

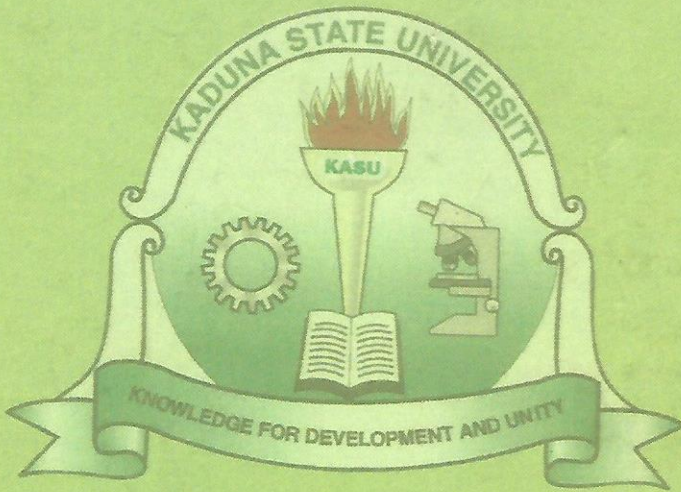


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Making Sense of Youth Subculture and Counterculture in Twenty-First Century Nigeria

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Abstract

This study interrogates Youth subculture and counterculture in Nigeria particularly in cities of southwestern Nigeria in the age of globalization. This research aims to critically analyse the factors responsible for the development of Youth subcultures and countercultures and the effects of these on them. The paper argues that Nigerian youths have increasingly developed and exhibited peculiar reactions to their perceived socio-economic and political exclusion. The subcultures generated from these in the global age have surprisingly become widespread and widely adopted by all strata of society. It has thus moved from being a culture of protest to that of popular culture. These subcultures are no longer gendered, classed, and location bound. Youth subcultures in Nigeria, characteristically exhibit the four criteria of subcultures as indicated by Thornton, namely; identity, commitment, consistent distinctiveness, and autonomy. This research concludes that youth subcultures and countercultures in the twenty-first century are highly influenced by the media of globalization and these have in turn influenced globalization itself. There is an urgent need to engage these cultures in the engagement of the youths as progressive agents of development. This will no doubt reverse the negative tendencies in youth subcultures in Nigeria as they portend great dangers to the future of the globe.

Introduction

The study of youth subcultures has rich histories in the United Kingdom and United States of America. Unfortunately, it has remained a marginal subfield (William, 2007: 572) within the field of social history in Nigeria. There is a wide array of theoretical and methodological traditions on subcultures. Subcultures are liable to involve an assortment of both positive and negative connotations. Unlike the USA, the UK, Europe,

and Australia where the youth-subcultural phenomena had for years remained popular at colleges and universities, they have only become widespread in primary schools, secondary schools, tertiary institutions and on the streets in Nigeria from the 1980s.

These subcultures were particularly interesting in Nigeria in the 1980s and 1990s as they tended to degenerate into terrorist gangs, militia groups, armed robbery gangs, kidnappers, fraudsters (Advanced fee fraud – 419), Cybercrime (Yahoo- yahoo), Cult groups, etc. A major component of youth subgroups in Nigeria is the exhibition of delinquent behaviours. These attitudes can be attributed to societal problems. Though antisocial in nature, they are protests against a lack of respect for their fundamental human rights, unemployment, bad economic policies, socioeconomic marginalization, corrupt governments, political exclusion, failed parenting, failed state, and social exclusion in areas of quality education, health care facilities, basic amenities, etc. (Honwana 2012:3). Usually, these group of youths' exhibit hostilities and act in defiance of 'normal' ethos.

The fascinating context of this research is how youth subcultures, whilst using the same tools, diverge into two different directions in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The two categories that have emerged are the ones used by refined elements (tertiary education students and graduates) and the unrefined (street boys and touts); though deriving from different backgrounds, they both use these subcultures as markers of identities and social acceptance. This is almost antithetical to the position of Downes and Rock (2003:146) who believed that when youths are:

Faced with problems of adjustment caused by school failure, the rejected evolve the delinquent gang solution as a means both to acquire status in a more accessible form and to hit back at the system that has branded them as failures. The gang takes the rules of respectable society and turns them upside down.

In this research, I attempt a critique of the theoretical frameworks for studying subcultures. Most significant of these frameworks are those propounded by Albert Cohen, E. Franklin Frazier, the Chicago School, Strain theory, the Birmingham school, and the post-subcultural studies traditions of youth-cultural and youth subcultural research. Unlike Williams (2007:572), I will only review the significance of Cohen's analytic concepts as they relate to and are manifested in youth subcultures in Nigeria. The largest concentration of these cities was in South-western Nigeria. (Fourchard:2003). The most prominent cities of south-western Nigeria are Lagos and Ibadan. Youth subcultures and

countercultures will be studied in these popular cities in Nigeria, particularly due to the preponderance of social markers and identities that flowed from several practices in these cities.

Theoretical and Methodological Analysis of Youth Subcultures

Youth subculture is a youth-based practice that is characterized by distinct identities, behaviours, styles, and interests. Albert Cohen (1955) indicates that the creation of subcultures is dependent on the 'mutual gravitation' of disgruntled individuals and their 'effective interaction with one another.' Cohen focused on gang delinquency among working class youth subculture in slum areas that responded to their perceived lack of economic and social opportunities within the United States. The position of Cohen, does not fully apply to the situation in Nigeria. Though gangs are mostly formed in the slum areas in Nigeria in response deprivation and inequity, it does affect working class youths. Working class youths in Nigeria are at most times excluded from this category.

Youth Subcultures and Countercultures in Nigeria

... young people, in rich and poor countries alike, share the same concerns and aspirations and are beginning to assert their rights as citizens. They are rising up against unemployment, socioeconomic marginalization, unsound economic policies, corrupt governments, political exclusion, and lack of respect for their rights. These are cries for freedom by a generation yearning to make a place for itself in the world. (Honwana 2012:3)

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, Nigerian youths were listless due to societal challenges; in a period marked by the 'rapid and radical social change' (Hebdige 1979: vii) of globalization. Youths in Nigeria have had to contend with myriads of societal challenges ranging from hunger and starvation in the mist of plenty and show of opulence, inability of parents and government to provide quality education, broken homes, loss and redefinition of societal values particularly from the agents of globalization (media, telecommunications, and other sources of information communication technology), proliferation of controlled substances (tramadol, codeine, cocaine, Indian hemp etc.); all these have made youths vulnerable to antisocial behaviours.

There have emerged two major strands of youth culture, namely; the violent and non-violent. While the latter is gender and class blind, the former is the gender blind but the reserve of the poor in the society. I will define the poor here according to the Oxford Dictionaries as those

"lacking sufficient money to live at a standard considered comfortable or normal in a society."

It must be emphasized that Nigeria has had her share of delinquents over time. Salm and Falola (2009), in their edited volume; *African Urban Spaces in Historical Perspective* provide the historical roots of youth delinquent groups in Nigeria. These included the 'Jaguda' (pickpockets) and the 'Boma Boys' in twentieth century colonial Nigeria. The pickpockets and hooligans who operated in a group of between three to six persons. Historically, they are the parents of the miscreants known as 'Area boys' and 'Area Girls' of the late 1980s (Momoh: 2000; Salm and Falola: 2009). These groups are known to have "provoked quarrels and fighting in the streets to relieve their victims of their money and extract illegal fees." (Salm and Falola 2009:298) One major youth culture associated with these deviant groups, irrespective of sex is drug use (cocaine, marijuana, heroin). They are either occasional users, addicts or peddlers (Momoh:2000).

In post-colonial Nigeria, events such as the Nigerian Civil war (1967-70) has also increased the level of youth involvement in crime and other unpopular activities. However, this escalated during the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP); 1986-1996 (Momoh: 2000). There was an 'epidemic of violence' (Adesina 1994:239) in the country as people, particularly the youth; reacted to the perceived injustices of SAP. This period was characterised by students' movements and popular struggles (Adejumobi: 2000), young ladies' involvement in commercial/International sex trade (Adesina: 2006) and all other vices. With SAP, violence became the new youth subculture. However, the aftermath of the SAP witnessed, particularly at the end of military rule in Nigeria (1999), a new subculture that was not entirely related to violence emerged. This is not to say, violence was entirely absent in the post-military era, it has been in fact been characterized by the activities of political thugs, garage touts, and area boys. While most civilian governments have discouraged the activities of 'Area boys', some have metamorphosed into youth robbery gangs such as the *One Million Boys Gang*, *Awawa Group*, *Aiye Confraternity*, and *Eiye Confraternity* in Lagos and Ibadan (Okolie: 2016; Malik: 2016) and political thugs have also mutated into ethnic militia groups.

The *One Million Boys Gang* (Lagos/Ibadan), *Awawa Group* (Lagos), *Aiye Confraternity* (Lagos/Ibadan), and *Eiye Confraternity* (Lagos/Ibadan) have established a 'reign of terror' across the cities of Lagos and Ibadan in Southwestern Nigeria.

Unlike the between three to six persons' groupings of twentieth century gangs, twenty-first century groupings are characterised by a

mass movement of youths between the ages of 15 and 20. These groups are often violent. They engage in acts of terrorism, drug use, raping, robbery, etc. These youths are known to wreak havoc on members of low income communities, where they attack the members of the communities with machetes, axes, cutlasses, broken bottles, and guns. The News Agency of Nigeria (NAN), on January 12, 2016 reported that 40 members of the *One Million Boys'* attacked the Ajara, Ibereko, Lopo and Aradagun areas of Badagry in Lagos State. These hoodlums were armed with dangerous weapons with which they robbed members of these communities of their valuables. According to one of the victims – Shola Odunade – in the NAN report, narrated his ordeal thus:

their mode of operation was to seek assistance from their target area from unsuspecting members of the public. Thereafter, they will rob those who listened to their pleas, he said.

Odunade added that the hoodlums usually attacked their victims with machetes. He said:

“I was in my house when I heard some people shouting for help and I opened my door so that I could render help.

“That was when they descended on me.

“They stole my money, cell phone and laptop and they still inflicted injuries on me after they had robbed me of my valuables.

Another victim, Segun, stated that:

“I was returning from an outing when I was accosted by the gang and they demanded that I must give them everything I had on me. When they realised I did not have anything on me, they began to beat me but I just managed to escape.

Using the same *modus operandi*, the *Awawa Boys'* of Lagos, a group of youths between the age of 14 and 20, are known to attack residents of the Agege area of Lagos State between 5 and 8p.m. on Thursdays and Sundays (Fagunwa, 2017). The Report by Danielle Ogbeche (2016) in the *Daily Post* of March 5 2016, confirmed the operative style of the group as revealed by the Police. The Nigerian Police Force (NPF) revealed that:

members of Awawa have been known in the last two years as ruthless robbers, who unleash mayhem, loot shops and attack residents at gunpoint in Agege area of Lagos.

Furthermore the NPF discovered that the group made use of an informant in its operations. They confirmed that:

Twenty year old Adesola, confessed to be an informant for the gang. However, before the police went after her, she had walked into the Isokoko Police Division, Agege, to see her husband (a member of the gang) who was also in custody. She was oblivious that her identity had already been made known to the police. The police told newsmen that the information they got from other captured members of the gang was that she was the one sent around the neighbourhood to identify potential targets of their robbery operations.

In her confession, Adesola said, "I don't know what the police are talking about. I am just a hairdresser. My husband told me to get the tattoo because he has it too.

They are identified with 'a unique teardrop tattoo beside their left eye.' (Ogbeche: 2016) This group are known to move in on their victims in droves. Some commentators on the online Magazine *NaijaGists.com* (2016), have described the Awawa Boys' as youths:

... between the ages of 15-23yrs and hardly before u see one without tattoo, they bleach, they mostly on big old skull jersey, sandal and half dread on the head. (Lagbaja)

... They are usually teenagers mostly in Secondary schools. The older ones amongst dem is not more dan 21. Kabakaba himself is still only 21. (Akin)

The *Awawa Boys* in a different Police raid reported by Olasunkanmi Akoni & Esther Onyegbula, in the Vanguard Newspapers of June 27, 2016, stated that a gang member had confessed to raping girls, amongst other nefarious acts. Jimoh Sanni (a sectional leader of the group) in the report, confessed as follows:

I am a sectional head of Awawa Boys and have raped more than five girls around Dopemu area. My gang has burgled many shops at Aluminium Village and sold Indian hemp for beer parlours and night clubs at N100 per wrap before we go for our usual night robbery operations. "We collect N2,000 to N3,000 every day from individual aluminium shop owner at Dopemu area and that they buy Indian hemp from another Awawa Boys kingpin named Olata, at Oloosha area at Mushin."

The twenty-first century violent youth subcultures are cult groups. They are found in primary schools, secondary schools, tertiary institutions, and on streets. They are identified by their hairstyles, dressings (style or a peculiar colour), tattoos, coded slangs/languages etc. They are also known to afflict their victims and rival groups with deadly weapons.

Youth sub-culture has diverged in different directions. This has found resonance in sharp practices, smart and skilful words and ideas that has deviated from the modes and categories inherited from the past; a phenomenon that no longer fits into the reality experienced by these new generations of youths (Hebdige 1979: vii). The emergence of street words and slangs as new markers of identity have redefined youth mobility and effectiveness. This youth culture is, at times, class and gender blind but the in the violent strand of Nigeria's twenty-first century youth subculture and counterculture, class plays a great role. Though Hebdige (1979) opine that the classless nature of youth subculture resonates in Volosinov's (1973) observation of the sign community, as he stated that:

Class does not coincide with the sign community, i.e. with the totality of users of the same set of ideological communication. Thus, various different classes will use one of the same language. As a result, differently oriented accents intersect in every ideological sign.

This position is no longer relevant to present-day Nigeria, where above all, poverty and deprivation are major determinants of youth culture. The street culture has now transcended all spheres – religious, ethnic, class, and gender. A major characteristic of this subculture is that it is generated through the diverse media – the streets, newspaper, radio, popular music, cable networks, internet, and the social media. Notable amongst these agents of youth subcultures is the Nigerian music industry. In the words of Fagunwa (2017), members of the notorious groups mentioned above are influenced by the lyrics of the new hip-hop music where a lot of emphasis is laid on amassing wealth, having access to any girl of their choice, dealing in drugs, meaning of power and its acquisition. He gave example of Davido and Olamide's Lyrics of 'The Money', Olamide's 'Dope Money', etc. where the acquisition of money by all means is encouraged.

The music genres that promote youth subcultures are the Hip-Hop and *Fuji*. These genres are predominantly Nigerian. The Hip-Hop is a peculiar local blend that preserves Nigerian languages and traditions. The musicians of these brands of music are heavily reliant on traditional Nigerian musical instruments and accompaniments like the talking drum. But, the musicians' styles of dressings are mostly western-styled. According to a Newspaper report by Olatunji Ololade in *The Nation* newspaper of April 9, 2016; the local hip-hop has replaced foreign music. The reporter attests to the fact that these new genres are a departure from the past (1960s to 1990s) where music represented accepted societal

norms, happenings in society, and folklores. Hitherto, while music entertained, it also taught moral and societal lessons. The music enthusiasts of twenty-first century Nigeria – the youths especially – are more interested in rhythms that appeal to ‘free madness’, and danceable lyrics that passed as gibberish. In the words of Olatunji Ololade (2016:14):

That hankering for ‘something fresh and creative’ is responsible for the sudden appeal and elevation of local music above foreign imports. The 21st century saw computers and affordable editing software becoming more widely available... Audiences were soon won over, and as home-grown sounds took over the airwaves, western pop music got displaced by local hip pop and local artistes earned lucrative corporate endorsement deals.

He stated further that:

All they seem to be saying is that they are making money, they are crime lords, they are big spenders, they are having sex and they are getting all the girls. This is why we have our children dancing and singing along to music that would earn me multiple slaps from my parents back in the days... Stripped to the basics, in ‘Free Madness’, there were no melodies, no dynamic changes and no actual lyricism. What sounded at first like one continuous pulsing sound, gradually revealed all sorts of inner gibberish. (Ololade 2016:15)

These new waves in the Nigerian music industry has affected dressing, hairstyles, manner of walking/talking/conversing, and greeting. The use of slangs which hitherto was the preserve of the lower class, has permeated all social sphere including religious groups. Some of these slangs include ‘*Twale*.’ *Twale* is an exclamation that is used to show respect to a person. It is a slang that was initially associated with *Area Boys* – the kings of the street. *Twale* is accompanied by the raising of two hands and a leg.” It is believed that “in dangerous situations, shouting *twale* can take you out of a dangerous situation. “In difficult situations learning to speak like them can save your life.” (Shola:2015) *Twale* has also been used in the lyrics of a church song where Christians have said *twale* to Jesus! Though this word is known to have originated amongst drivers and touts, it has permeated different strata of society including the academia and even church songs. However, the etymology of the word is not clear. while such words as ‘*Igboro*’ (meaning about town in Yoruba) and ‘*Ibile*’ are linked to Remilekun Abdulkalid Safaru (aka Reminisce or *Alaga Ibile*). These

words are used for the street wise young men and women while the modest is referred to as '*ope*' (meaning non-initiate in Yoruba).

There is also a beard gang. These are a group of young men who go around with full beards. The full beards can be associated with a 'copy-cat' mentality of the youths. Abdulbasit Olokuta, a young undergraduate says men carried the beards when they began to copy a beard style made popular by a Nigerian musician; Azubuikwe Chibuzo Nelson, aka 'Phyno'. Young men of all classes also began to wear wrist beads. This is also said to be trending because it is a marked identity associated another Nigerian musician; CDQ.

However, society has tried to resist this process of change by instituting boundaries between 'formal' and 'informal' spaces – by the school and parent culture (Honwana 2012:29) – to practically oppose the erosion of traditional normal spaces. Schools (universities) have been classified as 'formal' and 'responsible' spaces (Honwana 2012:18), thus, students have been dissuaded from 'interrupting the process of normalization.' In sum, most universities have established Codes of Conduct, Dress Codes, and Demerit systems to emphasize the marked difference between the 'responsible' and 'irresponsible' spaces. (See Appendix I) While these have helped reform some youths, they are not sufficient because the rules only apply to a few youths who are privileged to attend, usually, private universities.

Conclusion

This work has demonstrated that while the youth subculture of the earlier period in Nigeria was overwhelmingly formed by a small group of youths, rebellious and self-destruct, there are two new subcultures – the violent and non-violent. The violent groups are cultic, robbery gangs, and terrorist groups while the other is basically slang and identity oriented (distinguished by their physical appearances with their choice of hairstyles, clothings, drug use etc) – the latter group is not necessarily deviant.

The governments of Lagos and Oyo States are contending with the activities of these deviant groups – *One Million Boys*, *Awawa Group*, *Aiye Confraternity*, and *Eiye Confraternity* gang who are currently enlisting members from poor neighbourhoods across the two states. This is a dangerous trend that needs to be interrogated to avoid the emergence of similar terrorist groups such as '*Boko Haram*' and the militants from the Niger Delta, particularly because membership of these new groups cut across religious and ethnic affiliations. It is pertinent that one pays a close attention to the educational sector, the challenges faced by family

in carrying out its responsibilities, the peculiar challenges of living in low-income areas of Nigerian societies and how all these have determined peer organizations, as all these have profound implications for the activities of youths outside the shores of Nigeria. On the International scene, some group of youths who eventually migrate to Europe, the United States and other Developed countries of the world; form criminal organisations, such as drug/people trafficking and prostitution rings to continue with their nefarious activities.

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