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From University Campuses to Villages: A Study of Grassroots-based Cult Violence in Ogoniland

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Abstract: *Secret cults existed in traditional African societies as socio-cultural and political organisations. They provided socio-economic support to their members who were mainly adults and elders. Secret cults were also involved in indigenous peacemaking and healing in local communities. Traditional cult groups therefore occupied a pivotal place in community development and social transformations. The youth-based cult groups that emerged in Nigerian Universities in the 1950s were more or less an adaptation of traditional cult practices in key respects. For example, while the Pyrate Confraternity group, a pioneer cult formed in 1953 at the University of Ibadan, rejected spirituality, the group was concerned with fighting colonialism, bad university policies and sexual exploitation of female students by university teachers. This was the dominant character of youth-based campus cults until the 1980s when they became dysfunctional and violent, posing a threat to campus security and academic activities. Yet, cultism operated mainly on the campuses. Today, however, youth-based cult groups have emerged in local villages in Nigeria with serious implications for social order and stability. With a specific focus on the activities of the Deebam and Deewell, the two main cults that operate in Ogoni villages in Nigeria's Niger Delta, this study advances our understanding of cultism in Nigeria by highlighting the social determinants and contexts of cult violence in local communities. This article argues that grassroots-based cult violence in Ogoniland is a manifestation of two key elements: the struggle for social identity and the expression of economic discontent by disaffected village youths.*