

Vanguard

I take responsibility for the killing of 34 colleagues — EX-CULT LEADER

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By Emma Ujah & Omeiza Ajayi

29- year- old Levi Imoter was a notorious cultist for over 10 years. He engaged in the worst crimes imaginable, including armed robbery, and operated from Benue, through Bauchi to Borno. In this encounter, he recounts how he led many university undergraduates into cultism and armed robbery; his waterloo during a robbery operation in Maiduguri; life in prison and how his death sentence was reversed through divine intervention. He says he would spend the rest of his life preaching the mercy and love of God through Jesus Christ who delivered him from the jaws of death. He is the brain behind Renewed Mind Foundation International.

Excerpts:

How did you begin the journey into cultism?

I was in JS.S 3 in 2002 at the Federal Government College, Vandeikya, Benue State. At the time I was initiated, I never knew that I was entering into cultism.

Those days, we used to break bounds. We would scale the school fence. I was actually initiated during the period known as “mock extension”, where JSS 3 and SSS 3 students would stay back in school. I was initiated by my seniors. They loved me, always took me out and bought me drinks and cigarettes. I was introduced to partying. On one occasion, they took me to a party and, from the venue, somewhere in the bush.

What happened thereafter?

I was taken there alongside 14 other students for the initiation rites and I met 14 other students. The initiators stripped me to my boxers. The initiation held between 9:30pm and 4am. we went through a series of torture. In fact, one of my friends became deaf while the other had a broken leg due to the manner in which they dealt with us. Subsequently, we began to meet within the school premises for lessons on the cult codes and language. Our meeting point could be in the hostel and sometimes in the orchard.

We had supervisors who our were not students; they came from higher institutions. There were times they even slept in our hostels.

Were you ever caught?

On several occasions I was caught. In fact, after I was caught with arms, I was expelled in SSS 2. That was the fourth time I would be caught and what happened in this case was that I was fighting some members of a rival cult group because of a girl. Our own cult was named Black Skull. I should have been expelled after my second suspension but, because of my academic brilliance, the school would normally give me another chance and, at a point, even made me a prefect with the hope that I would change from my evil ways.

After I was expelled, I went to the College of Advanced and Professional Studies in Makurdi, Benue State for my Interim Joint Matriculation Board IJMB. It was here that I decided to join the Black Axe cult group having been a member of Black Skull way back in secondary school.

My initiation into the Black Axe was not done in Benue because they had done theirs before I got admission into the school. So, since I earnestly wanted to join, I had to be taken to the Abubakar Tafawa Balewa University ATBU, Bauchi where the Black Axe men were having their initiation.

At ATBU, we had brutal and hardened criminals as members. The initiation process was more tedious.

What is the essence of the torture during initiation rites?

It was done in such a way so as to make us develop a thick skin so that when you are caught by the police, no matter the level of torture, you would still be able to keep the cult's code.

I got so wild that I rose through the ranks rapidly and even became the leader of those who initiated me.

What was the motivation? Why were you attracted to cultism?

Love of supremacy over others. Then there was the spirit of camaraderie. Although, I came from a very loving family with a Christian background, I just wanted independence.

Even politicians came to be initiated. I was one of those who initiated a former governor of one of the states. We also had a lot of members among security agencies. Once, I was to be arrested, and a policeman called to alert me and that was how I escaped arrest that day.

Were your members always by your side?

To some extent yes, but there was a day they abandoned me. I came under fierce attack in Makurdi during a counter attack by another cult group and they fled. My attackers were arguing as to whether to burn me or throw me into River Benue.

I was saved because my elder brother came to the scene and I discovered that he also joined them in beating me. I passed out. However, the beating only got me hardened. I felt I could do better than what I was doing before I was attacked. I felt I could do better as a cultist, and so, I took to armed robbery. We robbed even on campus.

How were you getting your arms?

We were getting our weapons from ghettos where Indian hemp and other banned substances were on sale.

Back to your studies. Did you finish your IJMB programme?

My situation became very bad that Makurdi became too hot for me to stay. Rival cult groups were on my trail, the police were looking for me and so was the school management too. So, I left town. Later, I gained admission to University of Maiduguri where I planned to hide because my thinking was that cult activities would be low up-North. Unfortunately, someone recognized me as a cultist and he reported me to the Black Axe men on the campus that one of their members had joined the school but refused to “belong”. They came after me, and after some time, I joined, but I felt they were not well-organized as we were in Benue. So, I introduced them to the Benue system. I was the one who now introduced arms to them. At a time, we had a fight with the Vikings and they came to my residence to kill me, but I had already gone out to buy cigarettes and they mistakenly killed my bosom friend. I still take responsibility for his death. However, news went viral that I had been killed because the fight lasted for over two weeks in 2008. I was studying geography but I could not also graduate despite being a brilliant student.

Were you eventually arrested?

I was arrested in Maiduguri metropolis for armed robbery and was sent to prison on awaiting trial. We actually robbed a bank, but I was arrested on my way to Jos and I was in prison for about a year. There, I learnt more tricks because I met equally hardened criminals and cultists. I got bail. It was as if I did not handle the operation well and so when I came out in 2011, we went on another operation even while I still had a court case. I was caught again.

How was it that you never got killed?

In all of these, I never killed anyone but I take responsibility for the death of some of my friends who I initiated into cultism. I lost 34 friends in two years. They were killed by rival gangs and the police. I never used charms, but I think what made the difference was that my

parents never abandoned me. They stood in the gap for me, always interceding before God on my behalf. I was aware of that. Some other parents would not stomach the level of disgrace I brought my family. Many would place curses on such children.

I was in and out of prisons five times. It was after the fifth time that I discovered my true purpose in life. My father called me and said that was the last time he would offer me any form of assistance, that he was tired as age was not on his side. He spoke to me at length.

How did you renounce cultism and is there hope for others?

Yes, there is hope for cultists. Many of them would want to opt out if they know the way or if given the opportunity, like in Benue where the state government has offered amnesty to them.

There was this boy called Stephen Mshelia. He was 17 years then and often came to the prisons for evangelism. On this



(<http://www.vanguardngr.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Levi-Imoter.jpg>)

Levi Imoter

eventful day, the prisons pastor brought Mshelia to my cell where I was naked and bound in chains. I was chained because I attempted a jailbreak.

Mshelia preached the gospel of Jesus Christ to me and told me how he loved me, how he raised the dead and that Jesus stands in the gap. It was as if I was hearing that for the first time. He prayed for me. After he left, I could not smoke cigarette again as what Mshelia told me began to stink. I thought the cigarettes had gone bad, so, I requested for another pack, but all of them were smelling. That was the beginning of my journey to a new life. As at then, I had forgotten the Lord's Prayer and even Christian songs because I had stop going to church for many years. All I knew was the language and codes of cults. I became born again in November 2012 and even raised a church in the prison to the extent that people came from outside to worship there.

As a cultist, there was no where I could go without a gun. The only time I went to church as a cultist was for a wedding and I still went with a gun. So, after Mshelia's visit, I made a vow to God that if He would deliver me and set me free of all the charges against me, there is no place I would ever go without a Bible.

How were you eventually released from jail?

My lawyer deserted me because he was angry that I kept coming back to court for all the wrong reasons after struggling hard to secure my freedom. So, I was assigned a lawyer by the Legal Aid Council. The judge said he had already written his judgment of condemnation but that somehow, something kept pushing him to give me another chance. At the end, he discharged and acquitted me.

During the proceedings, as against the convention of the court, I had raised up my hand to speak despite having legal aid. I begged the judge to set me free so that I could go back and serve God. I told him, all the offences I committed, that Jesus Christ had taken them away and that the life I was now living did not belong to me, but to God.

The judge said God had dealt with him concerning my case, because each time he was to come for my case, something strange would happen in his house. Curiously, he decided to set me free and said although I had escaped his judgment, if I go out and refuse to serve my God, final judgment awaiting me would be terrible.

What do you have to tell other cultists?

Cultism comes in pleasant packages but, in the end, it is destructive. A gun has spirit and if you are exposed to it as a cultist, you would definitely take to armed robbery.

The evils of cultism should be taught in schools. The best way to stop this menace is to ensure that there is no recruitment. So, catching them young the right way is the answer. Let us not wait for cultists to catch the youth in our society.