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CULT CULTURE AND THE DILEMMA OF INSTITUTION BUILDING IN AFRICA

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Abstract
One of the greatest challenges to public administration and service delivery in Africa is the weakness of its institutions. Institutions exist but are unable to perform their roles effectively. Beyond the legal framework and actors within these institutions, there would appear to be a preference for a 'we' versus 'them' attitude in the use and appreciation of public institutions in Africa. Several factors are responsible for this. These include ethnicity, language, tribe, and group factors enabling the parochial perception of public institutions. However, these institutions and processes become effective and functional once defined and applied to achieve those parochial ends. These parochial outlooks have taken the form of cults. First because they provide alternatives to mainstream institutional frameworks and secondly, they serve to protect and preserve the interest of the inducted members of these social cults. This paper utilizes secondary data to examine the tragedy of institutional weakness and failure in Africa and submits that the cultic attitude of the people they are meant to serve makes the publicness of these institutions non-functional and continues to frustrate the effort to build strong institutions in Africa.

Key words: Cult, Culture, Institution building, Africa

Introduction

Although, the idea of cult is condemnable, it is practiced in most countries of the world under different guises. Through the examination of the case of Africa, this paper shows that despite the fact that the term is not acceptable and largely considered as negative, the practice of the variables that make up the concept can still be largely observed in the administrative system of most African countries. The aim of this paper therefore is to periscope the cultic approach to public administration in Africa, show how the cult culture is very much in existence and the role it plays in the failure of public institutions in Africa.

Cults are broadly prevalent because they basically exist as groups. As a result, there is controversy as to what a cult is. However, a cult can be categorised as an organised group or a solitary person whose purpose is to dominate cult members by using psychological manipulation and pressure strategies (Rousseleta, Duretetec, Hardouin & Grall-Bronnec, 2017). Cults are largely a product of a breakdown in the assimilation and ease of access of mainstream social processes and structures to the members of the society. The practice of cults is known as cultism. As it is with developed societies, so is developing societies if not more so. In the case of Africa, the phenomenon is so prevalent that it has weakened its public institutions. From the prebendalism of Joseph (1987), the functionalism of disorder (Chabal & Daloz, 1999), the political functions of corruption (Scott, 2006), to the bare faced criminalization of public institutions (see Ugwuja, 2020:99-100), cult culture has impacted on the management and weakness of public institutions in Africa. Especially because cult groups work to ensure unequal access to others that then make the effectiveness of these institutions to be compromised.

Cults are mostly formed in Africa to guarantee group domination. Thus, concerns and interest in domination have led the political, cultural, economic, bureaucratic etc. elite to form or join one 'cult' group or another. As already noted by Joseph (1987), individuals in the broader society have increasingly been added to these cult groups by the desire to gain access to power and wealth through a system of clients. This method of relationship with public institutions and systems generally pervades the administrative systems of most African countries today; leading to the prevalence of contentious politics and the desire for the capture of public institutions and the state itself. Whereas, public administration requires a rational leader with a political will for total development, the cultic group relies strongly on charismatic character; since more may depend upon the skills and the powers of attraction of the cult leader. Similarly different methods of recruitment and conversion might be anticipated where unorthodox and unusual orientations are being proffered in cult movements. Public administration on the other hand requires merit and fair methods of recruitments into public institutions. This heightens tensions for institutional and state capture. The weak nature of most African states has led to the formation of different cultic groups with the aim of becoming relevant in the society and to ensure that power remains with their groups. As in the case of Niger Delta militants in Nigeria (Ukiwo, 2007; Amadi, Imoh-Itah, & Obomanu, 2016) and rebel groups in many parts of Africa such as in dysfunctional Libya.

Given this scenario, public institutions in Africa have not been able to bring about the desired national development rather, they generally serve the interest of those who have succeeded in the venture of state capture. As a result, the cultic utilization of public institutions does not promote policies intended to achieve public good but those meant to benefit cult members and their sympathizers only. Consequently, public administration in most African countries tends to be chaotic because there is always continuous struggle between the group in power and those seeking power. This again will bring about weak public institutions and a weak state in general.

This paper is divided into six sections. Beginning with this introduction, we proceed to the next section on cult and cultism where the historical evolution of both terms are traced. In the end, they are considered synonymous and the concept of cult is ultimately defined as a 'group'. This leads us to the third section that is themed a cult culture. By this, it is meant that the culture of exclusivity of the cult is utilized in the administration of public institutions, leading to endless conflicts and gross inefficiency. The next section namely, the cult utilization of public institutions extends the notion of the cult culture to how it paralyses public institutions and makes it unable to deliver on the expectations of development. In the fifth section, a cultic approach to public administration and the challenge to institution building is considered. Here, focus is on how a cultic approach to administration has made it impossible to build strong institutions in Africa. The paper concludes with the sixth section where the central thesis of the paper is affirmed namely that a cultic approach to public administration has resulted in weak institutions and is the reason for the endemic conflict in Africa.

Cults and cultism

Cults and cultism have a long history in the field of sociology, deriving from the work of Troeltsch (1931), where he discussed cult as something of a residual category. Cults may represent the psychology behind a variety of extreme social movements (Wilson, 2020:140). The ritual dimension of cult (see Nche, 2020:18) is not centrally considered in this paper. This paper basically treats a cult as a group that functions to protect the interest of their members according to a predetermined means. Although this approach creates a confusion as

to the proper reference of a cult, it is consistent with the French categorization of the term (see MIVILUDES, 2016).

In recent years the term cult has become a widely used term, connoting some group that is at least unfamiliar and perhaps even disliked and feared (Dillon & Richardson, 1994). This popular use of the term has such credence and momentum that it has virtually swallowed up the more neutral historical meaning of the term from the sociology of religion. Indeed, some would claim that the term cult is useless, and should be avoided because of the confusion between the historic meaning of the term and its current pejorative use (Richardson, 1993). However, some elements and criteria proposed by authors have emerged in the literature (Chambers, Langone, Dole & Grice, 1994; Rodriguez-Carballeira et al., 2015). A cult can be viewed as an organised group or a solitary person whose purpose is to dominate cult members by using psychological manipulation and pressure strategies (Rousseleta et al., 2017). One of the factors for staying in the group are primarily internal to the group, indicating how central the cult is to the members' life. According to the American Psychiatric Association (2013), all activities of the cult members are devoted to the cult and that a lot of time is spent in the service of the cult, resulting in social impairment. Another study found that, during membership, the cultic group held an important and even an exclusive place in the life of the member (Buxant & Saroglou, 2008).

Additionally, cultic groups are present in the member's environment before his or her commitment, be it in the neighborhood, at work or through social associations or in their family (Bandura, 1986). However, it is the dislocations in the communicational and orientational institutions of advanced societies that has led cult to flourish in the practice of what is now known as cultism. There are numerous cults, some even date back to several years ago, but again relatively few, reflect the measure of sociological or other social scientific sophistication needed for full understanding of the phenomena.

Beyond the academic circles, the term cult has a salience provided by small number of culturally defined traits (Crockford, 2018). In view of the foregoing, earlier expressions of cult explained that a cult develops in opposition to the dominant culture (Yinger, 1957; Glock & Stark, 1965). The opposition to conventions seemed a fruitful way to proceed with research into the concept and its practice (cultism). As a matter of fact, the terms cult and cultism have become synonyms, a social weapon that can be used to describe groups that are not favoured.

The practice of cult organisations and movements can be related to some characteristics that can be identified in the public administration system of many African states. For example, conditions of human existence which forms some basis for identifying and arranging values and objectives for coming together is assumed to be a fundamental, both for cult and for public administration. This means that human existence is considered in every organisational goal because it is the primary focus for other goals to be achieved. Therefore, the maintenance of continuous existence is a first priority in public administration. However, cult groups also buy this idea which guides their operations, values and goals. As a matter of fact, the primary aim of forming a cult group is to gain some level of relevance; and this is often exclusively done in the public administration practices of most African states.

A cult culture

Crockford (2018) highlighted three features that determines the culture of cult groups. First is ‘charisma’ which stands for the influence of the leader, seemingly possessed with the power to control the will of his followers. Cultic leaders and cultic law ultimately determine what is to be deemed officially as enrichment or impoverishment in the cultic domain (Tyson, 1965). These leaders in most cases have the tendency to dominate and brainwash their followers to

believing that those who do not belong to their cult are enemies. Therefore, the reward of being members of the cult should not be extended to them. Secondly, is 'isolation' which represents the disconnection from society; the group disappears into the jungle far away from the family and friends looking for the 'Promised Land'. It is a protective motion for those taking it on willingly; for those unwillingly isolated, it is a symptom of an abusive relationship. This suggests that groups who isolate themselves from the general society are dangerous because they see isolation as a powerful privilege (Fondakowski, 2012). However, Taussig (1993) observed that total isolation is a fiction but relative isolation from the state is a privilege

What is troubling here is the notion that these charismatic leaders use their charismatic features to create a segregated community of followers who believe in their vision and will to strike out on their own to build a self-reliant communal society based on their twisted ideologies (Mark, 2013). Most times, the members of the cults are confused into believing that they will all benefit from the whole cult movements, but it eventually profits only the leaders or the elites of the groups. Lastly, is 'poison' which means alleged mind control, a corruption of the individual will to survive in favour of the collective. More than simply the delivery mechanism: it stands for the poisoning of the mind by another; how the authority of a few can take over and dictate the terms of life and death to the many. It is a slippery symbol that can signify both the lethal result of being physically poisoned and the mental effects of being psychologically influenced and damaged by another. It is the other side who drinks the poison, whose brains are saddled with toxic ideas (Crockford, 2018). The symbol of poison goes beyond its mode of delivery and stands for the concept of brainwashing. The mind is poisoned, which leads to a loss of control, and, in the worst cases, death.

Given that the philosophy of cults is basically exclusionary, it poses a challenge to the administrative systems like those in Africa which are unable to create an all-inclusive social framework. The implication of this, is that the negative connotations that goes with the terminology of cult will become the order of the day in public institutions and offices as exemplified in unconventional recruitments (e.g. Ahmed, 2022) and jaundiced service delivery (see Fourie & Poggenpoel, 2016; Fliss, nd). The point here is that, the failure to perform in the range of institutional organisation, by the state, for whatever reason, is basic. Such failure can profoundly affect the operation of the society and of other institutions within the society and change their physical environment or the forces or the relations of production, the level or pace of technological development, or in the political structure or other social arrangements within societies or between them (Forbes, 1912).

These symbols of cult culture (i.e. charisma, isolation and poison) are very much in use in the administrative systems of most African countries today. Different groups as exemplified by the Boko Haram and Indigenous People of Biafara (IPOB) in Nigeria and the various anti state militant groups across Africa, are rising up against the state due to institutional failures. While the point can be made that anti state movements are a global phenomenon, the capacity of non-African societies, in most cases, to deal with these movements are fundamentally bigger. The tactics utilised in getting members for these different groups is not different from the use of charisma, isolation and poison as they are used in cult movements. These groups appear in the forms of ethnic groups, religious groups, terrorist groups, militants, and others. Their aim is to control state institutions for their parochial gains regardless of public interests.

While public administration requires a rational leader with a political will for total development, the cultic group relies strongly on charismatic character; since more may depend upon the skills and the powers of attraction of the cult leader. Similarly different

methods of recruitment and conversion might be anticipated where unorthodox and unusual orientations are being proffered in cult movements. Public administration on the other hand requires merit and fair methods of recruitments into public institutions. However, when public institutions become weak, cultic groups begin to rise and it becomes the survival of the strongest group in taking over the institutions of the state, as manifested in the formation of governments for example (see Okhonmina & Ogbuagu, 2022a, b). This is why there are different uprisings in many African countries today. The weak nature of most African states has led to the formation of different cultic groups with the aim of becoming relevant in the society and to ensure that power remains with their groups. The dislocation in public administration introduces the cultic characteristics to public institutions where recruitment into these institutions would be done based on who is a member of the 'cult' in public power, while those who are not members are denied of public wealth. More so, public institutions will start relying on cultic approach to perform the functions of public institutions. The next section therefore analyses the cult utilisation of public institutions and the impact on public administration.

The Cult Utilisation of Public Institutions

A primary role of public institutions has been to help secure public order and accelerate national development, including reducing poverty (Hyden, 2020). In the case of Africa, it is meant to serve groups who are able to dominate government powers for the interest of a few. Public administration in Africa is considered weak because it deals more with adherence than with capacity (Okhonmina & Ogbuagu, 2022a, b). People are not yet organised according to shared economic interest but rather in communities with a common culture (Burchell, Gordon & Miller, 1991). These communities with common culture have now metamorphosed into different 'cult' groups such as ethno-religious groups, terrorists and other anti-state groups all contesting to gain control of state institutions. From Angola in the south-west through the Congos to Sudan in the north-west, a conflict zone exists which passes through the heart of Africa. Over the past four decades this has accounted for the death of millions, while contributing to the displacement of millions more. More depressing is the fact that contagion has occurred and now affects areas in Southern, North, East, and West Africa. All of these as a result of cult uprisings against the state.

These conflicts owe much of their origins to poor and ineffective governance, corruption, the ineffective use of the financial resources of the state and the abuse of human rights. Where the perception exists, that state institutions cannot fulfil their functions, 'cult' groups become the order of the day (see Said, Lerche & Lerche, 1995:252). That is why the predominance of the cult culture in the public institutions of most African states cannot be overemphasised. The uprisings of various cult groups to take over governmental powers for their selfish interest has overshadowed the idea of government that is meant for the good of the entire public. The proliferation of subgroups in the form of ethnic nations and the revived sense of identity constitutes a self-evident problem to not just national institutions but also to world politics (Lerche 1995).

It is even more problematic when the internal contradiction between cult identity and the state becomes visible to the extent that loyalty to the state and loyalty to a cult identity are in conflict. What is often experienced is a redirection of authority, legitimacy and loyalty away from the state to the subgroup (Plessis, 2002). It has been argued that perhaps one of the major causes of the failure of the post-colonial state in Africa has been its gross neglect of its cultural basis. In the urge to create political unity the tendency has been to negate ethnic, regional and cultural diversities rather than recognise them as building blocks in the construction of a civil society. The result has been often a facade of seeming unity at the cost

of many unsettled wounds and denied identities (Diamond. 1988). As illustrated by Afigbo (1986), this state-centeredness leads to a lack of historicity which can limit our understanding of significant aspects of intergroup relations. Often ignored by the state-centered approach are processes of identity formation that existed in the pre-colonial period which are of continuing relevance to 'nation building'.

While the nation building project was going on, along with the rhetoric of national unity, old patterns of exclusion and domination continued, and new ones were invented. Consequently, the reality of nation building was often that some groups consolidated their grip on state institutions, to the exclusion of others. The promise of common citizenship remained elusive. The nation building project is partly responsible for the ethnic confrontations and rampant civil wars which have characterised much of the politics of post-colonial Africa. For instance, after decades of independence, ethnicity is more central than ever to the political process of many African countries, as political openings and multiparty elections have led to the formation of innumerable overtly or covertly ethnic political parties. But this is not a sign that a primitive and tribal Africa continues to reassert itself through the thin veneer of modern institutions (Quaker-Dokubu, 2001).

The centralising project of state consolidation or nation building in many plural societies has almost inevitably involved the cultural devolution, political repression and/or economic expropriation of the more vulnerable geoethnic segments of the political communities. For instance, between 1983 and 1999, Nigeria had a succession of northern military leaders – Mohammadu Buhari (1983–1985); Ibrahim Babangida (1985–1993); Sani Abacha (1993–1998); and Abdulsalami Abubakar (1998–1999). Because the Nigerian state controls access to the nation's disposable wealth in the form of revenue from petroleum production, the fusion of military and northern hegemony has provoked resentment in southern Nigeria towards a system of governance widely viewed as biased, exploitative and repressive. Such centrist state building strategies and processes have invariably provoked both domestic communal rebellion as expressed by The Arewa People's Congress (Northern region), The O'odua People's Congress (Western region), Movement for the actualisation of the sovereign state of Biafra (Eastern region), and The Niger Delta Militants (Midwestern region).and international strictures (Wunsch, Olowu, Haberson & Ostrom, 1990).

The existence of "cult groups" therefore exert a powerful and autonomous emotional, psychological or consummatory role. They provide a sense of trust, certainty, reciprocal help and protection. In all deeply divided societies, such ethnic affiliations have naturally acquired greater salience and attraction as groups have increasingly found it necessary to mobilise against historic and contemporary inequities and injustices (Horowitz, 1985). In most developing countries of the Third World, different groups (cult) have been ignited by competition for real or perceived resources. Resource competition in Africa animates group conflicts because the survival of the winning group are the key prospective beneficiaries of state allocation decisions. Charismatic leaders use this notion to manipulate and mobilise these groups in their competition for power and privilege.

Another manifestation of cult utilisation of public institutions is in the case of the Sudan crises leading to the creation of Southern Sudan. Ethnicity and religion were regarded as constituting the central determinants for control of the institutions for governance and the econo-political and socio-cultural ways of life. The elites of Northern Sudan took advantage of this to continue to dominate Sudan through the Arabisation and Islamisation doctrines that were imposed on the people. It became imperative, in their view, for non-Moslems to be assimilated into the Arabic culture. Thus, Arabisation – that is, the policy of assimilation and integration of non-Moslems and non-Arabs into the Arabic culture became a sine qua non

condition of leadership in Sudan (Adar, 2001). The Southern Sudan and non-Arabised Northern Sudan were against this policy because they advocated a territorial model of a nation-state, one that is centred on the legal equality of all peoples irrespective of their ethnicity. These groups were labelled as rebels. The promotion of a theocratic state by the Arabic-speaking ruling elite was viewed as a hindrance towards the actualisation of a secular state. These differences led to a perpetual civil war in Sudan, undermined national consensus, leading to the eventual split of Sothern Sudan. The Arabisation and Islamisation doctrines were viewed by non-Moslems and non-Arabic–speaking Sudanese as discriminatory and exclusive because the territorial model encourages a pluralist view of the political system in which zero-sum political gains by the majority ethnic cult are discouraged (Smith, 1991; Hannum, 1996).

Flowing from the above, the cult presence in public institutions tends to alter or not promote policies that will benefit the entire people but promote the ones that will continue to benefit the cult group especially a few. It need be noted that the cultic utilization of divisive categories such as ethnicity and religion is not for the interest of all those who adhere to these values but to those who belong to the cult created on the platform of those values. Extension of privileges to non-cult members who believe in these values is only for the purpose of legitimising the cult itself (see Joseph, 1987). For this reason, public administration in most African countries tend to be chaotic because there is always continuous struggle between the group in power and the others who are not yet in power. This again will bring about weak public institutions and a weak state in general, the one that lacks development focus and would rather fight for the benefit of a few against the entire public.

A cultic approach to public administration and the challenge to institution building

This section gives in depth understanding of how these ‘cult’ groups operate in public administration and the impact on the society, using different case studies from different African states.

Flowing from the foregoing, cult groups can be in the form of state identity, national identity, transnational identity, ethnic identity, tribal identity, social identity, individual or personal identity, and so on. These identities consist of individuals/collectivities emanating from the mutual recognition of the interaction of like and unlike units. The cultic utilization of these groups seems to be specifically pronounced in Africa. Although they have manifested so as in the case of Nazi Germany and Ku Klux Klan in the US, the case of Africa is more widespread and extended. So that, whereas ethnic groups are to be found all over the world (see Plessis, 2001), they have not been mainly utilized as cultic groups that contest over public institutions and the state as in Africa. This impacts on public service delivery and institutions in general.

The conflicts between different cult groups are what is being observed in politics in different parts of the world, especially in African countries which tend to be more plural in nature. This can also be linked to emerging global authority crisis and the erosion of international authorities, as well as to the narrowing competence of governments and even failed states (Rosenau, 1990), this proliferation of subgroups in the form of ethnic nations and the revived sense of identity constitutes a self-evident problem of world politics and administration (Said et al., 1995). It is even more problematic when the internal contradiction between a cult group and the state becomes visible to the extent that loyalty to the state and loyalty to an identity are in conflict. When this happens, what is often experienced is a redirection of authority, legitimacy and loyalty away from the state to the subgroup.

Such are the already noted examples of Nigeria, South Sudan, Rwanda, and generally across Africa. In Nigeria, cult groups were used to affect the efficiency of public educational

institutions when in the mid-80s, they were used against students' union and university staff who were the only organised groups opposing military rule (Muyiwa, 2001). Due to the fact that Nigeria's police and judiciary had failed to protect their credibility, in the East, cult like Militias like the Bakassi Boys became a popular alternative. Executions and the use of the occult were used in fighting evil. But it is only one reason why 'jungle justice' may spread and human rights violated (see Harnischfeger, 2003). Indeed, some police officers have been accused of being cultist (Olawin, 2022) the inefficiency of the police institution in such circumstances can only be left to the imagination.

Furthermore, in Rwanda after her independence, the peace process was jeopardized by 'cultic' cliques of extremist Hutus who sought the peace process in order to retain their commanding positions and financial privileges (see Atkinson, 1990; Staub, 2000). Thus, the Hutu massacre of the Tutsi may be understood as an extreme form of scapegoating, whereby the dominant group (or individual) shores up its threatened self-concept by devaluing the outsider or subgroup. As a result of all these factors, genocide took place in Rwanda. The Tutsi were systematically killed in order to destroy the group to which they belonged. Public institutions and administration were thereby undone.

Almost every country across the broad middle belt of Africa – from Somalia in the east to Nigeria in the west, and from Sudan in the north to Angola in the south – has a volatile mix of armed conflict, unstable political institutions, limited resources, and inevitably a 'bad neighbourhood' of similar crisis-ridden states (Gurr, Marshall & Khosla 2000). All these are as a result of the cultic approach to public administration, where one group perceive another as a threat in the pursuance and acquisition of administrative powers. Therefore, instead of the focus on proper administration and development, the focus is shifted to defending one group against another. In addition, the different chaos and crises that arise from these cults, do not bring about any form of development, rather it results to destruction, deaths, theft, and other anti-development vices.

Conclusion

The administrative system that is evident in Africa today is an expression that the world is witnessing a return to the "cult of origins" where differences often means destruction, destitution, despair and death. This is illustrated in the level of political unrest and killings being experienced in most African countries in order to gain political power. Different cult groups in different guises believe in getting political power through any means. They see whoever is not with them in the race as enemies. That is why when a group succeeds in getting political power, they focus mainly on their members. Those who are not members would have to struggle to get powers and benefits, hence the reason for the different chaos in the public administration of African states. These unrests in the administrative systems will definitely weaken public institutions.

Therefore, a power-sharing structure may need to be established to deal with the problems caused by the power struggle between cult groups. Provisions must be put in place to ensure that leaders stay responsive to the concerns of the population. Free and fair elections are essential to establish trust in the government. Ethnic violence must be minimised or eliminated if a transition is to have any hope of succeeding. Establishing the rule of law will act as a deterrent to future outbreaks of violence. If a constitution can be considered the beginning of a new era, then the country will be able to move forward and strive to ensure a more equitable and appreciative environment that takes account of the multicultural nature of the society. As far as possible constitution building should be done by consensus and it should not be rushed. All parties, all sections of the community, all language groups, all ethnic group and men and women need to feel that their concerns have been taken into

account so that the outcome of the process is theirs. The protection of minorities should be taken seriously, else they will form an alliance and become a major cult against the government. More so, without the protection afforded by a bill of rights, unrestrained majoritarianism could harm minorities or members of minority groups and therefore a check on the power of the majority is essential.

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