

Of Cult and Power: A Political Phenomenology of the Ombatse Cult in Nasarawa State, Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper seeks to proffer a political phenomenology of the Ombatse cult in Nasarawa State, Nigeria, with a view to underscoring its origin, nature, character, as well as historical and contemporary dynamics. The Ombatse is a cultural organisation that is functionally mutating into a formidable ethno-political vanguard. Sequel to the ill-fated incident of May 07, 2013 whereof scores of Nigerian public security personnel were reportedly massacred by persons suspected to be members of the group; the Ombatse has gained immense prominence in Nigeria's public domain and beyond. The bulk of what is currently known concerning the Ombatse remains a matter of media permutations and figment-sensationeering. There has not been any conscious research effort to interrogate the prevailing media cum pedestrian perspectives on the subject with a view to situating its real essence and significance. By way of an empirical narrative, predicated on the phenomenological approach, the paper posits that the Ombatse has, more or less, metamorphosed from an obscure socio-cultural organisation to a prominent ethno-political movement in keeping with the imperative of politicisation. The paper submits that the bastardisation of the Ombatse, by way of ethno-elite manipulation and militarisation, holds critical implications for national security in Nigeria.

Keywords: Cult; phenomenology; the Ombatse; politicisation; national security.

1. Introduction

The Ombatse is a native trado-spiritual organisation for the Eggon people of Nasarawa State, Nigeria. Originally formed to fight social vices and ills, the Ombatse has over the years ostensibly metamorphosed into a formidable socio-cultural vanguardship dedicated to the protection of the land, people and heritage of the Eggon people as well as the advancement of their common aspirations.

Prior to the present decade (<2010 A.D), the activities of the Ombatse were more or less localized and scarcely prominent in the Nigerian public domain. They were largely “concerned with instilling purity in adherents, using the traditional religion of the people” (Joseph, 2013: para. 2). Over time, the fetish potency of the Ombatse seems to have endeared the organisation to the populace some of whom started resorting to it as an alternative avenue for social adjudication and legal recompense (Akuke, 2013). The organization has

also undertaken spiritual consulting for individuals who were prospecting healing, deliverance and breakthrough. Hence, in addition to regular worship and initiations, the Ombatse shrines is said to have played host to politicians, businessmen and celebrities who were seeking spiritual powers and/or favour to advance in their walks of life (Joseph, 2013).

The 2011 general electioneering marked a water-shed in the evolution of the Ombatse into national limelight. In this context the current Governor of Nasarawa State, Umaru Tanko Al-Makura was said to have benefited from the politico-partisan patronage of the Ombatse in making good his electoral victory, based on a certain sinister agreement (Akuke, 2013).

Since 2011, the Ombatse has been implicated in number of communal violence in Nasarawa State, such as the Ayaragu and the Assakio incidents of 2012 and 2013 respectively. On May 7th, 2013, scores of public security personnel were massacred at the Alakyo village of the State by militants believed to be members of the Ombatse. This development has since introduced a new dimension to the prevailing discourse on the Ombatse phenomenon.

In this paper, attempt is made to situate the political phenomenology of the Ombatse from the perspective of both historical and contemporary experiences. The essence of the discourse is to underscore the essence and significance of the Ombatse as a socio-cultural organisation that is fast mutating into a formidable ethno-political movement.

2. Frame of Reference: Ombatse Cult or Militia?

Various attributions have been ascribed to the Ombatse since it gained international currency in 2013, ranging from 'cult' to 'militia'. Hence, the Ombatse has been variously described as an 'ethnic militia' or a 'religious cult' by media and public commentators. The designation of the Ombatse as an ethnic militia must have resulted from its militant tendencies as exemplified in the Alakyo massacre of May, 2013 (Angwe, 2014). To ascribe to the Ombatse the attribute of an ethnic militia is at best problematic. This is in view of the fact that the organisation does not necessarily represent the pan-Eggon nationality as some observers may erroneously assume. Our research revealed that a good member of Eggon natives take strong exception to being identified or associated with the Ombatse. Again, it has not been properly established as to whether the Ombatse militants are fighting an ethnic cause or are simply serving the selfish interests of some political opportunists who masquerade as champions of the Eggon's nationalist agenda.

The notion of 'religious cult', for the moment, best describes the Ombatse phenomenon. Cult, in its present usage, denotes "any group with a fanatical devotion to a person, movement, or common interest" (Encarta Microsoft Student 2009 DVD). The Ombatse represents a religious cult to the extent that it is fanatically devoted to a common movement and cause under a spiritual father-figure that depicts a cult persona. Thus, some recent scholarly publications in Nigeria have acknowledged the fact that the Ombatse represents a cultic group (Aver, Nnorom and Targbe, 2013; Angwe, 2014). It is pertinent to note, however, that members of the Ombatse would rather pride themselves as faithful of a solemn trado-spiritual order, and not a cult or militia.

3. Methodological Foundation: The Phenomenological Approach

This paper is a product of a phenomenological research. A phenomenological research is a qualitative study that essentially seeks to describe rather than explain (Huserl, 1970). According to Lester:

The purpose of the phenomenological approach is to illuminate the specific, to identify phenomena through how they are perceived by the actors in a situation. In human sphere, this normally translates into gathering 'deep' information and perceptions through inductive, qualitative methods such as

interviews, discussions and participant observation, and representing it from the perspective of the research participant(s) (1999:1).

Put simply, the phenomenological approach is an investigative method that interrogates phenomena based on human perception and experience. In effect, a phenomenological inquiry seeks to understand reality as it is perceived or experienced without reference to the question as to whether what is perceived or experienced is objectively real. Hence, our attempt to examine the Ombatse phenomenon in this paper does not purport to establish any 'objective truth' regarding the essence of the organisation. It is only aimed at highlighting the ascribed nature of the group in the light of its manifest tendencies based on popular perception.

In tandem with the foregoing, the paper predicates its discourse on widespread apprehension of the Ombatse as elicited through intensive personal interviews and discussions with persons who are adjudged to be conversant with the issue under investigation. The thrust of the paper represents the researcher's personal effort at synchronizing the research outcome with relevant extant documented insights on the subject matter in an attempt to initiate a scholarly discourse in that regard. The paper is thematically structured to address its major concerns as below.

4. Understanding the Ombatse Phenomenon: A Discursive Empirical Narrative

The Ombatse has been widely discussed and misunderstood in Nigeria's public sphere. In effect, the bulk of what is currently known concerning the origin, essence and activities of the group has been fraught with misconception and/or terminological inexactitude. This section seeks to highlight the essences of the Ombatse based historical and empirical insights. This is done in turn under the sub-themes that follow.

4.1 Origin and Nature:

The origin of the Ombatse has been associated with the traditional religious practices of the Eggon people of Nasarawa State. Shrines of Eggon origin, where the adherents of the Ombatse go for their initiations and worship, have existed from time immemorial, and have been trans-inherited from one generation to another (Joseph, 2013). By its original calling, the Ombatse was concerned with instilling moral purity in its adherents with a view to bringing about spiritual transformation of the Eggon-land.

The motto of the Ombatse is captured in its sloganeering format: "*Ombatse*", "*Ombolamu*". The former from which the organization has derived its name is an Eggon word translating to "time has come" or "it is time now". Apparently implicit in this sloganeering is a subtle appeal to a sub-nationalist agenda built around the Eggon identity.

4.2 Organisational Structure/Hierarchy:

In its current existence and form, the Ombatse operates like an ethno-cultural movement with a well entrenched organizational structure. The group is superintended by the Chief Priest, Baba Alakyo, who is the supreme custodian of the organization. The Chief Priest is assisted by a number of other officials namely the spiritual leader, the chairman, the secretary, the Public Relations Officer (PRO), the Discipline Officer (DO), the Legal Officer, the Welfare Officer, and the Patron. There are also co-coordinators who represent the organization at various communities and operational cells.

The Ombatse maintains a rank and file of youth vanguard who often act as its 'foot soldiers'. This crop of enthusiastic youths has been associated with sundry excesses such as militancy, hooliganism and other forms of mob violence. They have been variously implicated in the spate of inter-ethnic skirmishes and communal violence in Nasarawa State over the recent years (cf. Okoli and Atelhe, 2014).

4.3 Modus Operandi cum Vivendi:

The Ombatse holds its worship and initiation ceremonies at the designated native shrines located in Alakyo village as well as other places in the State (Sabon Gida, Bakin Kogi, Angwan Abusa). Membership of the Ombatse is voluntary but exclusive to Eggon male adults of any age. Recruitment and initiation into the organization are largely based on persuasion, even though some people claim that such has often involved elements of subtle cajole and force.

The Ombatse is believed by many to be imbued with immense fetish potency and diabolical powers. Members of the group are also believed to possess magic powers of temporal invisibility and indefatigability. As part of their initiation rituals, members are believed to be fortified with charms and amulets that make them apparently invincible and indestructible by the snares of the enemy. They are, however, expected to observe some solemn practices to ensure the continued vitality and potency of their powers.

4.4 Membership/Recruitment:

The Ombatse draws followership from Eggon people all faith. In effect, its members include Moslems, Christians, atheists, traditional worshipers and polytheists alike. The multi-faith character of the organization affirms its vitality as a sort of pan-cultural organisation of the Eggon people. It must be noted, however, that not all the Eggon indigenes identify with the Ombatse. As a matter of fact, some of them take strong exceptions to being associated with anything that has to do with the group based either on personal values and convictions or religious biases.

4.5 Functions/Activities:

Apart from its religious undertakings, the Ombatse performs a number of socio-civic functions such as:

- (i) settlement of family and business disputes;
- (ii) resolution of property matters;
- (iii) community vigilantism/policing;
- (iv) redress for injustice and victimization, etc .

Notably, the Ombatse has served as a veritable instrument of social control as well as an alternative means of conflict/dispute resolution. More importantly, the Ombatse cult is believed to possess spiritual powers for healing, deliverance, protection, break-through and miracle. Hence, the organization is believed to have played host to a clientele of pilgrims who visit its various shrines for one form of spiritual favour or another.

4.6 Social Support and Funding:

In addition to its many adherents and clients, the Ombatse equally has strong network of sympathizers at both group and individual levels. Prominent among the group of sympathizers are the Eggon Cultural Development Association (ECDA), the Eggon Youth Movement (EYM), to mention but the prominent. It is also held that some prominent Eggon politicians and VIP's have been solidly identifying with the group either as financiers or promoters.

The Ombatse is voluntarily funded through personal contributions of members and supporters in the form of free-will donations, as well as possible proceeds generated from the various clients who patronize the organization's spiritual franchise. It is also alleged that some prominent politicians from the State have been sponsoring the activities of the Ombatse in a bid to high-jacking the group for the purpose of advancing their politico-partisan agenda.

5. Of Cult and Power: The Politicisation and Bastardisation of the Ombatse

Nigeria is a typical instance of a primordial polity whereof politicisation of ethnicity and ethnicisation of politics is more or less a rule of life (Okoye, 1996; Okoli and Orinya, 2014). In this context, the dominant political elites often resort to ethnic manipulation in their desperate grand design to gain political advantage. It is on this theoretical premise that the politicisation of the Ombatse could be properly conjectured.

The transubstantiation of the Ombatse from a socio-cultural organisation to an ethno-political vanguard started with its role in the 2011 general elections. Our research revealed that the Ombatse played a prominent role in bringing about the electoral victory of Governor Tanko Al-Makura during the 2011 gubernatorial election. This claim has been captured by an observer thus:

Governor Al-Makura was said to have been taken to Baba Alakyo (the chief priest of the Ombatse) by Senator Solomon Ewuga (an acclaimed Ombatse supporter) when the former was desperate to become the governor of the State. Al-Makura was said to have promised Baba Alakyo that he would rule for one term and make way for an Eggon man in 2015. Based on this promise, Baba Alakyo signaled his people to support Al-Makura and also fortified him with charms so that he can defeat the electoral malfeasance of the ruling PDP and their incumbent governor (Akuje, 2013: para.2).

On November 17, 2013, a group of more than 20 personnel of the State Security Service (SSS) invaded an Ombatse prayer ground at Alogani with a view to arrest the worshippers. The SSS were reported to have shot sporadically but their shootings were supposedly rendered ineffectual by the superior diabolical powers of the Ombatse (Eggon News, October 2013, p. 30). Irked by this development, the Ombatse faithful proceeded on a peaceful demonstration that led to the blockade of the Lafia-Akwanga federal high way at the Nasarawa Eggon axis. The demonstrators demanded the State Government to proffer explanation to the motive behind the said invasion by the SSS. This development signaled a critical juncture in the evolution of the Ombatse militancy.

Incidentally, the Ombatse has been purportedly involved in series of skirmishes either with the government or the other ethnic groups in the State. Its ostensible militant orientation has portrayed the organization as an ethnic militia. In view of its alleged complicity in the various communal clashes in the State, the Ombatse was proscribed by the State government in 2012 (Nasarawa State Government: Legal Notice No. 4 of 2012). Despite this proscription, the activities of the group have continued unabated, assuming more critical dimensions.

The whole scenario came to a head on May 07, 2013 when a group of seventy four (74) public security personnel were assassinated at Alakyo village by assailants believed to be members of the Ombatse. The security personnel were said to be on the State government-mandated mission to arrest the chief priest of the Ombatse, Baba Alakyo, when they were ambushed and massacred by the Ombatse militants. This incident brought the Ombatse into national and international limelight, and has since engendered mixed reactions from both the government and civil society.

A Judicial Panel of Inquiry set up by the Nasarawa State government to investigate the Alakyo killings indicted the Ombatse as being responsible for the killings (Section 3.3). The report of the Panel decried that:

The Ombatse group has been deeply involved in all communal clashes in the State. They are the most virulent ethnic militia. There is a definite political dimension to Ombatse militancy (Section 3.3v).

The Report also indicted some prominent Eggon politicians such as Senator Solomon Ewuga, Hon. Dr. Joseph Haruna Kigbu and Hon. Nathaniel Agyo Mesa, as sponsor-financiers of the Ombatse (Eggon News, 2014:6). The Panel's report in this regard has since been a subject of contention both at the law courts and

the court of public opinion. It is pertinent to note that the Ombatse has also benefitted from state sponsorship in the past. For instance, the group was said to have been given a cash donation of one million Naira by Governor Al-Makura in 2013 (Eggon News, October, 2013: 30).

It is understandable from the foregoing that the Ombatse has been a veritable force to reckon with in the ethno-political equation of Nasarawa State. In this direction, the group represents a platform for galvanizing the political momentum of the Eggon nationality in the context of the ever degenerating sectional politicking in the State. Akin to its political significance, the Ombatse has proved to be a potent instrument of civic guardianship for the Eggon nation. For instance, it is reputed to have protected the people of Eggon nationality from the onslaught of the Fulani herdsmen whose violent attacks have been virulent and perennial in the various parts of the State. The endeavours of the Ombatse in defending the Eggon-land from external threats have often brought the organization in fierce confrontation with other ethnic groups in the state. The manifest militant stance of the Ombatse in the face of these conflicts has earned her the (dis)reputation of an ethnic militia.

The phenomenological narrative of the Ombatse as sketched in the foregoing so far, among other things, adumbrates a peculiar and curious pattern of politicking in Nasarawa State. By extension, this mirrors the degenerating complexion of politicking in contemporary Nigeria. For instance, the notorious idea of conducting partisan dealings at shrines or the involvement of cultic mediums in partisan relations has been variously recorded elsewhere in Nigeria. In the run-up to the 2004 general elections in Anambra State, the gubernatorial candidate for the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), Dr. Chris Ngige, was dragged to the Okija Shrine in the State by his political godfather, Chief Chris Ubah, for the purpose of making a sinister partisan deal to the effect that Ngige would remain subservient to the dictates of his godfather when elected as governor (Okoli and Otegwu, 2010; Okoli and Ali, 2014). A similar episode also played out between the current governor of Abia State, Chief Theodore Orji and his estranged political godfather, Dr. Orji Uzor Kalu, prior to the 2007 general elections (Okoli and Orinya, 2014).

The above trend suggests the entrenchment of fetishism and diabolism in Nigeria's party politics. This queer trend is curious; yet it is reflective of the Machiavellian logic and essence of politicking in Nigeria whereby the end (however foul it is) is held to justify the means (Okoli and Orinya, 2014). In this context, the desperation of the opportunistic political elites forecloses politics of discipline and reason. What obtains, in effect, is the prevalence of crass partisan opportunism whereby the power hungry politicians are ready to go at any length in their desperate bid to capture state power (Okoli and Atelhe, 2008). It is in such circumstances that politicization of platforms like the Ombatse becomes necessary and expedient.

6. Evaluating the Ombatse Phenomenon: Strategic Implications and Trajectory

The phenomenon of Ombatse is symptomatic of a failed or dysfunctional state justice and security system in Nigeria. As Akuke (2013: para 2) points out, "Ombatse cult is Nasarawa (Eggon's) people's fetish alternative to failed justice and security". In a situation where the state lacks the capacity and/or legitimacy to enforce justice and security, people are bound to resort to alternative means of judicial and security safeguards. In this respect, patronizing fetish and cultic mediums becomes a veritable and viable option for members of the populace who are desperate for judicial recompense and redress. This is partly what has given vitality to the Ombatse activities.

The Ombatse phenomenon has got a standard corollary elsewhere in Nigeria. For instance, "the same lack of confidence in state protection and justice led to the formation of Bakassi Boys in Aba and Onitsha in 2001" (Akuke, 2013: para. 2). The implication of this awry trend is that the state's capacity and credibility to administer justice and security is in doubt.

Nonetheless, the resort to non-state justice and security mechanisms has been by and large counter-productive. As we have seen in the case of the Ombatse, it has been associated with sundry abuses and excesses, such as politicization and ‘franchise militancy’. The twin factor of politicisation and ‘militarisation’ has trans-mutated the Ombatse from a cultural organization to, more or less, a political front. This trend has interplayed with the factor of ethnic politicking to engender dynamics of crisis and violence in Nasarawa State.

The growing impunity of the Ombatse seems to be deriving impetus from apparent tacit conspiracy between some political notables of Eggon origin and the federal government. The former appears to have been subtly identifying with the group in an attempt to leverage on its potential to further their political ambition while the latter seems to have turned a blind eye in service of vested partisan interest. It is astonishing that since the Alakyo killings of 2013, the federal government has not taken any earnest measure to investigate the incident with a view to bringing the culprits to justice. More curiously, the federal government has failed to militarily intervene in the Ombatse saga in spite of the fact that it has ostensibly overwhelmed the capability of the Nasarawa State government to contain. Hence, in the aftermath of the Alakyo incident, the Ombatse has remained ever impetuous and virulent. The unfolding scenario portends dangerously for sustainable peace and security both in Nasarawa State and Nigeria at large.

7. Conclusion and Agenda for further Study

This paper has attempted to stimulate a discourse on the political phenomenology of the Ombatse. Concerning the Ombatse as a cult, the paper posited that the organisation has over the years metamorphosed from a socio-cultural organization to an ethno-political movement in keeping with imperative of politicisation and ethno-elite manipulation. The paper observed that the politicisation, bastardisation and militarization of the Ombatse have earned the group the character of an ethnic militia whose activities hold dire implications and complications for sustainable peace and security both in Nasarawa State and in Nigeria at large.

In view of the rising profile of the Ombatse in terms of ethnic cum politico-partisan gladiatorship, it may not be too hazardous to submit that the organisation will be a critical force to reckon with in the forthcoming 2014/2015 electioneering. Moderating the excesses of such an organization is of the crucial essence in promoting national security in Nigeria. To further and compliment and consummate this pioneering discourse on the phenomenology of the Ombatse, more studies are needed particularly to empirically ascertain some of the fundamental claims and observations made in the course of the present endeavour.

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