

The Rise and Proliferation of New Religious Movements (NRMs) in Nigeria

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the reasons behind the proliferation of new religious movements (NRMs) in Nigeria. This is because NRMs are growing in an environment in which mainstream religions have become highly institutionalized and dominate socio-politics of the state. The result of this research has shown that varieties of reasons have converged to make the proliferation of NRMs possible in Nigeria. The convergence reasons range from international factor such as globalization; national factors such as secularism, spread of education and urbanization and individual factors such as religious experience and existential crisis. It is also clear that members of NRMs are facing a lot of discrimination, accusations and negative stereotypes due to their unorthodox beliefs. However, after long time of ethnographic study among NRMs I came to the conclusion that the negative attitude toward NRMs is based on misinformation and misunderstanding.

1. Background

Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa with a population of over 160 million. Islam and Christianity formed about ninety percent of this population. African traditional religion (ATR) which was widely practiced before the advent of Islam and Christianity has been relegated to the marginal existence practice mostly in rural areas. The dominant of Islam and Christianity in the country, coupled with their aggressive evangelism and wide spread spatial practices create the impression that no alternative religions are practice in the country. However, there are thousands of Nigerians who confess varieties of unconventional religions which scholars called new religious movements (NRMs).

A proper definition and conceptualization of NRMs is a daunting challenge, scholars, media and other stakeholders failed to reach consensus on precise definition. The difficulties that usually arise in defining NRMs have been beautifully illustrated by John A. Saliba (1997). He started with the word “New” he noted that many of the NRMs are not really new, many parts of their syncretistic teachings go back to Gnostics teachings of ancient Greeks or philosophy of ancient India, and some of them such as Eckankar and Grail Message have tried to trace their origin right to the beginning of creation. Secondly, the term “religious” also has some problems because many NRMs do not want to associate themselves with religion. They view religion as something that has to do with superstition and dogmatism. According to the teaching of Raelian religion and New Age Movements what they practice is not a religion but pure science, Grail Message members contend that they observe higher law of nature.

Saliba (1997) argues that structural definition of religion could not qualify some NRMs into religious milieu only functional definition has the capacity to do that. Finally, many NRMs are too personal, transient and decentralized to fall into the concept of “movement” which suggests dynamism and social agitation. Despite all the limitations of the term NRMs, Saliba (1997) asserts that it is still better than the other language such as “alternative religions”, “minor religions”, “intense religions” or “cult”. In pluralistic society any religion can be alternative, and all religions were minors in their formative period and they can be intensely devotional in some time or another. Furthermore the word “cult” is value laden and indicate negative connotation in recent times. So, for the purpose of this paper the term new religious movements (NRMs) will be adopted.

Starting from the middle of the twentieth century onward, the world has experienced very conspicuous presence of new religious movements (NRMs).

For example, Centre for Studies on New Religions (CESNUR) listed 164 NRMs in its archive, while University of Virginia Home Page for the study of new religions gives the profile of 259 NRMs. The above statistics covered only the profile of religions treated by these institutions; therefore it does not represent the entire NRMs in the world. According to Encyclopedia Britannica, by the end of the 1990s, there were about 225 Hare Krishna centres in 60 countries, including 50 centres in the United States with a membership figure of about 1 million. While the number of formally initiated members is only a few thousand, several hundred thousand regularly worship at the Hare Krishna temples.

The Encyclopedia continues that by the late 1990s there were 367 ECK centres in more than 100 countries; Eckankar does not publish membership figures but estimate placed total membership from 50,000 to 500,000. According to Chinese government Falun Gong has 2 to 3 million followers. Soka-Gakkai an off-shoot of Buddhism which originated from Japan claims the membership of about 6 million. Having survived the period of intense criticism, the Unification Church emerged in the 1990s with an expansive international program, with a presence in more than 100 countries, though exact membership figures is difficult to estimate (n.p).

Surely the world has never seen a clear presence of minor religions as this time around. In the previous centuries unorthodox religions are usually silenced as a result of persecution and domination by established religions. But nowadays new NRMs are springing up continuously and are being diffused to different parts of the world through various outlets. The presence of NRMs cannot be without alarm to the orthodox religions, various anti-cult movements sprang up in North America, Europe and other part of the world. Even in Africa orthodox religions are watching NRMs with uneasy look.

2. NRMs in Nigeria

From the 1970s, onward many foreign NRMs began to appear in Nigeria especially in southern part of the country. Many of them have engaged in vigorous mission activities and tried to compete with the established religions for membership among Nigerians. Some of the foreign NRMs that marked their presence in Nigeria are as follow: Aetherious Society, Hare Krishna Movement (ISKCON), Raelian Religion, Inner Light, Grail Message, Baha'ism, Christian Science, Sa'i Baba Mission, Brahma Kumaris, Eckankar, AMORC, Scientology, Guru Maharaji, Lucis Trust, Higher Consciousness Society, The Way of Truth, etc. However, some of these movements have short life span and some have very insignificant membership.

Some of the above mention NRMs have become very influential and possess large number of followers in Nigeria. And some of them have been subscribing air time on television and radio for preaching their teachings, and sometimes they engage in outdoor preaching in public places or organize seminars and workshops. AMORC has about 76 centres with large and influential membership in Nigeria. Grail Message has more than 28 Grail Centres throughout the nation. Aetherius Society has two centres one in Abia State another one in Lagos with overall 12 Blessing Groups in several cities.

Lucis Trust has four strong centres plus esoteric library in Abeokuta. Hare Krishna and Eckankar are some of the most important and renowned NRMs in Nigeria. Eckankar has about 114 centres in 26 states of the Federation, while Hare Krishna has 9 temples in the country. Various factors may account for this state of affairs. So, we are going to discuss the reasons for the rise of NRMs in Nigeria under three headings—international, national and individual factors.

3. International Factor: Globalization and Growth of NRMs in Nigeria

There is no doubt that globalization has created favourable conditions for the proliferation of NRMs throughout the world. Neither globalization nor NRMs are really new phenomena, but in the middle of the twentieth century both assumed strong power and far reaching influence. Globalization is a complex and controversial concept; scholars do not unanimously agree on its definition and its nature. However, the Merriam-Webster dictionary defines globalization as 'the development of an increasingly integrated global economy marked especially by free trade, free flow of capital, and the tapping of cheaper foreign labour markets'. Globalization here is seen as a process of gradual integration of world economy and collapse of trade barriers.

The forces of globalization, such as efficient transportation, immigration, instant global communication, cultural linkages and ideological forces behind globalization (such as economic and cultural liberalism, human rights, democracy, secularization, individualism, freedom of religion, freedom of expression and emerging pluralistic societies), have created a fertile ground for growth of NRMs throughout the world and in Nigeria in particular. Social liberalism, which minimized conservatism, has given people more freedom to join the religion of their choice. Liberalism renders legitimacy to cultural pluralism, which gives rise to a multitude of worldviews in human society (Cooper, 2007).

Moreover, liberalism allows the fermentation of a new religious ideology or group to develop and proliferate in the new global world, without unbearable pressure to conform to conventional social norms. Immigration and easy and faster transportation in the age of globalization also make it possible for new religions to spread throughout the world. Immigrants from Asia and Africa introduced many NRMs to the West, and from there they spread to other part of the world. Strong concern for human rights in this globalized world gives shelter and recognition for different types of NRMs.

The growth of NRMs in a highly globalized world, which is characterized by competitive economic systems, has led Rodney Stark, William Bainbridge, and Roger Finke to propose the concept of religious economy. This theory posits religion as a market commodity carefully packaged and delivered to religious consumers. Producers of religious goods and services try as much as possible to meet the need of consumers, and they employ most of the techniques of modern marketing in order to succeed in the highly pluralistic and competitive religious market. Based on the concept of rational choice, religious consumers also select among a plethora of religious commodities what suits their need, and buy into it by becoming members (Lang, 2005). In the present world of complex religious pluralism, this theory fits the situation of NRMs that are rising and growing day by day. In this respect, Upal (n.d) states:

The entrepreneurship theory (Stark and Bainbridge 1987) considers NRM founders to be entrepreneurs who produce, market, and sell compensators in exchange for other rewards. A compensator is an unverifiable promise of a future reward that is in low supply or unavailable at present. According to the Stark-Bainbridge theory, in a situation where some rewards are in low supply or not available at all, people are willing to accept compensators in lieu of the actual rewards (3).

NRMs all over the world utilize media as effective strategy for advertizing their religious products. One of the important components of globalization, which NRMs are employing as their marketing strategy, is information and communication technologies (ICTs), which are becoming the dominant medium of advertisement. ICTs have virtually connected most of the world into a single global village. Now people from different parts of the world can communicate and access information in the blink of an eye. So, the great barrier of time and space has collapsed almost completely.

By the beginning of the 21st century, approximately 360 million people, or roughly 6 percent of the world's population, were estimated to have access to the Internet. It is widely assumed that at least half of the world's population will have some form of Internet access in the next few years, and that wireless access will play a growing role (Kahn, 2009, p. 1). NRMs all over the world try to take advantage of advertising their religious wares through the internet, and many of them have achieved significant success in this endeavour. Chryssides (1996) contends that:

Many of the new religions have availed themselves of the opportunity to 'go on the Net', for a variety of reasons. The prestige value of a web page is no doubt a contributory reason; however, more importantly, numerous religious organizations have realized that some net surfers are using the Net to find varieties of religion that may fulfill their spiritual needs. The plethora of religions that feature on the Net can enable the seeker to choose from the widest possible range (p. 1).

Nigeria is an integral part of the globalized world; in fact, the British colonialists had incorporated the Nigerian economy into the world-wide capitalist economy since the middle of 19th century. Therefore, Nigerian society is not immune to the myriad of influences from other parts of the world, including religious ones. The efforts of NRM missionaries have reached Nigeria since 1970.

The ease of traveling in this time of globalization has led many individual NRM missionaries to come to Nigeria and spread their religious messages, and some Nigerians have encountered NRMs while traveling abroad. Nowadays large numbers of Nigerians have access to the information technologies, and this has enabled them to search for NRMs of their choice in the comfort of their homes or internet cafes. Nigerian members on many occasions have watched international lectures of Harold Klemp live through video telecast, and sometimes through the internet. They usually communicate, interact, and share experiences with other members through the internet. They also read articles and books, or download materials such as spiritual music and literatures from the websites NRMs of their choice. All these are possible as a result of globalization.

4. National Factors

Apart from globalization there are many national factors that facilitate the growth of NRMs in Nigeria. These factors include secularism, urbanization, and the spread of modern education, as well as the similarity of NRMs with African Traditional Religions (ATR).

4.1. Nigerian Secularism

Many believe that secularism is an anti-religious movement, and that secularists are out to undermine religion, but the facts on the ground show that secularization is one of the modern factors that has indirectly influenced the rise and proliferation of NRMs in Nigeria. Government intervention or regulation of religion has stifled competition in the religious market, and discouraged new ideas in solving religious problems. In countries where theocratic system have been adopted, or where atheistic ideology assumed the role of state religion, new religions are hardly tolerated and religious innovation is usually undermined. It is very hard for NRMs to rise and thrive under these circumstances. Minority religions always feel more secure under a secular canopy, because it is only in this situation that their rights can be guaranteed.

From independence to the present, Nigerian policy makers have ensured that the federal government remains secular—not assuming state religion. Despite government involvement in some religious activities, such as funding religious projects, spending money on pilgrimages (to Mecca and Jerusalem), and clergy training in the police and the military, the constitution has guaranteed religious freedom. For instance, the 1999 constitution stated:

- (1) Every person shall be entitled to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom (either alone or in community with others, and in public or in private) to manifest and propagate his religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice and observance.
- (2) No person attending any place of education shall be required to receive religious instruction or to take part in or attend any religious ceremony or observance if such instruction on ceremony or observance relates to a religion other than his own, or religion not approved by his parent or guardian.
- (3) No religious community or denomination shall be prevented from providing religious instruction for pupils of that community or denomination in any place of education maintained wholly by that community or denomination.

This constitutional provision has protected NRMs' members from government persecution or any legal action that would deny them the right to propagate their religion, or hinder other people from joining them in any part of Nigeria. As a result, members of NRMs have been enjoying this freedom for decades, conducting their activities freely without legal impediment. Even when the military suspended the constitution, they never persecuted minor religions, but remained faithful in supporting religious freedom as stipulated by the constitution. Northern states which adopted state *Shar'ia* which is an Islamic legal system have not encroached on the rights of minority religions.

4.2. Urbanization

There is no doubt that urban centres create a favourable atmosphere for the growth of NRMs in Nigeria. Factors such as employment, education, and social amenities attract diverse groups of people into urban centres. Mingling of different groups, with different worldviews, often reduces conservatism as found in the rural areas, so people are freer to subscribe to a set of values different from that of their parents or communities. Access to new information and new ideas is prevalent in the cities, more than in the villages; these factors also make it easier for NRMs to spread in the cities than in rural environment. Nigeria has been steadily experiencing rapid urbanization since colonial times. Mezt (1991) writes:

Spurred by the oil boom prosperity of the 1970s and the massive improvements in roads and the availability of vehicles, Nigeria since independence has become an increasingly urbanized and urban-oriented society. During the 1970s Nigeria had possibly the fastest urbanization growth rate in the world. Because of the great influx of people into urban areas, the growth rate of urban population in Nigeria in 1986 was estimated to be close to 6 percent per year, more than twice that of the rural population. Between 1970 and 1980, the proportion of Nigerians living in urban areas was estimated to have grown from 16 to more than 20 percent, and by 2010, urban population was expected to be more than 40 percent of the nation's total (p. 3).

4.3. Spread of Modern Education

Mass literacy in Nigeria is among the factors that facilitate the growth of NRMs. The majority of NRMs converts are individual spiritual seekers who actively investigate various spiritual paths until they find the ones that satisfy their spiritual needs. This search into myriads of religious literatures is not possible without literacy. Over the years, Nigeria has reduced its illiteracy rates. According to Huebla (2008) 55% of the Nigerian population from ages 15 and above is literate, with more men (67%) than women (44%). He continues that the rate is higher in urban areas (71%) than rural areas (47%) (p. 1).

This mass literacy in Nigerian urban centres has played a vital role in facilitating the growth of NRMs in the country. Most of the NRMs members that I interacted with or interviewed are literate and highly educated persons. Due to the level of their education they are more open minded and more receptive, and daring to experiment with new ideas. Almost all the scriptures of NRMs are written in English. And all worship services and other ritual sacraments are conducted in English.

4.4. Similarities of NRMs with ATR

African Traditional Religion (ATR) is the religion of African people before the arrival of Islam and Christianity. Many scholars agree that there is no universally accepted definition of ATR. This is due to reasons that range from the fact that ATR is a holistic religion; it covers virtually every aspect of life, without clear separation between material and spiritual worlds. Moreover, ATR has no clear dogma, doctrines, sacred scriptures, hierarchy of priests; and its propagation is by living it, not by preaching, as in other religions (Mbiti, 1999, p. 3). These factors, together with the multiplicity of kinds of ATR, make it very difficult to define. But with all these problems, according to Mbiti (1999) we can find and understand ATR through its rituals, ceremonies and festivals, sacred objects, shrines, arts and symbols, music and dance, proverbs, beliefs and costumes, myths and legends, etc.

Even though ATR is now retreating to the background of the religious scene in Nigeria, it still has influence on Nigerian society and culture. Most Nigerians are carrying the vestiges of ATR beliefs in their psyche without even being conscious of it. There are still large numbers of people in Nigeria who practice ATR; we can still find its remnant in respect for ancestors, belief in spirits and the spirit world, magic and witchcraft, and so on. Similarities between ATR and NRMs include the concept of the Supreme Being, pantheon of gods, reincarnation, the spiritual world and immediate divine retribution.

5. Individual Factors

Apart from socio-political factors that smooth the ground for proliferation of NRMs there are many factors that can only be explained on the individual level. These factors are categorized on the following themes: existential crises, religious experience, quest for riches, social influence.

5.1. Existential Crises

An existential crisis is a stage of development at which an individual questions the very foundations of his life: whether his life has any meaning, purpose or value; whether death is the end of everything or consciousness will survive death, whether the values he has been taught have any merit; and whether his religious upbringing may or may not be founded in reality. It is a known fact in the study of religion that an existential crisis is one of the sources of religion. Most of the important religious founders such as Gautama Buddha, Guru Nanak, or Joseph Smith, were bedeviled by an existential crisis before the religious experiences or encounters that led to the founding of their religions. Some scholars agree that the most intensely religious persons are people who are concerned with existential questions. Batson et al (2001) quote Tolstoy lamenting as he is plunged into existential crisis:

What will be the outcome of what I do today? Of what I shall do tomorrow? What will be the outcome of all my life? Why should I live? Why should I do anything? Is there in life any purpose, which the inevitable death, which awaits me, does not undo and destroy (p. 116).

Modern psychology and science lack any panacea for such an existential crisis; as a result people usually turn to a spiritual quest. They explore different types of spiritual tradition in order to get solace for their deep subjective problems and uncertainties. In the course of this research, I have come to realize that a number of NRMs members are people who were highly disturbed by an existential crisis in the past. In most cases their previous religion did not satisfy their persistent questions about some of the most fundamental problems of life. They sought for answers through many religious groups, but could not get satisfaction until they came across their present religion.

Many of my informants from Hare Krishna and Eckankar and other NRMs were spiritual seekers and most of them explored different spiritual groups before they encountered their present religion. Mr. Emmanuel too had serious existential questions, but when he watched the Eckankar TV programme he became satisfied with their teachings and sought further information in the Eck centre in Jos. Another informant revealed to me that he had serious longings to know God, and that desire led him into many religions until finally he met Eckankar. Even the present priest of the Hare Krishna temple, Salika Dasa, was seriously disturbed by existential crises, and his former religion failed to provide him with adequate answers. He believed that God gradually led him to Hare Krishna through various miraculous incidents in his life.

5.2. Religious Experiences

There is no generally accepted definition of religious experience. This is because of its individual nature and the difficulty of putting it into ordinary language. Nevertheless, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (2011) defines it as follows:

Religious experiences can be characterized generally as experiences that seem to the person having them to be of some objective reality and to have some religious import. That reality can be an individual, a state of affairs, a fact, or even an absence, depending on the religious tradition the experience is a part of (p. 1).

Religious experience is one of the most important aspects of religion. Many important founders of religions, both orthodox and NRMs, were inspired through dramatic religious experiences. Some people that I interviewed state that they have become religious or converted because they had one form of religious experience or another. Some had a radical transformation of life, behavior, or worldview, and adopted a new commitment as a result of their religious experience. Some people have done amazing things because they believe God told them to do so, while others claim to have been miraculously healed through divine intervention.

Holy Books (such as the Bible or Qur'an) have many examples of religious experiences recorded in them. Classical scholars of religion, such as Edwin Starbuck, George Coe, James Bissett Pratt, and G. Stanley Hall, William James, and Carl Jung, have devoted some time in their works to religious experience. Religious experience plays an important role in conversion to most of NRMs in Nigeria. Some members report that they had experienced dramatic religious experiences before their formal conversion, while some maintain that they had no intention of converting, but they tried the spiritual exercises out of curiosity, and it resulted in an enigmatic experience.

5.3. Quest for Riches

Some members of NRMs have come to their present religion as a result of a quest for riches. Nigeria now is among the poorest nations in the world. During the oil boom era in the 70s Nigerians had unprecedented prosperity and one of the highest per capital income in Africa. When the oil boom collapsed in the early 80s the economy deteriorated and the limited manufacturing industries and agriculture experienced serious setback. This economic collapse, together with endemic corruption, political instability, ethno-religious crises, poor macroeconomic management, and structural adjustment programmes, plunged Nigerians into a vicious cycle of poverty, unemployment, under-employment and suffering. As a result some Nigerians have tried to cope with their economic hardship through esoteric religious means.

During my weekly visits to the Hare Krishna temple and Eck centre, Grail Centres, Mormon Church as a participant observer, I met several people who were coming for the purpose of getting magical techniques of acquiring riches and prosperity. They thought that they would get spiritual help to overcome their financial problems. But many of these people stopped coming as soon as they found out that these religions could not fulfill their expectation of material gratification. However, some of these prosperity seekers became engulfed with the profound spiritual experience or new truth as they conceived it, and this often led them to abandon their material quest and become true spiritual seekers.

One of my informants told me that he came to Eckankar originally looking for material prosperity, but he was trapped by God, and now he has changed his intentions. Another informant revealed that initially he had suffered from poverty, living with only one shirt and one pair of trousers, and hardly got three square meals a day. He began to search through various spiritual and metaphysical groups, looking for a solution, until he came to Eckankar and began to practice the spiritual exercises of Eck. Even though his problems did not disappear instantly he said he is now very contented, and is engulfed in wonderful spiritual experiences and bliss that transformed his perceptions of life.

5.4. Social Influence

Man as a social being is not completely independent from his social environment. Social psychologists study how people around a person influence his beliefs and attitudes. Batson et al. (2001) in their book *Religion and the Individual* discuss how social influence affects religious beliefs. They employ the explanation on how individuals learn from their environment, given by psychologists and sociologists using a dramaturgical analogy of social roles—the part or role assign to each individual by his social group to play. Social norms—the scripts of the play, which contain the rules and regulations of each role-play by the individual, represent the ideal behavior, and it may be written or unwritten. Reference groups—represents the audience of that particular part, and they may be parents, friends, or teachers. They maintain that, “our religion or lack of them is simply one aspect of the part in the social drama we have been assigned to play” (2001, p. 30).

Batson et al. (2001) argue that since religion goes above objective reality it is highly susceptible to social influence. They use the Leon Festinger theory of social comparison to illustrate the power of social influence on religion. According to this theory, there exists a drive to evaluate one's opinions and abilities. When evaluating ability people use an objective standard, but in evaluating opinions, beliefs, and attitudes it is not possible to use objective standards, and therefore people resort to social comparison. Batson et al. (2001) maintain that even though Festinger did not apply his theory to religion, it is very relevant to religion since it involves non-objective beliefs and subjective experiences.

The findings of this research conform to the conclusions of Batson et al. Many young members of NRMs were converted through the influence of their friends or family members. In my own observation, many youths that I interacted with in the two Eck Regional seminars I attended in Abuja and Jos were converted because their parents or their friends have converted. One of my teenage informants from Enugu told me that one day his father came back home and called him and his elder brother, and told them that from now they would be attending Eck centre on Sundays instead of church.

A female medical student at the University of Jos told me that her father converted to Eckankar when she was a teenager, and at that time she had no right to question his decision. Two other young girls I met at the Hare Krishna temple told me that they were Muslims before, but when their father converted to Hare Krishna they joined him because they believed that his decision was right for them. Another informant told me that it was her friend who convinced her about the truth of Hare Krishna. From the above we have noticed that various factors are responsible for the presence of NRMs in Nigeria. Global and national forces combined with individual subjective tendencies and motivations to pave the way for unorthodox spiritual seekers to experiment with new religions.

6. Challenges of NRMs in Nigeria

Nigerians have diverse reactions toward NRMs like Scientology, AMORC, Hare Krishna and Eckankar, but from what I observed, most of the reactions are somehow negative. Few Nigerians have a positive attitude and understanding or knowledge about NRMs. Below are some opinions expressed by Nigerians concerning the presence of NRMs in the country.

6.1. Secret Society or Secret Cult

Some scholars see secret societies as clubs or organizations whose activities or teachings are hidden from non-members, and in most cases they are fraternal groups that engaged in self help activities. What distinguishes them from other organizations is the use of symbolic actions and secret ceremonies. In this view, secret societies are not necessarily evil, even though some people also regard an organized crime group, such as the mafia, and security agencies, among secret societies, although such groups do not fit to the scholarly definitions of secret society. Barrett (1997) describes secret societies as:

.....any group that possesses the following characteristics: It has carefully graded and progress teachings; teachings are “available only to selected individuals; teachings lead to “hidden (and ‘unique’) truths”; truths bring “personal benefits beyond the reach and even the understanding of the uninitiated” (p. 3).

In Nigeria, the terms 'secret society' and 'secret cult' trigger a mixture of fear and mystery in the popular psyche. Conspiracy theorists tend to blame social ills on secret societies, and believe that secret societies are always conspiring to destroy or corrupt the social fabric of the nation. Nigerian popular thinking about secret societies usually raises the spectre of ritual killings, demonic activities or witch craft practices. The occultic blood rituals constantly shown on Nigerian movies has shaped and defined the perception of many Nigerians about a secret society. The crimes committed by many students identified with secret cults in the Nigerian universities further substantiate the negative outlook of many Nigerians about secret societies.

The Okija Shrine incident that happened on August 5th 2004, when police discovered 20 human skulls and 50 dead bodies in a shrine at Okija in Umuhu village in Anambra State, has increased fear among Nigerians about anything that involves a secret society or cult. Majority of Nigerians that I interviewed perceived NRMs as secret societies, and no different from the occultic groups portrayed in Nigerian films. According to some people, NRMs are not legitimate religions which worship God, but occultic groups who dabble in satanic rituals in order to acquire material riches or pursue other motives known to the members alone. This viewpoint has entrenched a phobia of NRMs among many Nigerians. During one of my visits to the Eck centre someone came with his friend, and after the service the visitor confessed that he was very surprised to witness something very different from what people are saying about Eckankar.

He said he was expecting to see members perform satanic rituals and drink blood. Many friends of mine had warned me about conducting a research visit to the Eck and Hare Krishna centres. According to them, I may be unknowingly initiated and after that would have to present my mother or any person from my close relations as a sacrifice, for ritual killing. Many were appalled and scared to see me with NRMs literatures.

6.2. Medicine men (*babalawos* or *bokaye*)

One of the vestiges of ATR is fervent belief in medicine men in Nigeria. Many Nigerians visit medicine men to seek for help for their persistent problems, and this practice is not restricted to people at the lower class of society; even the educated and political elites visit *babalawos*, or *bokaye* in the Hausa language. These practices persist despite opposition from dominant religions like Islam and Christianity toward such beliefs.

Some Nigerians confuse NRMs with medicine men. They assume that NRMs centres are mystical centres found on big cities in Nigeria. During my participant observation I witnessed many incidents where people came to the Hare Krishna temple or Eck centres asking spiritual help for their problems. I witnessed two young men who came in demanding that the priest reveal who among them stole a certain property. Sometimes people came looking for a spiritual concoction to make them rich, or to win the love of a lady, etc.

6.3. Social Discrimination

Many members of the two movements claim that they have experienced different types of subtle discrimination or rejection because of their belief. Many expressed concern over the emotional reaction expressed toward them whenever people discovered that they are members of NRMs. Some members hide their religious identity to escape discrimination. Many singles members of NRMs find it very difficult to marry outside their religion, because neither a Christian nor a Muslim will marry a member of these movements. While Muslim or Christian singles have numerous choices among the opposite sex, the singles of minority religions have more limited choice due to small membership. A female graduate of the Faculty of Law from the University of Jos and member of Hare Krishna told me that getting a husband is her pressing challenge. This is one of the challenges of many singles that I interacted with, even though there are also some who have found life partners among their fellow members.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion this research has found out that Christianity and Islam are not the only religions in Nigeria, there are different minor religions with legitimate claims to salvation. These minor religions managed to sustain their presence in the country despite many challenges. Contrary to what many Nigerians think, these religions are not secret cult that involved in demonic activities for making money. They do not engage in blood rituals or psychological manipulation of their members. Many members are normal people with genuine desire for God. They often arrived at their present religions after many years of searching for spiritual enlightenment. Therefore, these religions continue to maintain their presence because their members found spiritual solace through practice and conviction.

However, it is very important for NRMs leadership to make concerted effort to enlighten the public that their religions are not secret cult. For this effort to succeed they should try to increase their social engagement by providing services such as charity or volunteering works to the people of Nigeria. National bodies of Christianity and Islam such as Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) Jama'at Nasril Islam (JNI) should recognize the presence of these minor religions and include them in religious and peace dialogues. It is high time for department of religious studies to introduce a course an 'Introduction to New Religious Movements (NRMs)' in order to enlighten and increase knowledge of students about this interesting subject. Through these attempts more balance and more just religiously pluralistic society will be achieved in Nigeria in general.

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