
BEWARE OF CULTISM – THE GATHERING OF DEMONS

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INTRODUCTION

The play *Beware of Cultism...* is an expose on the horrific, dreadful and bloodcurdling activities of Cult organizations in our institutions of learning. It is a tragic enactment of how new and innocent University students are lured, coerced and oftentimes compelled to join cult groups even when it is against their wish to do so. Cult is described by the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (2005:398) as an extreme religious group that is not part of an established religion, interested in a particular thing, with certain beliefs and ideas that influence its members' lives in particular ways. From the definition above, it is clear that Cultism is a system of religious beliefs and practices. It has affinity with witchcraft, according to *Awake* (Watchtower Bible and Track Society) of February 8th 2002, and it is adduced to "Satanism". Commenting on the origin of Confraternities and Cultism in Nigerian Universities, Professor Muyiwa Awe, himself a founding member of the first ever – Pirates confraternity confesses in an interview with Akin Okunowo (2010:xv), that:

Anyone with spiritual insight will not fail to agree that the seed of evil and the descent into decay and violence had been planted even when the benign confraternities were being founded, (in the 50's).

Professor Awe informs us that shortly after the establishment of Pirates Confraternity, a breakaway association identified itself with "Buccaneers". And according to him, "both names belong to armed robbers operating on the high seas". Further, he says:

Another meaning of Pirate is a person who appropriates or reproduces the work of another for profit without permission. Confraternity is appropriate to a thief or a robber. Also, the symbol of the Pirates confraternity is a skull and two crossbones, a signal for life – threatening danger as well as the label on poison in every Pharmacy. Wole Soyinka was our leader and he called himself Captain blood. I called myself Long John Silver, and others took on names of the other pirates from the book *Robinson Crusoe* by Daniel Defoe. (PXV)

Professor Awe reasons that while it may be argued that these names, slogans and symbols were chosen in the innocence and exuberance of their youthfulness, Satan does not recognise innocence. As at 1990, according to a publication by the Federal Ministry of Education, there were over Eighty four (84) different Cult orgainsations (for both male and female students) in our institutions of higher learning. Only God knows how many they would be as at today.

Synopsis of the Play

The play, *Beware of Cultism*, is set in an unnamed University Campus in Nigeria and the plot revolves mainly around Onome and his roommates who have just been newly admitted into

the University, and also around cult groups such as the Black Ghost confraternity (a.k.a, Rugged Ghost family) Agnus Dei confraternity, (a.k.a, the Lambs) Wild Flora confraternity (a.k.a, Flower boys) Daughters of the Coast and Parrots (Female cult groups). The play opens with an initiation ceremony of new members into the Black Ghost Confraternity, and this leads to a confrontation staged by a group of Christian brothers and sisters who are eventually dispersed with gun shots by the Cult group. Onome and his room mates, Dada, Mayungbe, Charlie, Kenyatta and Danladi, discuss their ordeals and experiences, especially in the hands of Cultists within the Campus. Igwe, (a prominent member of a Cult group), in company of his gang, descends on Dada and his room mates in Onome's absence. They beat them up ruthlessly and turn their room upside down just because Dada, dates the same female student with him, Igwe. On hearing what happened to Dada, Onome summons courage and goes after Igwe, to challenge him. However, in spite of Onome's show of courage, he is revealed as an emotionally unstable young man, raised by a single parent, rejected by his father, maltreated by his step father and someone who has never really enjoyed love and care at home. He eventually gets recruited into a Cult group under the guise of being protected from members of the rival group, whose member he once challenged. In his second year at the University, Onome rises to become the "OWAF" and the "GHOUL" of his Cult group i.e (the no 10th man) who is the head of the hit squad of the Gomorah Cemetery. With his new position, he becomes the undertaker of most of the evil assignments to attack prominent members of rival cult groups. He leads the attack of Adamu, son of a police commissioner who is stabbed and mercilessly butchered to death in his boy's quarters hostel. The police arrests Onome but also releases him for want of evidence. The play reveals rather shockingly, that all Onome's room members, Dada, Danladi, Charlie, Kenyatta etc, who have at one time or the other experienced extortion, oppression or molestation by cultists for various reasons, have all joined one cult group or the other mostly through coercion and threat by the recruiting members of the confraternities, without disclosing to each other.

Thematic Issues in the Play

False Protection

Okunowo's *Beware of Cultism...* is a very topical play, which raises and addresses very relevant issues of urgent concern in our nation today. The play portrays our society as a decadent one, where all the values of uprightness and good sense of judgment have been jettisoned and replaced with despicable and benighted ways of life, especially among our youths. Young people are sent to school by their parents to learn, but instead of doing just that, they engage themselves in all forms of nefarious activities, living wild and dangerous life styles, all in self-delusion. Cult organizations exist on our campuses purportedly, as protective platforms for their members. Unfortunately, they offer nothing, but spurious and false sense of protection to these innocent inductees. Instead of protecting, they actually do the opposite. They expose their members to the danger of being hacked down by rival cult group members at any time. Protection comes from God, not from human beings, not the least, from fellow students. Children must be trained to develop self confidence from their homes and trust in God. There seems to be a serious disconnect in our society today,

between many parents and their children; between children and what God represents in human lives; between students and University authorities, and indeed between citizens, society and its leaders. This social decadence must be seriously addressed through compulsory moral instruction, civil education and continuous re-orientation of our youth.

The dialogue between Osama and Charlie illustrates this false protection point

Osama: You like those guys (Charlie nods excitedly) Once I package you well and you also arrange yourself as a good boy, no shaking, you'll become a big boy and enjoy enough protection throughout your life time

Charlie: Are you sure?

Osama: Shuo. You no believe. On this campus alone, if your enemies try you, they'll get big trouble. Whoever mess with us gets big-big trouble.

Charlie: Of Course, I believe you. Hope no one will harass me again?

Osama: Who will? We are the fear on this campus so you're on the safest side

Charlie: I love it (pg 30)

It is also important to point out however that some of the inductees into these organizations are forced to join. For instance, after the attack of Dada, by Igwe, over Ndidi, a fellow female student. Ndidi in an apparent attempt to assist Dada get protection, tells Uche, the students union welfare officer, who promises Dada, that so long as he hangs out with him, he will be safe, never to be harassed and attacked again. (pp 39-40). Unknown to Ndidi and Dada, Uche is a member of another cult group. The conversation between Dada, Uche and Material in Act 4 Scene 4 makes this clear.

Material: (To Dada). If you dare it, you'll regret why your Mama born you. Mind you, other "frats" now believe you're one of us.

Dada: Believe what? Why didn't you tell me this was your idea, Mr Union officer

Uche: Dem no de tell person, after all, its for your own protection

Dada: What protection?

Uche: You are now safe and man enough to face challenges

Dada: I don't like this

Material: Why?

Dada: It is against my wish

Uche: (Laughs) It was like this for many of us but with time, it will be part of your life

Dada: What nonsense are you talking about. I don't like cultism at all.

Material: Uche, lets go. Look here Dada. You've unmasked some faces behind the curtain of our "Confra", a knowledge that can cost your life if you remain a commonality.

Uche: Don't think I respect cowards. If you turn yourself into one, I will be among those who will treat your fuck-up.

Material: (Cross at him). Let me warn you. The choice to be or not to be is no longer yours. Just prepare yourself for drilling, next Sabbath (p.50)

Cruelty

Another topical issue discussed in the play, is that of cruelty. Cultism has nothing to do with kindness, mercy and compassion. It has nothing to do with good virtue and love, but hatred, rivalry, violence, revenge, terror, and hostility both among members of the same confraternity and especially, rival groups. So, one wonders, what the sense or benefit is, in belonging to an organisation that has nothing to offer but trouble. Almost every scene of the play portrays this theme of wickedness and vicious violence.

Let us consider these instances.

- The extortion of Charlie of all the money on him by Osama, a fellow student in Act 2 Scene 5. (p.31).
- The violent attack on Dada and his room mates by Igwe and his group because Dada dares to date the same girl, Ndidi, with him in Act 3, Scene 3. (p.37)
- The horrific rape of Stella by Ossai and his group and the dastardly act of forcing her into a sack full of faeces, tying it up, and abandoning the poor girl to suffocate to death, in Act 4, Scene 3. (p49)
- The tormenting and torturing of new inductees, some of who end up dead and are secretly buried at the venue of initiation, in Act 4, Scene 6 (pp 51-52) and Scene 7 (p. 57).
- The murder of Solo and a reprisal attack on Adamu and friends by Onome and his group of “elves”, in Act 6, Scene 6 (p. 74)
- The mutilation of Adamu in his boy quarter’s hostel by Onome and his group in Act 7 Scene 3, (p. 82) etc.

It is greatly disheartening that young men who leave their houses and parents to the University with a great hope of a bright future, suddenly turn away from pursuing activities that are academically productive and socially constructive, into pursuing that which is evil, destructive and criminal.

Home Training

One very important issue discussed in Okunowo’s *Beware Cultism...* is the role that families ought to play in bringing up their Children to imbibe the values of uprightness and to stabilise them emotionally through love and care, especially during their impressionable years. It is quite easy for an average young man like Onome who has no home to return to, even after vacation and who has never enjoyed his parents love and protection to fall to the lure of external sign of security, even when it is a ruse.

The conversation between Onome and his Mum in Act 3 Scene 2 is very instructive to our discussion.

Mama Onome: Didn’t I warn you not to have anything to do with your father?

Onome: Hem, he only came around to check, er.

Mama Onome: To check what? Oh, he just realized he has a son after denying your pregnancy and me? Onome, you disappoint me.

Onome: (remorsefully) I’m sorry.

- Mama Onome: Sorry over a man who never care? Let this be the last time you ever have anything to do with that heartless man who called you a bastard and was never there for you... Lest I forget, I want you to spend your vacation on campus.
- Onome: Why? Not again, in higher institution
- Mama Onome: I'm sick of your stepfather maltreating you. I can't stand it any longer and I can't talk because I'm a woman. But if you need anything, phone, I'll send it to you please.
- Onome: After a permanent boarding life throughout my primary and secondary schools with no single happy moment when I go home, when will I enjoy love and care? (p 34)

Much as it is important for parents to show love and to care for their children, one counter-productive error that some parents also commit, is that of over-pampering and undue indulgence in the privileges they extend to their Children either at home or while in school. The insistence of Mama Charles against the counsel of Chief, Charles father, for Charles to take a car to school is one of the reasons that attracted undue attention to Charles, in the University thereby leading to his eventual recruitment into a cult group. It is common knowledge that the Children of the rich and important public personalities are usually the target of these cult organizations. The recruitment of Adamu son a police commissioner, also exemplifies this point (p. 78)

Other Social Issues – Lesbianism, Robbery, Exam Malpractice, etc

Apart from the issue of rape earlier mentioned, there are other criminal and immoral activities discussed in the play:

- There is the issue of lesbianism between Sakie and Vikkie in (Act 7, Sc 5. P. 86).
- There is a case of daylight robbery by kobie and Etim (University undergraduates) in a supermarket in (Act 5, sc 4, (P.62).
- There is a plan hatched to engage in exam malpractice between Tolex and Danladi in Act 5, Scene 5 (P.64)
- There is the case of duplicity and the ineffectiveness on the part of Nigeria Police as portrayed in the arrest and release of Onome in Act 7. Sc 6 (Pg 88) etc.

What all these point to, is that there is a serious break down of law and order, while evil and criminality seem to have taken over, not only in our campuses, but even within the larger society. The submission of Supol, when he orders the release of Onome in Act 7. Sc. 6 (Pg 88) captures this over-whelming hopelessness

Supol: God, how can we stop violence and crimes in our schools now. Today, our schools have become the breeding ground for criminals. Moreover, investigating secrecy among these students is a big problem. Even the nicknames they bear are very much confusing. What is Lucifer? Is he a spirit or human? Only God will save us from students and the demons they have become.

Cult Members' Names

It is totally unbelievable the kind of names that these cult members christen and proudly call themselves. It is beyond belief for a young man with a fine name such as Charles to take on "Serpent" as name and symbol of identity. Below are some of the horrible names they call themselves: Coffin, Skull, Crossbone, Ghost, Carcass, Bloodstone, Hangman, Ur, Apiru, Small Devil, Lucifer etc.

Coded Language

In addition, the language of communication between the characters who are Cult members in the play is highly coded. Okunowo captures this linguistic codes so masterly that one wonders if its all due to creativity or personal experience.

Some of the striking codes include

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| - Bom – boy | - Gun |
| - Horse | - Vehicles |
| - Jew | - a novice or non-cultist |
| - Natives | - Enemies |
| - Sabbath | - Gathering for service in the secret bush |
| - Fante | - Leave |
| - Pai | - Die |
| - Omila | - Robbery |
| - Dogg | - Shot dead |
| - Gbege | - War |
| - Salele` | - Sing |
| - Gehenna | - Hell |
| - Ammo | - Arms and ammunition |
| - Kelebe | - Police etc. |

CONCLUSION

Akin Okunowo's *Beware of Cultism*, is an important and invaluable literary piece in view of the sensitive topic it discussed. The drama vividly exposes the ways of operation of Cult organisations, their initiation processes, reasons for joining, reasons for attacking rival group members and the general motivation towards show of power, revenge and thirst for blood. The play could be categorized as "tragedy" in view of the degree of violence and bloodshed portrayed in it. However, Onome the protagonist and Chief murderer in the play should have been subjected to "poetic justice" by paying dearly for all the atrocities he committed against humanity. The fact that he walks free at the end of the play even with Omo Olope arranging Arewa for him to satisfy his morbid sexual pleasure sends very wrong signals to all those involved in this evil game and to the audience. In addition, the role given to the University, as an institution is too passive. One expects to see a more active involvement on the part of the University authorities in the entire drama, such as a more serious investigation into some of the murder cases, beyond the defeatist attitude exhibited by the police. Such

investigation could also lead to the rustication and expulsion of some of the student Cultists, in order to serve as a deterrent to others. Although, there is a caption in page 92 which says "This is not the end, watch out for book 2", one should then believe and hope that some of the observations and suggestions made will be adequately taken care of in the sequel.

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