

Decay and Challenges of Traditional Cults in the 21st Century Nigeria

FolaBalogun, Morenike

Faculty of Humanities, Management and Social Sciences, School of Visual and Performing Arts, Department of Creative Arts and Tourism (Art History Unit), Kwara State University, Malete

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Abstract

Nigeria before the 21st century relied solely on traditional cults for its day to day events, policing, information dissemination, control of ancestral worship and initiation. The geographical ethnic cults taught the norms, values, beliefs, myths and morals to their society. In the 21st century the role of traditional cults was paling out and giving way to modern cults. Modern cults have directly and indirectly affected the beliefs, myths, norms, values, religion, education and cultural values in Nigeria. The positive significance has weaned out, but it is an area where many weaknesses are observed, yet it forms an important cultural foundation of the past. This study therefore investigated the characteristics of traditional and modern cults in Nigeria, and the challenges associated with the cults in the 21st century. The study's scope is narrowed down to Nigeria. Methodology adopted for this write up is qualitative which includes; non-participant observation, relics, interviews, historical, literary texts, Internet resources and oral tradition.

Introduction

Nigeria is located in West Africa and covers an area of 923,768sq.km (Bucharest-Romania, 2015). European countries colonized almost all Africa (Africa -wikiipedia). As observed by the researcher, cults are formed by individuals or groups of people exhibiting an ideology, philosophy, cultural or religious affiliation to control or

dominate a certain group of people or their members through the mission and visions of the established cults. Traditional cults are formed due to the traditional values, customs, norms, myths, values, religion, ancestral or ethnic worship. Most of the traditional ethnic cults were passed down from generation to generation. Modern cults are more recent and want to differentiate itself from the past but exhibits the past in some of its activities. Traditional ethnic cults are made up of masquerade and non-masquerade cults. In Nigeria, traditional cults are palling into insignificance in history; this paper examined specifically the decay, characteristics and challenges of traditional cults, in the 21st century Nigeria. This paper contended for the need to examine the challenges faced by traditional ethnic cults in Nigeria. The writer addresses the probably reasons for the decline and possible recommendations were given.

Discussion

Nigerian cults are secret societies formed by groups of individuals to carry out special traditional assignments based on religious, social and political assignments. Rules, language symbols and paraphernalia, norms, values, costume are associated with some of these cults. In Nigeria traditional cults are made up of masquerade and non-masquerade cults. It is interesting to note and acknowledged change as a constant factor in every culture. In every culture, change has played a huge role in modification. Traditional Nigerian cults are mode of expression performed in a given form and style by initiates which can include music and dance which occurs through purposefully selected and controlled rhythmic movements, the resulting phenomenon is recognized as by the audience and performers as ritualistic. Traditional Nigerian cults can be Spiritual or Social.

In the world statistics there are fifteen prominent cults, the first one is the *Pirate confraternity*, established by Wole Soyinka in Ibadan, Nigeria in 1952 known as (National Association of seadogs). The seventh is the *Okonko* equivalent of a stronger *Ekpe* cult in the Igbo community, eight is the *Ekpe* cult, the leopard cult, a male masquerade cult of the Efik, in Cross River State of Nigeria, fourteen is the *Enkankar* cult, a 20th century cult and the fifteenth is the *Ogboni* fraternity, which has a strong affiliation to royalty (Onuh, 2017).

Pirate confraternity can be said to be the foundation where other university cults sprogged from in Nigeria and is still presently active. Ekpe masquerade of Efik were used as a government instrument in Bakassi in exercising authority for more than 200 years ago (E.O.Efiong-Fuller, 1996). Ogboni fraternity is an indigenous fraternal institution of Yoruba language speaking polities (Ibenegbu, 2020). They are spread in Togo, Republic of Benin, and in Nigeria and use to be the highest court in Yoruba land, they were so powerful, that they had the ability to choose or remove kings (Ibenegbu, 2020). Ogboni cult earliest mention was in 1884 and they worshiped the goddess of the earth, which gave them power for unity (Ibenegbu, 2020). Ekpe, Ogboni. Okonko, Encanker, and Sea Dogs Pirate confraternity are all Nigerian cults.

Ogboni confraternity, Ekpe masquerade cult (Plate III), Okonko masquerade (Plate IV) cult can be classified as traditional ethnic cults while Sea Dogs Confraternity and Encanker can be classified as modern.

Ekpe cult and the others mentioned were the means of transporting and implementing cultural norms in the Nigerian clime. The cults were used in conveying the values, myths, norms, customs, religion, laws of the land and spiritual processes to their ethnic geographical locations. The philosophies and results of these cults and beliefs rest solely on the performance of *the* cults. Nobody has the right then to challenge the authority of these cults and their pronouncements before the pre-Colonial era. The *Ekpe* masquerade cult as an example however became less in authority since independence to just a social status. The *Ekpe* masquerade cult is sometimes called *Mgbe* or Leopard society. Observation by the author shows decline in performance culturally of masquerade cults that were once revered in Nigeria as ancestral spirits and at times control the community indirectly by their utterances and messages, passed down orally in trance during performance. Deviation from the traditional norms, beliefs, values, and customs of ethnic beliefs and post-colonial influences led to weaknesses in masquerade cults and non-masquerade cults. Sango, *alafin* (king) of the Oyo Empire, introduced a form of ancestor worship known as *baba* (father) which later came to be known as *egungun*, meaning masquerade (Adedeji 255).

In Africa generally we have a rich language heritage and secret writings coded for cult's information. These secret codes or languages are used purposely within traditional and modern cults which are known to the groups of ethnic affiliations. "Nsibidi" is one of such ethnic symbols used by the Ekpe secret or leopard society as a means of secret communications (figure I and II). Nsibidi is only one amongst the pre-colonial indigenous writing systems of southeast Nigeria. Europeans discovered the secret society writing in 1905 (Chinenye, 2017). The pictographic and ideographic Nsibidi is in fact a language rather than mere systems of motifs. Nsibidi includes a whole range of verbal expression. Nsibidi was transferred via slave trade to Cuba, where it was developed into the Anaforuana and Vevve symbols (<http://kwekudee-tripdownmemor>, 2017). It is a visual artistic expression of symbols, made up of unit motifs designs to form a language expression (motifs) for communication within the initiates and devotees (figure I and II). The Ukara cloth (Figure III) is a fabric that is used by members of the Ekpe cult. This is an official and traditional apparel of the Ekpe society. The Ukara is a blue and white fabric inscribed with two dimensional motifs call Nsibidi (Figure I).

Ogboni also have their signs and language, so do other cults groups. The Ogboni have their elaborate wide caps with their rattling staffs, highly and artistically decorated with jiggles. The author from personal observation saw the Ogboni in possession about forty years (40) ago and till date cannot forget that scary, loud, dreadful call of *Yeeparepa* made by the leader, as he strikes his long staff of office almost the same height with him on the ground as he walks, the staff made rattling loud sound that cannot be ignored because of the multiple golden like totems attached to the broad hat

like head wear and staff of office head. The cap and his staff of office were artistically adorned. Ogbonis shake with their left hands. The left hand is for the gods and the right is for human beings and they also say the following *Ta babowo Ogboni, Owo osi la na, Anakan siwaju, A nakan sadarin* (Ibenegbu, 2020).

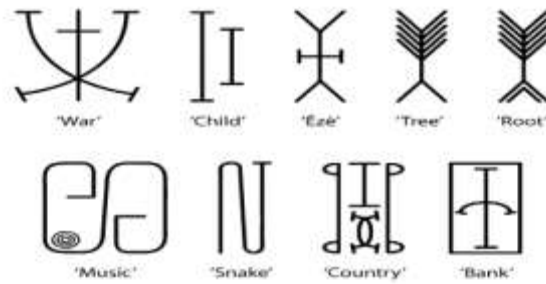


Figure I: Nsibidi Symbols

(http://www.gophoto.it/view.php?http://24media.tumblr_mohkleu30clr4c2pko3_400jpg, 2017).



Figure III. Ukara cloth:

(http://www.mcser.org/images/stories-2journal/mjss_may2012/babson_ajibade_ester_ekpe.pdf, 2017)

In (plate I) is the *Oloolu* the most dreaded masquerade in Ibadan, Oyo state of Nigeria in his full regalia with a

female live skull on his headgear, the oral tradition has it that the pioneer of the *Oloolu* masquerade was captured during war from Akoko in the present day Ondo state, when the captors commanded his wife to follow him and she refused, the masquerade was commanded to behead the wife and carry the blood soaked head on his own head and he was led to Ibadan city like that (Oloolu-The Father of all masquerades in Ibadan.Oloolu masquerade/Abiyomo, 2017). To this day the succession of *Oloolu* masquerade still carries the female skull on their heads during their own reign as part of their paraphernalia when they sail and that is why they say any woman that sees him face to face dies, but the custodians of the masquerade says it is okay for a woman to see his pictures. The Yoruba speakers normally sing a song to demonstrate the dreadfulness of the '*Oro*' cult:



Plate I. Oloolu Masquerade

(Oloolu-The Father of all masquerades in Ibadan.Oloolu masquerade/Abiyomo, 2017).



Plate II. De-masked Oloolu Masquerade

Awo egungun lo birin lese, awo gelede lo birin le mo Be obirin ba fi oju Kan oro, oro agbe Translates; Women can take part in Egun gun and lesser masquerade cults but the day a Woman sets eyes on the forbidden masquerade, the forbidden cult will take the woman.

Peculiarities of Traditional Nigerian Cults

- Members goes through initiation and oaths taking
- Some traditional cults undergo physical and mysterious transformations
- Cults are created by ethnic demands
- Cults exist within geographical ethnic boundaries of the people
- Cult members speak the same mother tongue
- Members must adhere strictly to secrecy, rules and regulations
- Initiates respect and keep their personal regalia out of sight
- Cults is by membership
- Cult Members communicate with codes and symbols and peculiar language known and understandable by members alone.
- Cults paraphernalia are artistic, unique and are not common
- It has the past as its basis
- It has rich Artistic traditions
- It's over 200 years old
- It depicts traditional daily lives
- It depicts mythology (beliefs ,norms, values)
- The designs and motifs of their cultists regalia depicts ethnicity
- Cultists borrow from tradition
- Traditional Artists in charge of cultists paraphernalia's stressed content over process
- The artists theme is always Nigerian
- Cult, art and religion were inseparable
- Abstraction was more related to figure composition on staffs, anklets, bracelets
- Blood sacrifice is common to appease the gods and for ritual rites
- Authority is displayed by rankings and position plays important roles
- Cults carried out cultural, religious and economic functions like the Ekpe masquerade
- Cults carry out services for monarchs, presidents and leaders of communities
- Sculptures used by cultists portray religion, philosophy, economic and politics.

The author observed that, with the influence of colonization and after effects of pre independence and independence proper, the traditional cult scene in Nigeria palled into insignificance and the cults became more of a social gathering.



Plate III Ekpe Masquerade (Cross River State).

(http://www.gophoto.it/view.php?=http://24media.tumblr_mohkleu30clr4c2pko3_400jpg, 2017)



Plate IV Okonko masquerade

Source:(Masquerade of the Okonko society)

Challenges faced by Traditional Cults in Nigeria.

Challenge One: Religious Encroachment

Beecroft was of the view that: ‘So rapid has been the advance of civilization in old Calabar that at present though retaining many of the old forms they (Egbos) have lost their old influence and no act of oppression can be committed through its agency without notice being has been thereof. The influence of the Christian Missionary fast supersedes that of Egbo’ (OKU, 1989). The attitude of the Efiks, Yorubas and

Igbos towards indigenous religion, tradition and culture changed gradually. Educational exposure, foreign culture, technology, introduction of Christianity, all these affected the performance of *Ekpe* (leopard) masquerade cults and other traditional ethnic cults. The comment of Beecroft as recorded in (Oku, 1989) goes a long way to show the impact of colonization on religion in Nigeria. Christianity and Islam weakened and challenged the performance beliefs of different ethnic cult groups. Cults were challenged by the people in the society due to modernization, influence of Television and Radio, Internet incursion, disregard of Oral tradition and History, introduction of Christianity and Islam. A typical example is the masquerade cult in the 21st century Nigeria, the most dreaded masquerade that women must never see called *Oloolu* (plate I) in Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria in the year 2012, was arrested by the security outfit called “Operation Burst”, the masquerade was beaten to a pulp and unmasked, he was warned not to sail through the area and the masquerade did not heed the warning, this led to a fracas and the masquerade was even detained in a police station for some days (Ajayi, 2012).

A British colonialist in 1902 made this statement about the destruction of the Arochukwu Masquerade by the British colonialists in the eastern part of Nigeria of West Africa. On January 1902, the colonial British personnel reported that, the influential Igbo (Arochukwu) Oracle, known variously as, Chukwu, Ibiniokpabi, or the “Long juju” of Arochukwu was reportedly smashed by the British. Lieutenant Colonel Gallwey’s reported that: The submission of the Aro Chiefs and people and the destruction of their Fetish Hierarchy is (now) an accomplished fact, and was the chief objective of the expedition...no trace whatsoever of their “Chukwu” would in the country.(For)The Chukwu shrine and all paraphernalia connected therewith had been completely obliterated... (Ekechi, 1985).The report of the British Lieutenant Colonel Gallwey showed a negative impact on Nigerian tradition by incursion of foreigners. In many ways modernization has changed the face of Africa, positively and negatively in equal measure (Taremba, 2016). The attitude of Nigerians towards indigenous religion, tradition and culture changed gradually. Educational exposure, foreign culture, technology, introduction of Christianity and Islam; accessibility and contact to foreign culture, decay of oral history all these affected the performance of the traditional Nigerian cult culture. These factors watered down the cult’s tradition and it was no longer respected or acknowledged any more. Any country colonized by foreigners always suffers from residual

negativity of remnants of the foreign culture. If the remnants in the colonized culture is not properly managed by the colonized, it can break or mar their culture.

Challenge Two: Democracy and independence Effects

African land mass on the surface of the earth witnessed a lot of events or testimonies that brought about changes right from 1830s to date, from the introduction of Christianity and Islam to the amalgamation of African in 1884, the British punitive expedition of Bini kingdom in 1887, to Colonization of Nigeria in 1960. Traditional ethnic masquerade cults and other traditional cults lost its political, religious and cultural powers of administration and seal of authority round about the time when independence and democracy was ushered into Nigeria. The government took over the day to day running of affairs of the people. The Nigerian Monarchical power lost its executive, judiciary and administrative powers also. Power changed hands from the distinguished Nigerian Monarchs and masquerade cults and non-masquerade cults to the democratized government of the day in Nigeria. Ekpe masquerade cult and other masquerade cults, and confraternity cults like Ogboni amongst others also lost their political power of administration and seal of authority round about the time when independence and democracy was ushered into Nigeria. People no longer dreaded or are afraid of the cults; people cannot be summoning like of old either for punishment or judgment. The government took over the day to day running of affairs of the people. Western style of judiciary system was introduced forcefully in places that will not succumb easily. The *Ekpe* masquerade cult as an example lost its executive, judiciary and administrative power. Power changed hands from the distinguished *Ekpe* masquerade cult and other traditional geographical cults to the democratized government of the day in Nigeria.

Challenge Three: Cultural insignificance

Modernization, Eurocentric ideologies, residual effect of European legacy, modernization, cultural interference, de-emphasis of traditional values and oral traditions, religion, norms, beliefs, Internet incursion, Education and religious beliefs are some key factors that affected the performances of all the traditional cults in Africa and Nigeria is no exception. Okonko, Ogboni, Arochuchwu, Oloolu, Arochuckwu and *Ekpe* ethnic cults amongst others in Nigeria have palled into insignificance and taken the roles of social groups for entertainment. The cults lost their cultural, economic, political, philosophical and dictatorial grip on the masses. The Cults lost their responsibilities to carry out services for monarchs, presidents and leaders of communities.

Challenge Four: Dearth of Literary materials

This writer submits that traditional cults are part and parcel of Nigeria's oral history's signature and also part and parcel of its cultural expression. The writer observed that because of the secrecy associated with these cults, Scholars and Art Historians have not been able to carry out intense inquiry on these cults. Therefore, a dearth in literature exists in these areas. The prestigious historical account and documentation of the most distinguished and most honoured *Ekpe* masquerade and other masquerade cults, with non-masquerade cults forms a gap in literature. No detailed documentation of historical, artistic and cultural performance and events of these cults were documented in detailed for posterity. Art Historians should breach the dearth in literature through more research and documentation of activities of these traditional geographical ethnic cults in Nigeria.

Challenge Five: Lost of Judiciary Power

The people of Nigeria with the highly skilled and professionally turned out graduates of law from our universities, European sophistication, education, western awareness do not need to take cases to traditional cults like Arochukwu, Ogboni, Oloolu and *Ekpe* cults for settlement of cases again and *these cults* do not issue degrees or carry out degrees because of the establishment of courts and the availability of the learned profession of law, producing lawyers for modern courts, people can disregard the laws of cults like the *Ekpe* and others now, without any sanctions. Other ethnic or traditional masquerade cults in Nigeria are no exception when it comes to the residual negative effect of the Eurocentric legacy on their performance in terms of judiciary roles. These challenges have encouraged lawlessness, corruption, looting, and break down of proper order in the ethnic culture.

Recommendations

Firstly, *Ekpe*, Okonko, Ogboni traditional cults amongst others can be formed into night police guards under oath, to sincerely check negative night activities, kidnapping, and brutality under the watchful eyes of the law enforcement.

Secondly, members of the traditional cults can be coopted as candidates into local state police force, local state civil defense corps or local state peace ambassadors, or tagged as local regional vigilante groups, the dread of sanctions from the cult, will help in bringing sanity to lawlessness in the polity.

Thirdly, the reformed traditional Nigerian cults can be formed into local law enforcements agencies like state, regional if not abused can check the excesses of modern cults, looting, rape, killing, maiming, stealing and violation of human rights.

Lastly, the status of these reformed cults for service to humanity should be to save lives and protect their geographical areas faithfully under oaths from anti-social behaviours and not to maim, destroy and kill.

Conclusion

The implication of this paper is that traditional and modern cults in Nigeria in the last hundred years (100) have evolved from one stage to another. Some of the factors responsible for these development includes Literacy and modern education, urban migration, weak oral history tradition, incursion of computer and internet exposure, technology, availability of modern forms of entertainment, changing attitudes of hostility towards, freedom of choice, democracy, judiciary law, changing values and systems, modern economy. The residual negative effects of European legacy on Nigeria and its incursion on culture have taken its toll on the cults. No culture is static, any culture that does not evolve dies. The western world or colonial masters influenced Nigeria and African art in general. It tampered and altered Nigeria's artistic cultural norms, values, mythologies, religious representations, yard stick of measurements to conform to the European yard stick of measurements and traits. However the effects of Colonization still left some positive impacts also on Nigeria culture.

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