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The Return of the Gods? Trends and Implications of the Rising Popularity of Fetish Rituals and Occult Practices Among Nigerian Youth

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Abstract

In his seminal 1993 work *The Embattled Gods: Christianization of Igboland 1841–1991*, Ogbu Kalu argued that the gods of African traditional religion were dislodged from their stronghold but not completely defeated. Could the rising popularity of fetish rituals and occult practices among the Nigerian youth over the last two decades mean the return of these gods? Using historical analytical methodology, this article examines the rising influence of fetish rituals and occult practices among youth in southern Nigeria. It recognises the current attraction of the occult world as a subtle form of youth resistance to financial and social insecurity engendered by the modern state system in Nigeria, as well as youth resistance to the money-making ethos of 'prosperity gospel' evangelism. The article argues that, while the surge in youth engagement in ritual and occult practices may appear to be a form of re-traditionalisation, such cultural revisionism can better be described as an instrument of youth resistance.

Keywords: Nigeria, youth, fetish rituals, occult practices, African traditional religion, missionary Christianity

Résumé

Dans son ouvrage fondateur de 1993, *The Embattled Gods: Christianization of Igboland* 1841–1991, Ogbu Kalu soutenait que les dieux de la religion traditionnelle africaine avaient été déchus de leur piédestal mais pas complètement vaincus. La popularité croissante des rituels fétichistes et des pratiques occultes dans la jeunesse nigériane au cours des deux dernières décennies pourrait-elle signifier le retour de ces dieux ? Par une méthodologie

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analytique historique, cet article examine l'influence croissante des rituels fétichistes et des pratiques occultes chez les jeunes du sud du Nigéria. Elle reconnaît l'actuel attrait du monde occulte comme une forme subtile de résistance des jeunes à l'insécurité financière et sociale engendrée par le système étatique nigérian moderne, et à l'éthique lucrative d'« évangile de la prospérité ». L'article soutient que, si l'engagement croissant des jeunes dans les pratiques rituelles et occultes peut sembler comme une forme de re-traditionalisation, un tel révisionnisme culturel devrait se décrire comme un instrument de résistance des jeunes.

Mots-clés : Nigéria, jeunesse, rituels fétichistes, pratiques occultes, religion traditionnelle africaine, christianisme missionnaire

Introduction

The forces of modernity – industrialisation, capitalism, evangelisation and imperialism – had a deep impact on Africa. As the shores of the continent were inundated with the 'civilising mission' of European agents of modernisation, African socio-cultural norms, values and systems were not seen as constructs and structures that needed to be modified by the new winds of change, but rather as an inferior and valueless heritage that had to be discarded because it held little or no value for its owners or the world at large.

Christian missionary work was a powerful force of change that had a deep impact on African traditional religion. By the second half of the twentieth century, Christianity had penetrated virtually all parts of the continent dislodging, piecemeal, the strongholds of African traditional religion. Indeed, practices associated with traditional forms of worship such as ritual sacrifice, cultism, divination, dedication of oneself to shrines retreated as Christianity swept through the continent with its churches and Western modes and concepts of worship.

The decline of traditional practices was more of a retreat than a permanent disappearance since some adherents of the new Christian religion continued to engage in these practices, albeit in a clandestine way. Christianity had become fashionable and successful, entrenching a culture and structures that openly discouraged traditional beliefs. In more recent times, however, there appears to be a resurgence of traditional religious practices in most parts of Africa.

Over the last two decades, southern Nigerian society has clearly manifested this trend with an increasing number of communities, groups, families, and individuals openly engaging in what were previously referred in the Christian milieu as fetish and occult practices. A particularly interesting

aspect of this development is the popularity of these practices among youth in the region, especially in aberrant forms. What explains this recent trend among the Nigerian youth in the study area? What are its implications for Nigeria and the rest of Africa in this era of globalisation?

This article is based on a study conducted in the three geopolitical zones of southern Nigeria within a qualitative and historical framework and using a data collection method that combined and triangulated three field-based primary sources – in-depth in-person interviews, focus group discussions, print media (newspapers), and secondary source materials.

Ritual and Ritual Practices in Traditional African Religious Cosmology

While African traditional religion is diverse and has no single coherent body of belief or practices, there are several fundamental coherent similarities in the structures of indigenous belief systems which make up what can be called traditional African religious cosmology. As Idowu (1973:13) aptly observed, 'there is a common African-ness about the total culture and religious beliefs and practices of Africa'. One of the common characteristics of African indigenous belief systems is the idea of 'diffused monotheism' in which a supreme god relates to humans through lesser or subordinate deities (Idowu 1973; Mbiti 1975). The colonial anthropologist Talbot (1969) refused to characterise African traditional religion with any single word, noting that Africans combine belief in the existence of an omnipotent and omnipresent supreme god with multitudes of subordinate deities. Earlier European missionaries and anthropologists misconstrued this description of African religion as irrational and incompatible with monotheism. However, as demonstrated in Evans-Pritchard's (1976) study of occult beliefs amongst the Azande, African traditional religious systems are anything but 'irrational'.

In general, African traditional belief systems regard the supreme god as the controller of the universe who is beyond the reach of humans, hence the need for accessible intermediaries that render subsidiary services. Such subordinate spirits maintain the link between god and humans through several means, of which ritual sacrifice is the most prominent. Ritual sacrifice is another phenomenon that is common to indigenous African belief systems. Shujaa (2009) defines ritual as a prescribed procedure or a set pattern for conducting religious action or ceremony. It is a viable means of communication between god and humans. A fundamental element of ritual is sacrifice, which involves giving up something of value in exchange for something of more value (Ayegboyin 2009).

In their study of the biblical concept of sacrifice and the Ghanaian world view, Wafe *et al.* (2016) identify six categories of sacrifice in Ghanaian tradition which are equally common in other traditional African settings – propitiatory, substitutory, mediatory, communion, gift, and atonement. According to these authors, the more severe the offence or graver the situation, the larger the sacrifice must be. It is in this context that human sacrifice stands out as the highest and most costly form of sacrifice in most religions, including African traditional religions.[1]

Ritual sacrifice, including human sacrifice, was part of the African past from before the colonial era. However, such ritual sacrifice was only used to constitute a collective statement of community, continuity and unity through group participation (Shujaa 2009). In other words, in the traditional African setting, human sacrifice was not a general disregard for the sanctity of human life but, rather, based on an understanding that sacrificing the life of one person is acceptable if it is done in exchange for the well-being of the entire community. Pre-colonial and colonial human sacrifices were largely carried out using slaves and victims of war, as depicted in Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart*.

Ashanti (2009) has argued that there has never been a general acceptance of human sacrifice in Africa. Human sacrifice was never allowed outside the strict confines of a communally sanctioned ritual. Bell (2002) refers to sacrifice outside a communally accepted ritual as a defile ritual which stands against the sanctity of life and communal values of society, and most often earns the offender banishment from the community. It was against such abuse that some mechanisms were established in pre-colonial societies in Africa such as the anti-witchcraft masquerade cult among the Igbos, the Ogboni cult among the Yoruba and Sakradbundi, and the Aberewa (witchcraft movement) among the Akan (Idowu 2005; Parker 2004).

Something that African traditional societies have in common is magic, sorcery and witchcraft functionaries: priests, priestesses, prophets, prophetesses, and diviners. These functionaries exercise forms of ritualised power through which they maintain harmony, balance and order in the society. However, this does not preclude the possibility that such powers could sometimes be misappropriated and rechannelled negatively in a way that nullifies their communally beneficial purpose. As Ekpo and Omeweh (2001) observe, the desire for fame, wealth, special protection and revenge nourished the 'privatisation' of such ritual powers in pre-colonial Africa.

Modernity and the Decline of African Traditional Religion

The African continent opened to a larger European influence following its exploration by European explorers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Exploration brought evangelism and later colonisation into Africa with its concomitant integration of the continent into the global capitalist economy. Missionary evangelisation flourished in the nineteenth century. By the second half of the twentieth century, magnificent church edifices, luxurious liturgical celebrations, and most importantly, teeming populations of Christians of various denominations were apparently some of the markers of its growing success. (Nwaka 2011, 2012; Kalu 1993, 2007). The success of the evangelising mission was anchored on denigrating African traditional religious practices by pejoratively describing these as 'pagan' religion infested with fetish practices (Njoku 2007). African traditional religion was also denied recognition as a monotheistic religion.

Efforts to bring Africans to the new religion did not initially yield the desired result of mass conversion. School education was used as an alternative strategy in the service of evangelisation in most parts of the continent. As Omenka (1989) argues, the school system worked the miracle of mass conversion so well that, by the end of the colonial period, large populations of Africans had turned to Christian churches. Those who remained unconverted were disparagingly taunted as people living in darkness and backwardness – an isolation many of them could not stand for long.

Although Christianity appeared to have won the upper hand in Africa, rituals and other practices associated with African traditional religion thrived clandestinely (Ntombana 2015; Kalu 1993). Religious syncretism, which obviously accompanied mass conversion, did not escape the attention of African writers who decried the missionaries' lack of studied attention to primal spirituality. The evangelisers were accused of failing to weave the primal world view into their message, even though some ritual practices found in both the Old and the New Testament – e.g., human sacrifice, rites of initiation and absolution – have traditional African parallels.

Bediako (1995) argued that, by emphasising the superiority of Christian religion over traditional religion, the evangelisers discouraged dialogue between Christian theology and the theology of traditional religion; between Christian modes of worship and those of traditional religion. In the absence of channels for interaction, Christianity became a foreign religion to its adherents, what Nwoga (1984) refers to in *The Supreme God as a Stranger in Igbo Religious Thought*. Kalu (2007) says this explains why the spirits that guard the gates of African communities have remained unconquered. Arguably, the success of

the Christian faith did not end African traditional religious beliefs and their associated ritual practices and symbols, but rather facilitated their privatisation at the expense of their communal and public expressions.

Colonial rule, another supposed agent of modernisation, had further negative impacts on African traditional religious systems. With its tight grip on the economy through monetary policy, colonialism undermined the communality which underpins African traditional society and established a capitalist system that provided firm control of the economy for the privileged few at the expense of the larger population. This system has survived beyond the period of colonial rule in Africa and continues to have staggering consequences for most of the continent's people. Colonialism promoted the ethnocentric view that the morals and values of the colonised were inferior to those of the colonisers. African traditional values, cultures and practices were systematically eroded through the implementation of colonial plans. For example, between 1900 and 1930s, so-called 'pacification expeditions' carried out by the colonial military forces were used to dismantle some of the symbols and sanctuaries of traditional African deities in locations across the continent.

As the continent was subjugated by imperial powers, missionary evangelisation gained further ground. With financial and policy support from colonial governments, the missionary school system created a framework for systematic Christian proselytisation. By strategically reaching out to the children, the missionaries made a huge investment in the future generation that would take over the control of local affairs. Success in converting the children became a critical success factor in making future generations of Africans adherents of the Christian faith. In their role as instruments of the 'civilising mission', schools inculcated and sustained the view of the local culture as inferior. As Afigbo (1972:67) observes, the mission education promoted by colonial governments was 'a loaded mix of religious, cultural and secular knowledge principally aimed at comprehensive conversion of the pupils, religiously, culturally and socially'.

Traditional ritual practices such as human sacrifice, witchcraft, initiation rituals, juju and magic were outlawed across Africa under colonial rule.[2] Kohner (2003) argues that there was an assumption that, when these practices, states and legal systems were criminalised in Africa, they ceased to exist. Because colonialism maintained a social construct that promoted individualism instead of the communalism of the traditional African setting, these outlawed practices survived in the private realm, especially among the upper class who sought power, wealth and fame in their individual capacities.

In their efforts to maintain an effective hold on inherited positions and powers from the colonial mater, African elites clandestinely delved into ritual and occult practices (Geschiere 1997). One significant development from this privatisation was the blurring of the boundary between rituals for common good, as was the case in pre-colonial African society, and engagement in the occult world for self-aggrandisement. The secrecy with which private rituals was previously shrouded seems to be giving way to a brazen display of wealth accumulated from ritual engagements, especially among the youth.[3] It is against this background that the recent wave of youth experimentation in the occult world has become a subject of interest among academics (Oyewole 2016; Akinpelu 2015). This article presents findings from fieldwork research in order to describe the dynamics in this recent trend among youth in southern Nigeria and to explore its implications.

Framing Occult Economies

As offshoots of modernity, neoliberalism and democracy were thought to possess the potential for transforming human conditions for the general good (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999). The expectation of socio-economic, political and technological upliftment was most visible following the collapse of the Cold War and the concomitant global enchantment with global integration, mobility, flexibility and economic freedom (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999). However, as the sense of new possibilities in free trade, expansion and circulation of knowledge, capital, and goods pervades the globe, especially in the so-called transitional societies, a new form of 'uncertainty and precarity' reared its head (Comaroff and Comaroff 2018: 2). In what Berman (2006) titled *The Ordeal of Modernity in an Age of Terror*, the ascendancy of capital produced the accrual of wealth in some parts of society, leaving the bulk of the population in poverty and want. In response to the existence of affluence alongside the slums and shanty towns, many people turned to non-conversional means of accumulation known as occult economies (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999; 2018; Ifeka 2006). This phenomenon cuts across generation, gender and race lines and forms the background against which the recent wave of youth engagement in ritual and occult practices in southern Nigeria can be understood.

Occult economies can be perceived as a form of resistance to new realities that pose certain challenges to both corporate and individual existence. As Anugwom (2011) shows in the case of the Niger Delta, the perception of injustice and marginalisation at the hands of both transnational corporations and the government provided fertile ground for occult practices, and also facilitated the rediscovery of deities that were previously associated with

justice and fairness. Similarly, Ashforth (2005) shows that, in South Africa, occult discourse, especially witchcraft, is commonly associated with both personal and group inadequacies, grievances, and a rejection of asymmetries. Emphasising the relationship between socio-economic deprivation and occult practices, Comaroff and Comaroff (1999) note that witch-hunting is most severe in constrained conditions and where there is severe inequality. Geschiere (1997) emphasises that witchcraft has both emancipatory and repressive functions. Traditions invented in the past to legitimise suppression can be reinvented in the struggle against oppression.

Scott (1985, 1990) divides resistance into hidden and public resistance in relation to three forms of domination – material conditions, status and ideology. While public resistance takes the forms of petition, demonstration, open revolt, desecration of status symbols and so on, disguised or hidden resistance, which Scott calls 'infra politics', entails resistance by disguised resisters, hidden transcripts of anger, and dissident sub-cultures. 'Infra-politics' is quiet and subtle, but remains a powerful tool both for survival and in order to undermine repressive domination, especially where open resistance is deemed dangerous (Bayat 2000; Scott 1990). Johansson and Lalander (2012) argue that power relations determine the form of resistance that is used.

Where organised or 'real' resistance appears risky due to an asymmetry in power, subtle, or what Scott calls 'everyday resistance', is expressed. Thus, in a society characterised by inequality and repression, everyday acts of resistance that cut across various strata of the society are often the norm, and can take various forms. Depending on the resources available to counter resistance, everyday resistance could become transformed into large-scale and organised resistance (Lilja *et al.* 2017). This framework is the background for analysing the link between youth in southern Nigeria and the proliferation of ritual and occult practices in the region. As the existing literature reflects, everyday acts of resistance constitute one of the four broadly defined ways in which resistance in general, and youth resistance in particular, occur.[4]

In addition to being seen as an expression of resistance, occult activities can also be seen as a response to an undue emphasis among prosperity gospel pastors of the present time on getting rich quickly, which blurs the distinction between what is genuinely extraordinary divine intervention and the mundane (Stoll 2013; West and Sanders 2001). This provides a context for understanding the rise of satanic scares, witch-hunts, and the 'spiritualisation' of uncomfortable conditions of life in the study area. In a bid to climb the ladder of affluence and success in the new way of the world,

according to (Dardot and Laval 2014), the challenges of life are invested with spiritual significance, leading to youth engaging with all forms of mysterious possibilities.

Trends in Rituals and Occult Practices among the Youth in Southern Nigeria

Five common patterns of youth engagement in fetish rituals and occult practices in the study area have been identified over the last two decades. The first is ritual killing of human beings. This is not a recent phenomenon in the region. Various groups in southern Nigeria used human beings for sacrifice before, during and after the colonial period (Ayegboyin 2009). As has already been said above, pre-colonial and colonial human sacrifices were largely carried out using slaves and victims of war as depicted in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart.*

From the beginning of the post-colonial period, victims of ritual killings were mainly small children kidnapped and sold to ritualists. A social welfare staff member in Enugu, John Udeabasi, has confirmed this, noting that the 1970s and 1980s were remarkable for the number cases of missing children regularly reported in the media.[5] From the1990s, a noticeable change in the pattern of ritual killings became apparent. There was a shift to killing parents, children, wives, siblings and, in recent times, mad women. While there was no clear gender preference in the past, it seems that a belief in the ritual power of female body parts, especially the genitals, has led to more killings of women in recent times.

In 2014, the Nigerian police apprehended a 42-year-old man who killed Ngozi Eze in Enugu for a sponsor who was willing to buy female private parts for 600,000 Naira (Ozor 2014). In 2017, the lifeless bodies of two female Imo State University students were discovered in Owerri with their private parts removed (Oluwole 2017). Among the items found in the apartment of 34-year-old Ifeanyichukwu Dike, who allegedly killed young Miss Chikamso in Port Harcourt, were vaginal parts, a mutilated human breast, and a human tongue (Madike 2017).

There are also instances where mothers, wives and daughters were slaughtered for the same purpose. Usman (2017), for example, reported the case of 50-year-old Jafainu, who killed his wife, Roselyn, for ritual sacrifice in Ondo. There have been other changes as well. Previously, swallowing concoctions and making incantations were common modes of ritual performance. Over the last two decades there have been many reports of ritualists eating the flesh of their victims, cooked or raw. In 2016, 31-year-

old Samuel Okpara was caught by the Nigerian police eating pepper soup and plantain porridge made from the intestine of his victim (Usman and Ake 2016). Between 2013 and 2017, the *New Telegraph* alone reported 14 cases of young men involved in such cannibalism. The brazen display of human body parts for sale in various markets as well as the apparent dumping of the bodies of victims of ritual killings on the streets in full view of everyone displays severe callousness towards the sanctity of human life. This is different to the pattern of the 1960s and 1970s when ritual killers carefully disposed of the bodies of their victims by burying them in shallow graves or taking them into thick forests.

Whereas ritualists and body-part harvesters used to kidnap their victims, they are now attacking their victims at home. There are reported cases of heavy objects being used to kill people after which machetes are used to remove specific body parts. This is common among some cult groups in the study area, particularly in Rivers, Edo, Lagos and Abia states where rival cult activities have been on the increase in the recent past. The Badoo cult group that terrorised the Ikorodu and Lagos areas between 2016 and 2018 were notorious for using this method to kill their victims and for collecting their blood on handkerchiefs for ritual purposes (*Punch* Editorial 2018).

Beyond ritual killings, youth engagement in bizarre acts for money has been on the increase over the last two decades. These acts include having sexual intercourse with a mad woman, a corpse, one's mother, or one's siblings; sleeping in cemeteries; eating human faeces in a sandwich (commonly known as a Ghana burger); searching refuse dumps for used tissue paper and sanitary pads; acting like a mad man for some months, and barking like a dog occasionally.[6] They are found to be most common among internet fraudsters commonly known as 'yahoo boys' who operate mostly within and around university areas (Olutande 2013). While internet fraud may be viewed as an advanced form of the '419' scam that has been associated with Nigeria since the 1980s, its entanglement with spiritualism in what has recently been referred to as 'yahoo plus' is a totally new development that has spread among the youth in southern Nigeria.[7]

Though not as common as the other acts mentioned above, donating a kidney for money has become trendy among the youth in the study area. Some key informants were of the view that ritual acts involving organ donation is associated with young men who suddenly disappear from the scene and return after few months with unexplained wealth.[8] Malaysia and Ghana were identified as two countries where kidney harvesting for money rituals takes place. Referring to kidney harvesting, when a young

man starts handing out US dollar notes to dancers and other performers in a public place in Nigeria, the audience often applauds and shouts 'Malaysia!, Malaysia!'

The revival of traditional shrines in the study area has been noticeable over the last two decades. Interestingly, available evidence points to young men in the region and beyond as the most visible clients of these shrines. For example, when the popular Okija Shrine was raided in 2004 by the Nigerian police, they found many letters from young apprentices asking the deity to compel their masters to set them free. While some of these young men openly initiate the revival of abandoned shrines, others introduce new deities.

For example, five young men between the ages of 22 and 46 in one of the villages in Awka Etiti in Anambra State publicly renounced Christianity in 2013 after establishing the shrine of *Agadi Nwanyi* (old woman) 2015.[9] The research revealed that 14 of the 19 shrines visited in Idemili North Local Government Area of Anambra State have young men between the ages of 26 and 50 as their custodians. The point is not that there is something wrong with reinventing the old to address the challenges of the new, but rather that there is a noticeable shift back to what appears to have been generally accepted in the past, following the advent of modernity (Christianity), as evil and backward. Affirming this point, Magesa (1997) postulates that African traditional religion contains both the elements that proffer abundant life as well as those that threaten it. However, the manner in which these youth are currently engaging with the past leaves no doubt about their hostility to aspects of the present.

Explaining the Rising Popularity of Rituals and Occult Practice

Rising interest in the ritual and occult world among the youth is arguably closely associated with the persistent rise in youth unemployment and poverty. Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa with enormous potential for development. It is Africa's largest producer of oil, the world's tenth largest oil-producing country, and it has huge reserves of natural gas and minerals. In 2014, when it was recognised to be Africa's largest economy, Nigeria's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) stood at US$545 billion (*The Economist* 2014; World Bank 2014). However, despite the vast resources at its disposal, Nigeria is among the most unequal countries in the world. Between 1985 and 2004, inequality worsened from a Gini coefficient of 0.43 to one of 0.49, placing it among the countries with the highest inequality levels in the world (UNDP 2005). In 2009, the

National Human Development Report noted that 20 per cent of Nigeria's population controls 65 per cent of national assets.[10] The former Nigerian Finance Minister, Dr. Ngozi Okonjo-Iwuala (cited in Asu 2013) noted that, despite the growth in Nigeria's economy, which was driven by the non-oil sector at the time, only 10 per cent of its population enjoys the benefits of Nigeria's economic growth. Country Director of the World Bank for Nigeria Marie-Francoise Marie-Nelly further stated that one hundred million of the world's 1.2 billion destitute people were Nigerians (Adoyi 2013). The worst hit group in the sea of poverty and want is apparently the youth who constitute more than 60 per cent of Nigeria's unemployed people. Between 2005 and 2009, available data points to what seems like a continual rise in youth unemployment – 11.9 per cent (2005); 13.3 per cent (2006); 14.6 per cent (2007); 14.9 per cent (2008); and 19.4 per cent (2009) (NBS 2009). In 2010, there were over 64 million unemployed youth and 1.6 million underemployed young people (Awogbenle and Iwuamadi 2010).

As unemployment worsens, various strategies of survival that include theories of spiritual warfare with invisible agents of regression have surfaced. Harnischfeger (2006) observed that there was a rising fear of uncontrollable spirits in the 1980s and 1990s in many parts of Africa. The application of spiritual solutions to problems associated with material hardship revived interest in the occult and ritual world. Human and drug traffickers, migrants, fraudsters and others sought spiritual protection and success in their 'businesses' through occult covenants, and possession of charms and other items associated with occult engagement. It is against this background that the power and influence of the Okija Shrine as well as the popularity of Prophet Edward Okeke of Nawgu in the 1980s and 1990 can be understood.

However, what appears on the surface to be a quest for survival is underpinned by a tone of frustration and subtle resistance to the status quo. In my interaction with a cross-section of final year students of the History Department at the University of Benin, 97 per cent were of the opinion that Nigeria holds no future for them.[11] They summed up the best approach as follows: 'go out there, use whatever works to claim your destiny'. The reference to 'destiny' as something that needs to be retrieved or claimed suggests that someone or something is engaged in an act of usurpation and must be resisted or dealt with. In another context, one of my informants (name withheld) said,

> …if these politicians will use at least half of the resources entrusted to them to work, Nigeria will be fine. But as it is, they swallow the whole money leaving us with nothing. It is a case of "monkey dey work, baboon dey chop". Who want to be baboon?

Overcoming the status of a baboon demands an intense struggle for wealth using every workable means, and the world of occultism seems to offer much to those who are well disposed towards it. The attitudes of some Nigerian youth towards the recent wave of hostage-taking (kidnapping) for ransom and internet fraud show this resistant mood. While a good number of those engaged with during the research do not approve of such criminal acts, they were not slow in their outright condemnation of certain people, particularly politicians. According to Osahon,

> The Nigerian resources belong to all and not to the government and politicians only. If they think they can take it all as usual, the kidnappers and "yahoo boys" are saying no. My only worry is the indiscriminate nature of these acts. Innocent Nigerians sometimes fall victim.[12]

In 2018, a recorded conversation between an internet fraudster and his would-be victim who appeared to be smarter went viral on social media in Nigeria. The fraudster is recorded as saying, 'Idiot, you think you will go free after emptying the public fund into your account? Thunder fire your head', to which the other person replied, 'your juju has failed! your juju has failed!'

For a long time, internet fraud relied on the ingenuity of fraudsters. However, most respondents in the fieldwork research said incorporating a spiritual dimension into this form of crime is largely responsible for the recent wave of fetish rituals among the youth, has taken fraud to another level, and further demonstrates the determination of frustrated youth to fight for success by any means.[13]

Tade and Aliyu (2012) affirm that the emergence of the 'yahoo boys' subculture in Nigeria can be traced back to the failure of political leadership and endemic corruption which has created the wide gap between the rich and the poor. In other words, as a small segment of the Nigerian population – politicians, transnational corporations and their favoured cronies with access to government contracts and revenues – grow wealthy and powerful, leaving the bulk of Nigerians poor. The youths look beyond the physical world in their rejection of the abnormality that seems normal in Nigeria.

As the brave delve successfully into the occult world, their success becomes a source of enticement to their peers, leading to more people becoming involved. From the study findings, most of the boys who engage in 'yahoo business' as students before their graduation are introduced to the practice by their friends. Some cultists apprehended by security officers at the University of Benin confirmed that they were introduced to cultism by their friends.[14] Rivalries between old and new participants contribute to the expanding participation in cultism. Since patronage appears to be the

most common source of recruitment and initiation, both the newcomer and the patron adopt a spiritual approach to forestall threats from one another, strengthen their position, and make more money.

The link between youth resistance culture and the proliferation of occult acts in southern Nigeria is also evident at the group level. Southern Nigeria has for some time been the home of political agitation, especially against marginalisation, and for self-determination. With the obvious failure of government security measures, groups and communities in the region have responded by establishing local self-defence initiatives. More often than not, the youths who normally form the bulk of these local security outfits combine their mandate with activities that include contesting and negotiating for their respective communities or ethnic groups. The search of these localised security outfits for both lethal and non-lethal weapons includes using protective and revelatory charms, and other traditional forms of protection. As communities and other pressure groups increasingly rely on these traditional forms of protection, they seek other forms of spiritual powers. While some opt for reinventing deities who were known in the past to be effective and powerful, as Anugwom (2011) shows in the case of the Niger Delta, others explore what is new and potent in the spiritual world.

The degree of trust in spiritual powers in the struggle for Biafra is crystal clear in this statement of one of the leaders of a vigilante group in Isiokpo who is also a staunch Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) member:

> The struggle for Biafra is not for women, neither is it meant for men without hair on their chest…. We have prepared for the Nigerian Government. They have machine gun; we have more than machine gun. I can give you this cutlass to try my hand. I bet you, there will be no single cut… Gone is the era of hiding.[15]

Reliance on spiritual powers to bolster courage and receive spiritual protection tends to be emphasised more than conventional weapons of war. The confidence with which ethnic militia and other pressure groups confront armed state security agents for ethnic and communal space in the region also shows a high level of trust in the efficacy of spiritual powers.

In addition to resistance, youth engagement in the ritual and occult world is a response to the Pentecostalist prosperity gospel of the present era. The rise of Pentecostalism brought about a change in the way certain Christian principles and doctrines were seen. In a cultural setting characterised by a long history of scarcity and want, the emphasis on prosperity found in Pentecostal evangelism is certainly more appealing than the mainline churches' expectation that authentic Christians should have hope, accept and endure their suffering, pain and poverty.

Mainline churches could not sustain their emphasis on the value of hope and endurance and lost members to Pentecostal churches which saw prosperity as a sign of being blessed from above, and poverty as a curse, a satanic omen that must be abhorred, rejected and resisted. This led to a culture of seeking wealth at all costs, regardless of how the wealth was accumulated. Ministers of the prosperity gospel encouraged members to donate to expand the ministry. In a situation where wealth acquired in any way can make a 'triumphant entry into Jerusalem', to use the biblical expression, an explosion of interest in the occult world in search of wealth is no surprise.

The field research showed that the prosperity gospel emphasis on gaining wealth at all costs has led youth to express less interest in participating in religious activities. Expressing his feelings about participation in church activities, Chuks remarked 'I will still go to church, but let me hammer first'[16]. Another informant observed that people without money at religious gatherings appear foolish: 'how can you remain seated when others are going to the altar to announce their donation; you have to look for money for seed sowing; otherwise, you will be a nonentity'.[17]

Furthermore, the ease with which some acclaimed 'ministers of God' get involved in occult and ritual killings has created disillusionment among the youth. Newspapers regularly report cases of ministers associated with occultism and occult items with which they purportedly manipulate their congregations.[18] Young people are easily given to generalisation, and there is indisputable evidence of the involvement of some high-profile church leaders in occult practices. Such generalisation often creates disregard for societal norms, including Christian values, and triggers a search for alternatives. This could help explain the revival of traditional shrines by young people and their relatively high patronage in recent times.

Implications

Youth engagement in the occult world is certainly associated with the current proliferation of cybercrime in Nigeria and beyond. The introduction of spiritualism into cybercrime and its purported efficacy has made cyber-fraud a lucrative and engaging business for the teeming population of Nigerian youth. The Nigeria Deposit Insurance Corporation says that there was a 183 per cent increase in e-payment fraud between 2013 and 2014 (NDIC 2014). According to the UK Centre for Strategic and International Studies, the annual cost of cybercrime in Nigeria is estimated at 0.08 per cent of the country's GDP, about 127 billion Naira (Iroegbu 2016).

Nigeria and Nigerians are losing huge sums of money through internet fraud, and the country's image on the international stage is being battered by young Nigerians operating as internet fraudsters. Of the 67 foreigners arrested for internet fraud in Hyderabad, India in 2015, 60 were from Nigeria (Lasania 2016). Nigeria has become so synonymous with cyber-fraud that some non-Nigerians caught in the act claim to be Nigerian before their country of origin is established (Adesina 2017). Today, paper-based Nigerian financial instruments are not valued highly by international financial institutions. Many Nigerian internet service providers and email providers are blacklisted across the internet (Adesina 2017). Also, some companies block internet traffic that is traceable to Nigeria. The implication is that Nigeria is gradually facing global isolation in the digital world.

As already noted, the Christian evangelising mission failed to separate Africans completely from their traditions, instead of a mutually enriching interaction between African and colonial culture, Africa was launched into a cultural crisis in which it could neither hold on to the past, nor embrace the new in its entirety. The recent explosion of interest in the occult and ritual world has further complicated the situation in Nigeria and in Africa more broadly. As the African youths who have been raised and trained in a context of modernity have become disenchanted, they have tended to go back to the past. However, they have not gone back to a healthy African traditional society past which has been modified by its interaction with the forces of modernity. Rather they have reverted to an unhealthy version of the past that is failing to contain them; one that endangers Nigerian society through the invocation of spiritual elements to gain wealth.

When attempts to gain wealth through occult practices fail, the unintended consequences include madness, untimely death, deformation, and susceptibility to becoming engaged in crime. There is an increasing incidence of madness among young men and women who were previously involved in ritual killings and occult practices. Case files in Uselu Psychiatric Hospital in Benin City reveal an increase in the number of psychiatric cases associated with cultism and other allied practices. Cultists and ritualists formed the second largest group of patients in the hospital after drug addicts in 2016.[19] There is also increasing number of mad young men and women roaming the streets in urban and rural areas of southern Nigeria. Field research respondents in various localities affirmed that while some of these mad young people were known to be drug addicts, there is an obvious increase in cases of unexplainable, sudden madness. The latter are largely attributed to rituals, cultism, and yahoo plus[20] (FGD 2018b). The loss of Nigerian youth to insanity and other psychological illnesses is a dangerous future development for the country.

Politicians' desperation for power certainly contributes to the proliferation of fetish rituals. Hired as political thugs, young men and, in some cases, women are ready to carry out any assignment that will give their master victory. An informant's story about his involvement as a political thug is revealing:

> Before I surrendered my life to Christ, I was a reliable political thug for Senator (name withheld). We were in Calabar for three days in 2007 where we were baked for fortification. Every six months, I travel to Ijebu Ode to see Baba and to collect some materials for the boys. We were made to be invisible before our enemies.[21]

The group of young men and women used by the Nigerian politicians to secure their position today represents the future leaders of the country. As they become part of the political process, they are likely to bring along their experiences from the spiritual world. As Ukoji and Okolie-Oseme (2016) argue, if politicians of today rely on occult powers to maintain their positions, destroy their enemies, and silence the masses, the youth, who are the politicians of the future, are unlikely to be different. In the words of Bolade: 'Nigerian youth are not just learning from politicians of today, they are making their own explorations, the outcome of which will be brought to bear on the future Nigerian politics'.[22]

Obvious reliance on occult powers for security and protection by both community vigilante and militia groups portrays the fragility of the Nigerian state. The failure of the state to protect and provide for its citizens implies a loss of trust in the state structure and gravitation towards militia and other extra-legal groups. As Ellis and Ter Haar (2004) argue, since liberal democracy cannot formally encompass spiritual powers, in exploring such terrain, non-state armed groups tend to acquire spiritual powers that further delegitimise the state. The asymmetry in physical power between the government security forces and these groups often propel the non-state groups to galvanise the deployment of all forces in their confrontations, especially spiritual forces. In their demonstration of power, more insecurity is engendered in the society with further relegation of state institutions. Indeed, the activities of IPOB in south eastern Nigeria and the formation of Amotekun (a Yoruba ethnic vigilante group) are among the topical issues that constitute obvious threat to the survival of the Nigerian state today.

Finally, the recourse of Nigerian youth to spiritualism for a better life is a dangerous development for the country and the African continent as a whole. It is both a departure from obvious steps that led to development in industrialised economies of the world, and an abandonment of the science of technology and innovation on which development depends.

Development is first conceived as idea in the mind which is then transmitted to the physical world through concrete action. Unfortunately, despite abundant natural and human resources, the leaders of Nigeria, and indeed, most African states, have failed to effectively execute policy for promoting the scientific innovation needed for development. Consequently, spiritual solutions have for a long time become a palliative for the masses. The way in which the youth have recently taken to this alternative is a dangerous awakening. Certainly, the crisis of development will deepen further when the populations of Nigeria and other African states abandon development in their search for spiritual succour.

Conclusion

The socio-economic and cultural disruption engendered by the forces of modernity provided the setting for post-colonial African society. As the euphoric wind of independence disappeared, critical challenges of nation-building became evident, creating an air of uncertainty and disillusionment that necessitated a search for alternatives at all levels. It was in this context that private rituals, particularly among the elites, became common in most African societies. The current wave of youth engagement in ritual and occult practices in southern Nigeria may be located within the privatisation of such practices during and after colonialism. However, the extent of engagement in these practices, regardless of their social and health implications, suggests something more than private rituals for protection, fame and power which characterised the first two decades of the post-colonial era.

Re-traditionalisation appears to be a more appropriate definition of the new development, even though a reversion to tradition may no longer be feasible because of the deep impact of modernity on traditional African society. The field research respondents indicated that the youth do not patronise traditional African deities as some sort of enchantment in their revival. Patronage of deities, mostly in aberrant forms, represents a rejection of the socio-economic order in Nigeria with little or no regard for their impact on practitioners and the larger society.

Notes

1. Sacrifice is found in all the Abrahamic religions. In Judaism, Abraham earned great reward after he demonstrated his faith in Yahweh's command by showing his willingness to sacrifice his only son Isaac. In the Christian religion, Jesus paid the highest price with his life as propitiation to God for the sins of the world. The Muslims celebrate Eid al-Adha during which they sacrifice a ram in remembrance of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac.

2. The Witchcraft Act was adopted in Zambia in 1914, and in South Africa in 1957. The Nigerian Penal Code of 1916 criminalised all these practices as well. See, for example, Orde-Browne (1935).
3. The earlier secrecy suggests that practitioners were afraid of the implications of being publicly exposed.
4. The other three types of youth resistance referred to in the literature are cultural resistance, youth development as resistance, and the social justice framework of resistance – see Ginwright *et al.* (2006) and Tuck and Yang (2011).
5. John Udeabasi, personal communication, 9 May 2018.
6. These were the most common ones identified by some students from three universities in southern Nigeria – University of Benin, University of Ibadan, and Nnamdi Azikiwe University. Used women's underwear, used sanitary pads, and used toilet paper have recently become some of Nigerian ritualists' most sought-after items.
7. Section 419 of the Nigerian Criminal Code Act criminalises the obtainment of another's property by false pretence. The expression '419' is therefore used in Nigeria to refer to the act of fraudulently obtaining another person's property or intending to fraudulently obtain such property within or outside Nigeria.
8. Five of the six people who responded to questions on donation of human organ for rituals were young men and women aged twenty-five to forty years. They all affirmed the common nature of the practice among young boys, especially the yahoo boys.
9 Personal communication with Ejiofor, 6 July 2018. He was one of the young men who was instrumental in the establishment of this shrine. He said the failure of foreign religion to address some of the challenges facing his community was one of the key reasons for establishing the shrine. The shrine of Agadi Nwayi became popular in Igboland in the first decade of the twenty-first century after news of its purported potency was spread in the south-eastern part of Nigeria by the Bakassi Boys, a group of local security operatives.
10. This was noted in a report on 7 December 2009 by Prof. Ode Ojowu, former economic adviser and Minister of National Planning who was also a member of the advisory council on the National Human Development Report (NHDR).
11. Focus group discussion with a group of final year students at the University of Benin, October 2018.
12. Personal communication with Osahon Erabor, 17 March 2019.
13. In a focus group discussion with some students of the University of Benin and Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka, I was made to understand that 'yahoo business', as they called it, is only lucrative when there is a spiritual angle. The students were unanimous in noting that using spiritual means has no adverse consequences for those who know how to do it well.
14. The security personnel from the university who supplied this information preferred to remain anonymous.
15. Personal communication with the Anochie, 14 August 2019.

16. 'Hammer' is a popular slang term used by Nigerian youth to refer to a sudden influx of wealth. Most of the young people interviewed blamed religious leaders and religious institutions for societal decadence, including the proliferation of human sacrifice. They said these leaders and institutions are after wealth instead of winning souls for God. Personal communication with Chuks, 7 July 2018.
17. Personal communication with Ndibe, 7 July 2018.
18. *The Guardian* of 17 August 2017 reported on the arrest of a pastor at Ota in Ogun State for burying human body parts in his church (Gyamfi 2017). A pastor who was arrested with the fresh human heart of a one-year-old girl in a church in Calabar was also found in possession of a dead chicken, the head of a goat, and male and female effigies (see Jannah 2017).
19. Personal communication with Sr. Osuji, 4 October 2018. In addition to this, the increase in the number of mental cases is becoming apparent on the streets of Benin City and other cities in southern Nigeria.
20. Focus group discussion with members of Idowina Community in Edo State, 17th December 2018.
21. Phone conversation with a key informant who preferred to remain anonymous, 28 July 2018.
22. Personal communication with Mrs Bolade, 14 September 2018.

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