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NIGERIAN CONFRATERNITIES TO CONQUER THE WORLD?

Corentin Cohen



Nigerian confraternities to conquer the world?

Abstract

While the Nigerian brotherhoods have become increasingly prominent in the media given the criminal threat they are said to represent, they have not been the subject of any field research in Nigeria or Europe. This media coverage is fueling a growing confusion between the legal and police categorizations that are used to define these brotherhoods and the pan-African practices and discourses of solidarity and emancipation that they promote. The socio-historical approach developed in this study makes it possible to put into perspective the global expansion of confraternities since the 2000s. It offers another perspective on the role of these secret societies and their inclusion in political economies and different territories. In Europe, the Nigerian confraternities are first and foremost social institutions for the youth and the diasporas. They ensure the reproduction of the power of traditional and political elites abroad by capturing incomes linked to migration (remittances), and therefore play a key role in the production of a form of globalization of Nigerian society from below. They participate in the establishment of moral and social institutions from the south of Nigeria in Europe. Behind a discourse of empowerment and solidarity, the confraternities are thus a transnational network which perpetuates a conservative order, a social hierarchy and the inequalities which they help to naturalize.

Les confraternités nigérianes à la conquête du monde ?

Résumé

Si les confraternités nigérianes occupent une place croissante dans les médias au nom de la menace criminelle qu'elles représentent, elles n'ont fait l'objet d'aucun travail de recherche de terrain au Nigeria ni en Europe. Cette médiatisation alimente une confusion croissante entre les catégorisations juridico-policières qui sont utilisées pour les définir et les pratiques et discours panafricains, de solidarité ou d'émancipation, qu'elles mettent en avant. L'approche socio-historique développée dans cette étude permet de mettre en perspective l'expansion globale des confraternités depuis les années 2000, et de proposer un autre regard sur le rôle de ces sociétés secrètes et leur inscription dans des économies politiques et des territoires différents. En Europe, les confraternités sont d'abord des institutions sociales encadrant la jeunesse et les diasporas. Elles assurent la reproduction du pouvoir des élites traditionnelles et politiques à l'étranger par la captation des rentes liées aux migrations (*remittances*), et jouent donc un rôle clé dans la production d'une forme de mondialisation de la société nigériane par le bas, participant à l'implantation des institutions morales et sociales du sud du pays en Europe. Derrière un discours d'*empowerment* et de solidarité, les confraternités sont ainsi un réseau transnational qui perpétue un ordre conservateur, une hiérarchie sociale et des inégalités qu'elles contribuent à naturaliser.

N. B.: The website addresses in this volume were checked in November 2021.

Nigerian confraternities to conquer the world?

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“If bird dey travel wetin he dey carry?
A nest²”

Quite unexpectedly, Nigerian confraternities, secret societies that developed out of student societies, regularly make the headlines in the European press. Since 2018, they have been the focus of Matteo Salvini’s speeches denouncing the “Nigerian mafia” said to have settled in Italy during the “migration crisis” in 2015. Despite their community’s small size – about 117,000 people, or 2.2 percent of the 5 million foreigners residing in Italy³ – Nigerians are accused of competing with local mafias in drug trafficking and sexually exploiting women. These issues have become the subject of controversy, with non-profit organizations in Naples and some Italian left-wing parties taking an opposing view and denying the very existence of confraternities in Europe.⁴ The media have also taken up the issue. Invariably evoking the town of Castel Volturno and its devastated landscape, the setting for dystopian films such as *Comorra* or *Dogman*, they recount in sordid detail the violence of Nigerian “gangs” and describe a form of reverse “colonization”, echoing Great Replacement theories. Media as diverse as ABC, Al-Jazeera, *Der Spiegel*, *Le Monde*, RAI and *Paris Match* have broadcast testimonies repeated identically, contributing to the spread of rhetoric and clichés⁵ which indirectly resurrect the figure of the black pimp that emerged in the Mediterranean imagination in the aftermath of the

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² “When a bird travels, what does it carry with it?” This is one of the questions, translated from pidgin, in the initiation ritual of the Supreme Eiyé Confraternity, to which members must answer “a nest”.

³ <https://www.ilmattinodisicilia.it/storie-reportage-dalla-sicilia/mafia-nigeriana-sicilia-autonoma/>.

⁴ Interviews, Naples, January 2020.

⁵ See for example <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=drt2QsuLPn8>, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A1pJfWJHrs>, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tMef3Xt0IHk>, https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2020/07/03/l-odysee-criminelle-de-la-mafia-nigeriane_6045014_3212.html et <https://www.parismatch.com/Actu/International/A-Castel-Volturno-la-mafia-nigerian-a-mis-la-ville-au-pas-1343264>.

First World War⁶. This plays a part in propagating moral panic in Europe.⁷ They have taken part in creating a political issue, Nigerian and African immigration, and a culturalist discourse that casts Nigerians as predisposed to crime. Since the 2000s, there has been a growing number of studies on Nigerian women, who are sometimes seen as passive victims of sexual exploitation networks. But very little work has been done on Nigerian migrant men, whose numbers are far greater in Europe. These gaps contribute to the invisibilization of male trajectories, making it particularly difficult to conduct research on a phenomenon that has received a lot of media attention but little data.

This study aims to provide new empirical elements and to lay the – still imperfect – groundwork for a socio-historical analysis of the evolution of confraternities and their internationalization since the 1990s. Before British colonization, some of the traditional secret initiation societies served as a counterbalance to royal power while providing supervision for youth. This was the case for the Ogboni societies in southwestern Nigeria, Owegbe in Benin, or Ekpe among the Efik in Cross River State. In the early 20th century, Frederick Lugard, Governor General of Nigeria, fought against their influence, seeing forms of traditional justice within these societies that “corrupted” the modern state⁸ through their practice of oaths of allegiance and of sacrificial rituals.⁹ As a result, they turned increasingly to clandestine activities. It was shortly before independence, in 1952, that the first confraternity, a student society known as the Pyrates, was created. The founders included Wole Soyinka, future winner of the Nobel Prize for literature. Originally, these societies were not secretive. The Pyrates worked to promote Yoruba culture, organizing cultural and political meetings at the University of Ibadan patterned after those in the mother country. They recruited through sponsorship and selection processes that spurred individuals to prove their talents, inevitably conferring a certain prestige, as seems to have been the case for the Buccaneers, and then for members of the Supreme Eiyé in 1968.¹⁰ With the National Union of Students, these societies took part in a period of cultural effervescence, marked by the multiplication of burial societies and social clubs¹¹ mobilizing against the government since the early 1970s. This continued until the ban on student movements under the Obasanjo dictatorship (1977-1979),¹² which also prohibited civil servants from belonging to secret societies and saw a large number of Pyrates arrested in Calabar in 1977. That year, the Black Axe confraternity (also known as the Neo-Black Movement of Africa – NBM) was founded at the University of Benin City, followed by the Maphites in 1978 at the same university. These developments would explain why the student confraternities went underground, but also,

⁶ Sylvain Pattieu, “Souteneurs noirs à Marseille, 1918-1921. Contribution à l’histoire de la minorité noire en France”, *Annales. Histoire, Sciences sociales*, 64 (6), 2009, pp. 1361-1386.

⁷ Toyin Falola and Niyi Afolabi (eds), *The Human Cost of African Migrations*, New York, Routledge, 2007.

⁸ Stephen Ellis, *This Present Darkness: A History of Nigerian Organized Crime*, London, Hurst, 2015, p. 11.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 19-20, 39.

¹⁰ Adewale Rotimi, “Violence in the citadel: the menace of secret cults in the Nigerian universities”, *Nordic Journal of African Studies*, 14 (1), 2005, pp. 79-98.

¹¹ Uchenna M. Nnam, “Secret cult menace in Nigeria within the context of social structure and political economy: a critical analysis”, *International Journal of Criminal Justice Sciences*, 9 (2), pp. 171-180.

¹² Stephen Ellis, “‘Campus cults’ in Nigeria: the development of an anti-social movement”, in Stephen Ellis and Ineke van Kessel (eds), *Movers and Shakers: Social Movements in Africa*, Leiden, Brill, 2009.

according to Stephen Ellis, their “anti-social” role, i.e., their transformation into bodies charged with controlling students and serving as a paramilitary force against social mobilization. Like the area boys, street gangs that proliferated in the 1980s in the wake of the oil crises,¹³ these groups became instruments for the authorities and for political score-settling.¹⁴

Organizations such as the Black Axe were particularly effective in suppressing student demonstrations.¹⁵ With the banning of the campus cults in 1989 and the launch of major anti-confraternity campaigns under the dictatorship of Sani Abacha, playing both sides made it possible to criminalize dissident voices such as Soyinka’s, while reinstating order on the campuses.¹⁶ The confraternities proliferated in the 1980s in the oil-rich Niger Delta region, merging with militias and rebel groups around the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND).

But these secret groups remain little understood. Empirical data on their evolution after 1999 is sparse. Furthermore, it comes from institutional sources or is governed by normative and legal approaches that say nothing about their members’ practices or the socio-political dynamics in which they are embedded. The few works available rely on highly localized case studies or quantitative databases to describe the violence associated with confraternities. The latter are often thought of as part of a continuum between area boys, vigilante groups and militias, producing different forms of local conflict management.¹⁷ However, the confraternities have continued to evolve, renewing their discourse, and developing their presence in many countries. At the annual convention of the Maphite federation, held in late 2019 in Oweri, the organization’s “chapters” in South Africa, Belgium, Benin, the United Arab Emirates, Spain, the United States, France, India, Malaysia, the United Kingdom, Sweden, and Turkey were represented, compared to only six or seven “convents”, the name for chapters in Nigeria. At the same time, the confraternities have acquired new visibility by creating organizations, or charities, which employ Nollywood stars and singers for their meetings. They also seem to have given up operating as agents serving the state. Resuming their protest rhetoric, they have openly positioned themselves around pan-African positions and slogans of emancipation and social justice, mobilizing youth against modern slavery in Libya, or more recently, with the #EndSARS movement, against police violence, of which the Nigerian people are often victims.

This study focuses on the development of Nigerian confraternities and this new phase in their history. Through a socio-historical approach, it goes beyond existing judicial truths, which diffract a complex subject, part of the history of pre-colonial powers and different political economies. Despite the limited perspective available to us, the documents analyzed and interviews conducted reveal the limits of existing knowledge, which remains contextual

¹³ Jinmi Adisa, “Urban violence in Lagos”, in *Urban Violence in Africa: Pilot Studies (South Africa, Côte-d’Ivoire, Nigeria)*, Ibadan, IFRA-Nigeria, 1994, <http://books.openedition.org/ifra/771>.

¹⁴ Adewale Rotimi, “Violence in the citadel. The menace of secret cults in the Nigerian universities”, *Nordic Journal of African Studies*, 14 (1), 2005, pp. 87-88.

¹⁵ Irit Eguavoen, “Killer cults on campus: secrets, security and services among Nigerian students”, *Sociologus*, 58 (1), 2008, pp. 12-13.

¹⁶ Yann Lebeau, “Permissivité et violence sur les campus nigériens. Quelques lectures du phénomène des ‘secret cults’”, *Politique africaine*, 76 (4), 1999, pp. 173-180.

¹⁷ Charles Gore and David Pratten, “The politics of plunder: the rhetorics of order and disorder in Southern Nigeria”, *African Affairs*, 102 (407), 2003, pp. 211-240.

and reflects first and foremost the understanding of European institutions. Secondly, the study sheds light on how confraternities fit into the territories and illegal markets which they now have access to and how they take advantage of the precarious situation of Nigerian migrants in Europe, by providing new empirical elements on this migration and the forms of stratification at work within the confraternities. By taking the political role of these organizations seriously, it has emerged that, while claiming to “liberate” their members, they are in fact perpetuating their elite’s neo-patrimonial mindset and a form of youth supervision. Rather than attacking Europe, the confraternities seem intent on conquering Nigerian diasporas and the income they generate. They have produced a form of transnationalization of the moral and political institutions from the south of the country in Europe. Unlike the militias, area boys or vigilante groups to which they were compared in the 1990s, confraternities now preside over connections and initiatives on the scale of neighborhoods, federated states of Nigeria and several continents.

An encounter with confraternities over the course of ethnographic work in Sao Paulo, Brazil in 2015 marked the beginning of this multisite research. Since 2016 and an initial study of human trafficking for sexual exploitation in Paris and Nigeria,¹⁸ I have conducted interviews with “madams” (procuresses), victims, and members of confraternities; interviews and observations in Benin City (2017), where the Black Axe and Maphite confraternities were founded, in a city in eastern France and in Paris (2018-2019), then in Naples and the surrounding area (2020); and I was able to study extensive legal files that provided access to day-to-day exchanges between these groups through the numerous intercepted communications contained in the files. Thanks to this fieldwork and to anonymous sources, I also had access to internal documents belonging to the confraternities. In addition, I conducted interviews with social workers in a dozen French and Italian cities, as well as with police officers and magistrates. Since 2020, due to the Covid pandemic, my interviews with Nigerian migrants have focused on France. As requested by my informants, all of these interviews are anonymous and some of the data has been de-identified.

I chose to translate directly into the text the documents and information in Portuguese and Italian, as well as sources and quotations in English, being aware of potential translation biases, in particular for the interviews transcribed from pidgin, yet anxious to make the study easy to read.

STATE KNOWLEDGE FOCUSED ON THE CRIMINAL ACTIVITIES OF CONFRATERNITIES

Judicial and Police Knowledge about Confraternities in Europe

Political and media-related discourses about confraternities are based on knowledge forged over the last ten years by European law enforcement agencies and legal institutions. Far from being homogeneous, the approaches taken by various actors, in particular Italian, French or Dutch, have been shaped by their cultural, imperial and political pasts. They draw contrasting

¹⁸ Conducted with support from IFRA-Nigeria.

portraits of the confraternities, which reflect both their subjects and the institutions' "work". These differences were revealed through analyzing ten judicial files and rulings in France, consulting seven hundred pages of documents from a major investigation in Italy, and through interviews with various European judges and investigators.

For French, Dutch and Italian law enforcement agencies, the confraternities are both an "inaccessible group"¹⁹ and a homogeneous whole. According to several investigators, most of them have only been identified within the past few years and are still not well known. The Italian police maintain that their lack of information is mainly due to members of the diaspora fearing reprisal and therefore refusing to testify.²⁰

To one Italian magistrate, it can also be explained by the silence of those arrested. Collaboration with a very small number of informers – perhaps less than a dozen in Europe – has played a central role in developing this knowledge.²¹ In addition, there are the codes used by the confraternities, as well as linguistic and cultural barriers linked to the use of southern Nigerian languages or pidgin, which require translators and make it "difficult to say whether an individual belongs to one organization or another."²² Over the years, however, knowledge has been developed, mainly through Italian police investigations and reports from the Direzione Investigativa Antimafia (DIA) exchanged via Eurojust, then through bilateral cooperation between European law enforcement agencies. But they are not taken for granted by all police forces. An investigator from northern Europe considers that a large part of this knowledge is the result of "repeated information coming from the same source within the institutions and from the circulation of highly contextual data and analyses."²³

Definitions of "confraternities" found in court files and police reports are variable and sometimes contradictory. Different terms are used to describe them: mafias, gangs, criminal groups. Each confraternity also has a reputation now: the Maphites are associated in France with a greater level of violence, a reputation which the Black Axe "enjoys" in Italy. This shifting categorization reflects the diversity of the victims' testimonies. In many of the court files we have been able to consult, they mention that pimps or facilitators of illegal activities are members of confraternities, although the testimonies do not agree on the name of the confraternities or the exact role they play. Interviews with victims of sexual exploitation networks convey the same paradox.²⁴ As Georg Simmel discusses in *Secrecy and Secret Societies*,²⁵ not all secret societies dissolve when their existence is revealed to the uninitiated. Some, such as the confraternities, seem to be strengthened by it. For the victims, membership in these organizations is a symbol of both power and secrecy, which they use as embellishments.

¹⁹ Interviews with French, Italian and Dutch investigators.

²⁰ Interviews with an investigator, Naples, January 2020.

²¹ Calculation based on interviews with judges and police investigators.

²² Interviews, January 2020.

²³ Telephone interview, March 2021.

²⁴ Interviews conducted in France between 2017 and 2019.

²⁵ Georg Simmel, *Secrecy and secret societies*, Paris, Circé, 1991.

Nonetheless, wiretaps and a proliferation of leaked documents online, notably thanks to the work of Uche Tobias and his site devoted to the Black Axe,²⁶ have helped to make people aware of their ceremonies and codes. They have facilitated the identification of confraternities and their members, especially as investigators in several European procedures have used open source observations on social networks. They are based, for instance, on the clothing, berets, color codes (black, white and yellow for the Black Axe, blue and yellow for the Supreme Eiyé, green for the Maphites, black and red for the Supreme Vikings, black and white for the Klansmen Konfraternity (KK), also known as the Eternal Fraternal Order of the Legion Consortium or the Deebam). These aesthetics and the symbols with which they are associated (an axe for the NBM, an eagle or bird for the Supreme Eiyé, a flame for the Maphites...) reflect the confraternities' mythologies, each one having its own initiation rites, songs, and ceremonies.

Confraternities also use codes to refer to their members. For example, members of the Black Axe call themselves Axemen, Strong Men or Lords, members of the Supreme Eiyé Birds, "Air Lords", call themselves "rugged" or refer to their confraternity as "Supreme," while the Supreme Vikings call themselves "Norsemen", "Aro Men" or "Sailors", the Maphites "Show Guys", "Gogo" or "Omi Gogo", and members of the Klansmen Konfraternity "Efficient" or "Very Efficient Sirs". Despite several telecommunications intercepts, these codes were not always picked up or known to investigators of certain cases. After long investigations, sometimes of several years, this police knowledge seems to be circulating now.

Legal Frameworks and Approaches by Police and Judicial Agencies

- **In Nigeria**

Since the colonial era, Nigerian civil servants have been prohibited from belonging to secret societies. After the 1989 campus cults, the 1990 penal code banned a number of secret organizations based on their objectives. This legacy is reflected in the 1999 Constitution prohibiting membership in secret societies (section 38-4), defined by section 318 as:

"Any society, association, group or body of persons (whether registered or not): (a) that uses secret signs, oaths, rites or symbols and which is formed to promote a cause, the purpose or part of the purpose of which is to foster the interest of its members and to aid one another under any circumstances without due regard to merit, fair play or justice to the detriment of the legitimate interest of those who are not members; (b) the membership of which is incompatible with the function or dignity of any public office under this Constitution and whose members are sworn to observe oaths of secrecy; or (c) the activities of which are not known to the public at large, the names of whose members are kept secret and whose meetings and other activities are held in secret."

This prohibition reflects the ambiguity of the federal government with regard to secret societies and the instrumentalization to which they are subjected. It is also based on the federal

²⁶ <https://nbn147watch.com/>.

law known as the “Secret Cult and Similar Activities Prohibition Act”, enacted in 2004, while several states adopted their own legislation: Edo with the State Secret Cult (Prevention) Law in 2000, Rivers in 2004, Lagos in 2007,²⁷ Bayelsa in 2012, while in 2018 Edo²⁸ and Akwa Ibom²⁹ enacted new laws to update the existing ones, and Lagos announced in May 2021 that it intended to punish the parents of young people convicted of cultism.³⁰

According to journalists and representatives of Edo State interviewed in December 2017, this legal arsenal has two limitations. On the one hand, it is reportedly used widely by the police, often groundlessly, to criminalize offenders and youth movements. On the other hand, the anti-cultist operations organized and staged by the Nigerian police conceal a form of impunity. As one police commissioner in Benin City explained, “each time we arrest members they remain in custody and then we receive a call... people at the top level of state government, politicians... we have to liberate them.”³¹ And in the rare cases where prominent members are arrested, often due to their political positions or internal rivalries, judges, sometimes members of confraternities themselves, are reportedly given money to vitiate the proceedings and ensure that they are never concluded.³²

• In Italy

In Italy, according to the DIA, the question of the presence of Nigerian secret societies arose in the early 1990s with the first indictments of groups of Nigerians involved in prostitution and drug trafficking. In 2015, gang violence in the streets of Naples, in which a member of the Black Axe was arrested, reportedly led prosecutors and police to consider that the societies came under Article 416 A of the Italian criminal code, introduced in 1982 to combat mafia organizations:

“The association is considered mafia-like when those who are part of it take advantage of the intimidating force of community ties, of making people subject to their control and to the resulting “omerta” (law of silence) in order to commit crimes, to acquire directly or indirectly the management or in any case the control of economic activities, concessions, authorizations, contracts and public services, or to obtain profits or unfair advantages for themselves or for others, or to prevent or hinder the free exercise of the vote or to obtain votes for themselves or for others in the course of elections.”³³

For the first time in the country, foreign nationals were prosecuted for belonging to a mafia. The criteria used to justify this categorization were explained by various informants, who drew parallels between the mafia and Nigerian groups, described as “black mafias”

²⁷ <https://laws.lawnigeria.com/2020/04/17/cultism-prohibition-law-of-lagos-state/>.

²⁸ <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2018/12/edo-assembly-passes-bill-to-prohibit-secret-cults/>.

²⁹ <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2018/03/gov-emmanuel-outlaws-33-cult-groups-ibom/>.

³⁰ <https://truetellsnigeria.com/2021/05/28/governor-sanwo-olu-vows-to-jail-parents-of-children-convicted-of-cultism/>.

³¹ Interview, December 2017.

³² Interviews with journalists and police officers, December 2017, Benin City.

³³ Quoted in and translated into French by Ciro Grandi, “L’apport de la jurisprudence italienne dans l’élaboration du concept d’association de type mafieux,” *Revue de science criminelle et droit pénal comparé*, 1 (1), 2017, pp. 13-26.

but which, according to some, do not have the same complexity.³⁴ As Fabrice Rizzoli points out, “the definition of 416 A is based on the ‘mafia method’ characterized by the use of intimidating force in conjunction with community ties that conditions the population.”³⁵ The confraternities’ categorization as mafias would therefore be justified by 1) their vertical organizations, 2) initiation rites, 3) the use of violence to obtain their victims’ silence.³⁶ Despite the at times formidable arrests and the proliferation of court cases reported each year by the DIA, many cases have proven to be fragile. Furthermore, convictions remain limited: in 2018, 28 Nigerians were charged with mafia association and 129 in 2019.³⁷ In addition, according to one prosecutor, the quantities of cocaine, cannabis, and heroin seized sometimes do not exceed a few hundred grams. This was notably the case for a large-scale investigation that began in 2014 and resulted in the arrest of 22 members of the Maphite Confraternity and 22 of the Supreme Eiyé Confraternity; followed by the arrest of “Caesar” in December 2019, in fact Osaze Osemwingie-Ero, Commissioner for Arts, Culture, Tourism and the Diaspora for Edo State, identified as the global vice president of the Maphites. A review of the case revealed that the police focused on proving the defendants’ membership in the confraternities, but that not all members were involved in illegal activities. When they were, possession of tens of grams of cannabis or a few hundred euros was reported. An Italian magistrate interviewed in January 2020 spoke of a “political moment” that may have justified this categorization of confraternities as mafias. Although the analyses and experience of Italian police officers on the subject are often cited as a reference by European law enforcement agencies and judges, and the documents seized have been used to build an overall analytical system, the latter has not produced a consistent reading of the confraternities.

- **In France**

In France, Nigerian confraternities have mainly been studied with regard to human trafficking for sexual exploitation. The police and judicial authorities responsible for the fight against human trafficking are central in cases highlighting the confraternities, and in particular the Brigade de répression du proxénétisme (BRP) and the specialized interregional jurisdictions (JIRS) of the Paris public prosecutor’s office. This is particularly true in the ten legal cases studied, which were investigated in Bordeaux, Rennes, Poitiers, Paris and Lyon between 2010 and 2020. Comparisons with Romanian, Albanian and Chinese human trafficking networks (TEH) were often made in the interviews. The approach focuses first of all on the figure of the “madam,” described in several procedures as the core of the network. The confraternities are a backdrop for the investigations. Some of the legal files examined, particularly those from the early 2010s, contain contradictory observations that confuse the names of the confraternities (in particular

³⁴ Interview with a judge and police investigation services, Naples, January 2020

³⁵ Fabrice Rizzoli, “Pouvoirs et mafias italiennes. Contrôle du territoire contre état de droit,” *Pouvoirs*, 132 (1), 2010, pp. 41-55.

³⁶ These features were also highlighted by a Neapolitan judge in January 2020.

³⁷ <https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2021/01/29/mafia-nigeriana-il-viminale-e-una-minaccia-globale-nel-2019-forte-crescita-dei-segnalati-per-associazione-mafiosa/6083574/>.

Aye and Eiye³⁸), designate “members”, then speak of “proximity” to a confraternity, evoke sects, student fraternities or gangs. They often highlight the rituals, likening them to Haitian voodoo.

In France, the first detailed investigation that revealed the role of confraternities in the sexual exploitation economy was the so-called “Authentic Sisters” case, named after the club to which madams belonged who were exploiting some 50 women. Initiated in 2014, it went to trial in 2018 and revealed the membership of several spouses of madams in the Eiye brotherhood. Conversely, in another large-scale legal case investigated during the same period, the link between prostitution networks and confraternities was not established or analyzed in the proceedings, even though intercepted communications attested to the use of codes and terms specific to the Eiye confraternity between several members, pimps and logisticians. Finally, in a third case of human trafficking and pimping of minors, tried in June 2020, the membership of one of the convicts in the Black Axe was mentioned in the proceedings, but this element was not elaborated on during the trial, nor was it possible to draw any specific conclusions about the role of the confraternities.

- **In The Netherlands**

Dutch police have been looking into Nigerians’ illicit activities as part of their fight against drug trafficking. Investigations into drug dealers or semi-wholesalers working with major criminal operators in the country’s ports have revealed in particular the transfer of small quantities of cocaine, methamphetamine, and heroin by Nigerians. While one investigator did not rule out the possibility that the individuals in question may have belonged to a confraternity, and police have identified the presence of several confraternities in Holland, no investigation has focused on these confraternities or shown their role in organizing criminal activities related to drugs or prostitution.³⁹

A Discourse of Empowerment and Pan-Africanism

To get around prohibitions, the confraternities have created charities that serve as both legal showcases and public branches. Like the Neo-Black Movement of Africa⁴⁰ of the Black Axe or the Norsemen KClub Incorporated⁴¹ of the Vikings, which presents itself as a club for university graduates, these structures are registered as non-profit associations with the Nigerian Corporate Affairs Commission and sometimes double as philanthropic foundations, such as the Uhuru Foundation.⁴² The confraternities have been included in the political life of various countries

³⁸ Names given to the Black Axe (Aye) and Supreme Eiye Confraternity (Eiye), often pronounced the same way.

³⁹ Interviews with an investigator, April and May 2021.

⁴⁰ <https://www.nbmworldwide.com>.

⁴¹ <https://denorsemenkclub.org/>.

⁴² Conversely, some confraternities, such as the Klansmen Konfraternity, appoint “street wings” (or “creek wings” in the Niger Delta), branches of the organization devoted to criminal activities.

through the charity and solidarity initiatives they are engaged in, testifying to their strong symbolic investment in building legitimacy and their involvement in social mobilization. For instance, the Cape Town chapter of the NBM recently relayed calls to mobilize against the violence affecting Nigerians in South Africa. The confraternities also took part in protests against police violence during the second #EndSARS movement in 2020, and regularly share content against human trafficking. Like the NBM, they all invoke pan-African discursive repertoires. One of the NBM's days of official commemoration coincides with Sharpeville Memorial Day, a reference to a massacre of township residents committed in 1960 during apartheid. The NBM website states:

“The Neo-Black movement of Africa is a Movement whose aims include the Promotion and Advancement of the black race all over the world. The movement believes in one black race all over the world. In addition, NBM is a socio-cultural organization that sincerely seek to revive, retain and modify where necessary those aspects of African culture that would provide vehicles of progress for the global populace. The Neo Black Movement is a sui generis organization that holds with a sanguine attitude an intuition that we can live in a Global Village that is void of the nuance of inequality and social injustice.”

The political aspect plays an even more important role because certain practices may be justified in the name of this collective aspiration. Many “chapters” mobilized against the exploitation of Nigerian men and women at the time of Al-Jazeera’s publication of investigations into Libyan slave markets in 2017. At the beginning of the Covid 19 pandemic in Europe in March 2020, the Green Circuit Association of Cyprus, a Maphite association, provided food to its members, while the Supreme Vikings of Malaysia organized similar distributions. These activities are widely publicized by the confraternities and reported extensively on their social networking pages or local branches.

Screenshots of visuals produced by the Green Circuit Association, the Cape Town NBM Zone and the Norsemen Club on social media in 2017 and 2018





Links between different branches of the confraternities must be analyzed on a case-by-case basis, especially as some of them have several associations in Europe and the United States. But the American, Canadian and Italian courts have ruled that their legal entities cannot be separated from their secret or criminal entities, which has led to their being banned in various cases.⁴³ This

⁴³ <https://www.justice.gov/usao-mdfl/pr/organizer-complex-nigerian-fraud-and-money-laundering-ring-sentenced>.

permeability between associations and confraternities was confirmed by the statements of Caesar, one of the international leaders of the Maphites, during a meeting intercepted by the Italian police:

“We are *family* men...we have this legal organization, because if the police come, we are legally registered, and because of that we use the title GCA [Green Circuit Association], which is the same as Maphite. I say we are members of the Maphites, but on the other side of that door if someone addresses me as a member of the Maphites I will deny it, I will say I am not part of the Maphites because I don't want to be arrested. I am a member and we used the name GCA as a cover... We can use the names Don, Capo, Maphite, etc. among ourselves, but we have to use names like “president” when we are out in the world... If we call ourselves Dons in front of policemen, you know what we'll be accused of? Of being in the mafia; whereas if you are called president, it can mean a president of an association [...]”⁴⁴

In the same way, the constitution of the Green Circuit Association and the Green Bible, the document that specifies the confraternity's rules, objectives and *modus operandi*, stipulates:

“Being a criminal organization, we work in any criminal aspect or interest for the benefit and advancement of MAPHITE, we shall deal in drugs, contract killings, prostitution, large scale robbery, weapons and in WHENEVER WILL BRING IN LARGE NUMBER OF DRUGS THROUGH OPERATION TYRUS THE CIC MUST BE IN CHARGE OF DISTRIBUTING IT THE DON AND DD1 MUST ALWAYS REMAIN COVER, everything imaginable.”⁴⁵

It then recalls the importance of operating clandestinely and in secrecy:

“It is good for some brothers to remain undercover without applying the image and we give to those brothers the responsibilities for special projects without anyone being aware that they are part of Maphites. THOSE BROTHERS UNDERCOVER MUST BE HIGHLY PAID BECAUSE THEY WORK AS INFORMANT FOR GUDPHADA, THEY ARE OUR EYES.”⁴⁶

Conversely, other confraternities have given up maintaining a public presence. During the initiation rite of the Supreme Eiyé, one of the few confraternities that did not have an association, the oath of membership places particular emphasis on allegiance to the four cardinal points of the ‘SADB’: Secrecy, Autocracy, Discipline and Brotherhood.⁴⁷

Organizations Linking Different Social Worlds

Despite being banned, these societies cannot be reduced to mere criminal organizations for their members, for whom they play different roles. For a former student and teacher at Uniben,⁴⁸ the motivations of the members changed gradually in the 1980s. According to him, some of the children of the Edo elites had turned away from traditional secret organizations,

⁴⁴ Interception cited in a legal file examined.

⁴⁵ *Green Bible*, pp. 3-4. Underlined in the document.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁴⁷ Oath of initiation provided by a local informant.

⁴⁸ University of Benin, located in Benin City. Interview in December 2017

such as the Ogboni society, considered too restrictive and morally demanding. Unable to be initiated into them, they joined student groups, which presented themselves as those of a new generation while appropriating certain traditional rituals.⁴⁹ It was during this period that fraternities on university campuses began to carry automatic weapons and to behave like gangs, particularly under the influence of politicians. Many students are thought to have joined the fraternities then to obtain protection:

“Cults became an instrument, including for the weakest, they started to control the campus, the girls, to extort students. As a member you would have power with you and not be chased by the police, it would become costly for them to take you.”⁵⁰

Members of the confraternities who were trained alongside them at university are now politicians, businessmen and lawyers, but maintain their affiliations in order to meet among themselves and have access to different social milieux and generations. For one of its members living in France, the Black Axe is “a powerful association working for the improvement of the condition of Blacks,” which he speaks about in an open and sometimes threatening way, helping him to obtain support from other members.⁵¹ A woman who belonged to the Blue Queens of Benin City, the women’s branch of the Eiyeye Confraternity, emphasizes how joining this group allowed her “to become somebody, to meet people of power.” She speaks of it as a circle that protected her and provided her with opportunities, especially in love and marriage, despite the fact that female subgroups are always subordinate to the male ones.⁵²

For a member of the Black Axe in Benin City who did not go to college, however, the means of entry was different, as a continuation of his delinquent activity⁵³. The other members of the fraternity he is associated with are “bus drivers, workers, market vendors or ‘Yahoo boys’.”⁵⁴ They meet once a week in a bar and have set up a tontine which allows everyone to borrow in case of need. This practice highlights the role of solidarity in confraternities and, although they do not organize it directly, they help to conclude it between the members. Tontines are also common in Europe. According to this informant, meetings between members are part of a routine linked to the territory in which one spends most of one’s time and in which one operates.

⁴⁹ Broader research is necessary regarding the circulation of these practices.

⁵⁰ Interviews, December 2017.

⁵¹ Interviews, April and May 2019.

⁵² “Girls are under the boys’ authority. The Blue Queens under Eye, and the Black Bra under Aye. They take their orders from the head, the area boss. Most of them have a girlfriend in the Queens.”

⁵³ Interview in Benin City December 2017.

⁵⁴ The Yahoo boys are the source of the scams and well-known online swindles promising to pay strangers millions of dollars, as well as of false offers of services and invoices they send to companies, notably by masquerading as other entities.

Confraternities have Diverse Operating Modes and Structures

Each confraternity has different a structures, function and spatial organization. The organization charts presented below are ideal types. Although they are affirmed by the confraternities, we will see that they do not shape relations between members and seem to be largely undermined by their expansion in Europe. However, they do shed light on the varying roles of rituals and magical activities that should be studied in greater detail for each confraternity.

• **Supreme Eiye**

From interviews conducted in Benin City in 2017 and internal documents, it appears that the Supreme Eiye organization is based on nests, with certain members being granted titles that guarantee them “rights” to these nests, in the manner of an office. Each nest belongs to a forum and is led by:

- an Ibaka, or spiritual leader reporting to the international council;
- an Ostrich, in charge of combat and external activities;
- a Fly Commander, who acts as a deputy;
- a Peka, who is the treasurer and is responsible for keeping the books and collecting dues;
- a Parrot, who “calls out” and is responsible for certain rituals, communications and information for members;
- and lastly two Doves, who watch over the security of the nest and its members: the Intelligent Dove protects the Ibaka, the Infantry Dove the nest; their names and functions are kept secret, and they are also said to be responsible for relations with other confraternities.

• **Black Axe**

The Black Axe is divided into geographical zones directed by the National Body, itself made up of different councils, a system that has been analyzed in particular by Uche Tobias.⁵⁵ Each zone has a Zonal Council of Elders made up of the former zonal chiefs, an executive council and a zonal head in charge of operations:

- the Zonal Head supervises the members;
- the Chief Priest assists him: he prepares the jollification ceremonies for combats and spiritually fortifies members;
- the Butcher is the number 3: he is in charge of member violence and discipline;
- the Eye is the secretary and deputy;
- the Ihaze is the treasurer;
- the Cryer is in charge of communication.

⁵⁵ <https://nbn147watch.com/nbn-structure/>.

- **Maphite**

This confraternity's constitution was renewed in 2017, and the Green Bible dedicates an entire section to its organization (pp. 9-15). Entitled "The supreme power structure of Maphite," it is divided into six articles (1. Supreme commander; 2. Objectives and bylaws of GCA families; 3. Regimental captains; 4. Functions and qualities of a lieutenant; 5. Family soldiers; 6. Discipline and conduct), displaying a more military and vertical structure organized geographically. This structure is said to be inspired by the army and to have three ranks for promotion. According to one source, it reflects the influence of former mercenaries active during the Biafran war (1967-1970) who had ties to the confraternity's founders:

- the president, also known as the Presidion, and the vice president are at the top of the international organization, but report to several councils designated as the Supreme Maphite Council, of which they are members;

- generals are in charge of regions, called chapters or forums;

- Captains (Captain In Command) are responsible for the organization of their family, sometimes localized at the level of a city but they may coordinate several of them, or several members on the scale of an entire country; they must report to the general above them. For example, the Maphites have four families in Italy, the Vaticana, Roma, Latino (Piedmont, Liguria, Lombardy), and a family in Sicily for the south, but only three families in France, two of which are active in the Paris region;

- lieutenants manage the various activities in the cities and ranches (sub-regions); they are assisted by sergeants, with "soldiers" under them;

- each family is said to have a council, and to delegate the function of checker, or cashier, to specific members.

EXPANSIONS MARKED BY THE EUROPEAN MIGRATORY CONTEXT

Nigerian Migration to Europe

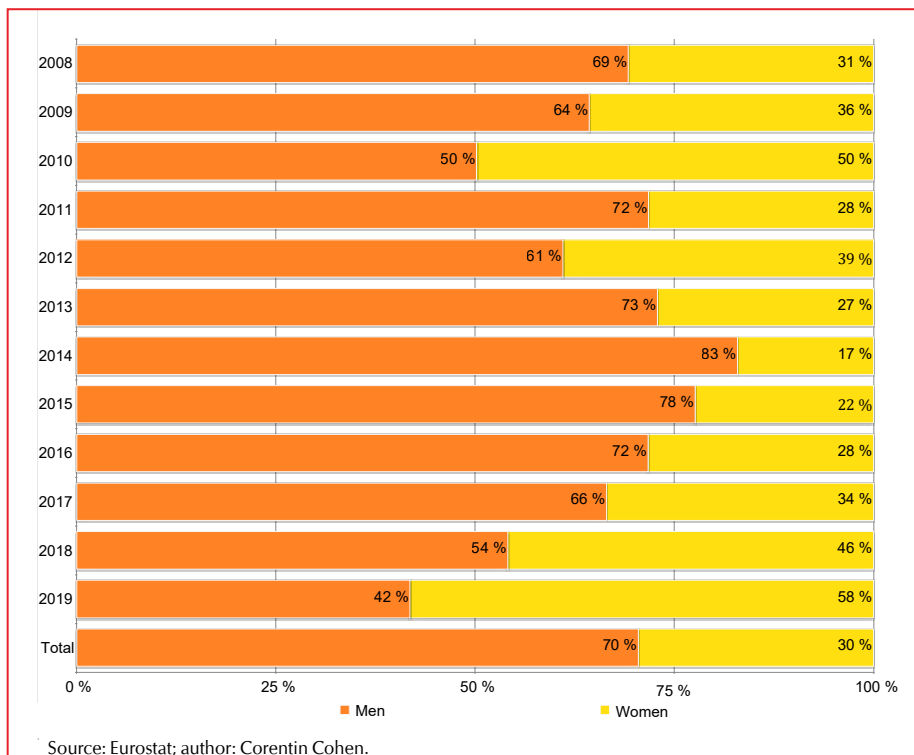
The confraternities' expansion in Europe is inseparable from the clandestine and precarious nature of Nigerian migration trajectories since the late 2000s, which have been studied very little. In the United Kingdom, a former colonial power, the presence of students who remained in the country after their studies gave rise to the emergence of a British middle class of Nigerian origin.⁵⁶ Another migration linked to the Biafran war⁵⁷ occurred in the 1970s

⁵⁶ Pamela Jennifer Kea, "Reproducing middle-class subjectivities: educational migration, transnationalism, and British Nigerian youth", *Africa Today*, 66 (3-4).

⁵⁷ Sebastian Okechukwu Onah and Johan Leman, "Cosmological and religious fundamentals among Igbo immigrants in Belgium: the way out of segregation", *Social Compass*, 52 (4), 2005, pp. 513-527.

and was also present in France. From 1986 onwards, structural adjustment programs and IMF interventions triggered a new wave of migration linked to the growing impoverishment of part of the population, especially the urban middle class. Researchers have emphasized the role of imagined prosperity associated with Europe in these migrations,⁵⁸ while showing how diasporas use economic insertion strategies that rely on mobility and trade flows with Nigeria.⁵⁹ However, lessons gleaned from this literature are limited regarding Nigerian men who arrived in Europe between 2000 and 2020 by crossing the Mediterranean into Spain via Morocco, or to Italy via Libya. This is especially the case since, in the words of an individual from the Igbo non-profit community in Paris who came to France to study after the Biafran war, these new arrivals constitute a “distinct community”. They are thought to have no contact with the Nigerian populations already present in several countries, except through the networks of certain evangelical churches, and are mainly structured around regional associations from Edo.

Figure 1
First-time Asylum Seekers in Italy, by Sex, 2008-2019



In the absence of more specific work on this recent migratory phenomenon, the Eurostat statistics on asylum applications that we have been able to gather highlight two dynamics. This data seems worthy of note: all our informants in France and Italy – men and women – have applied for

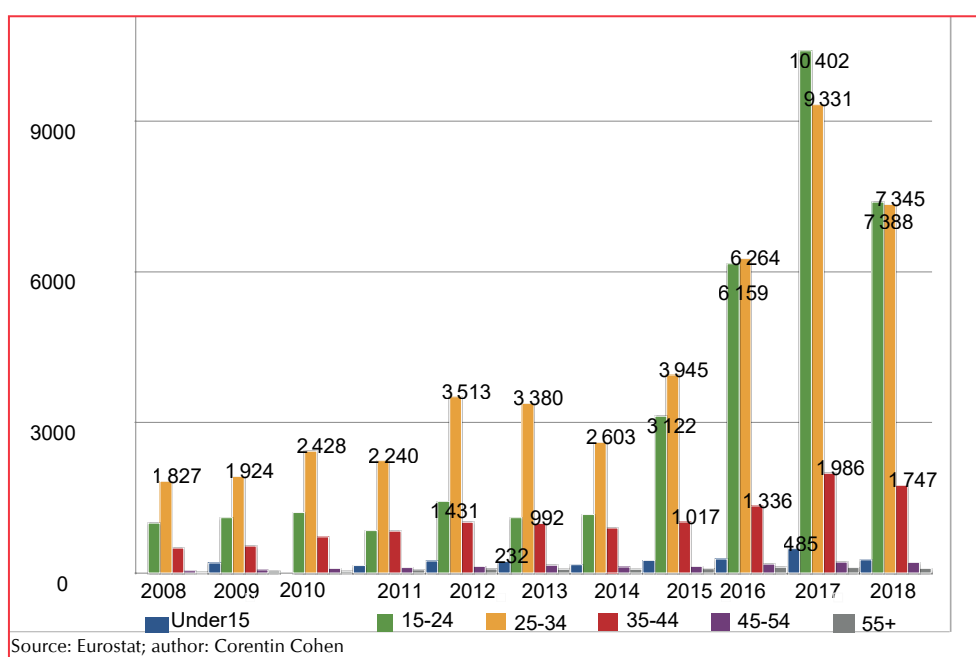
⁵⁸ Paul Obi-Ani, Ngozika Anthonia Obi-Ani and Mathias Chukwudi Isiani, “A historical perspective of Nigerian immigrants in Europe”, *Cogent Arts & Humanities*, 7 (1), 2020.

⁵⁹ Joris Shapendonk, “From transit migrants to trading migrants: development opportunities for Nigerians in the transnational trade sector of Istanbul”, *Sustainability*, 5 (7), 2013, pp. 2856-2873.

asylum.⁶⁰ During the period from 2008-2019, Italy was the leading country for Nigerian asylum applications in Europe, followed by Germany, France, the United Kingdom, and Switzerland.

Among Nigerian asylum seekers arriving in Europe between 2008 and 2018, men represented a clear majority in Italy – about three-quarters of applications between 2013 and 2016. This proportion is mirrored in some countries such as Germany, while in France the distribution indicates a slight female majority, and in the United Kingdom near parity. The data also highlights the decreasing age of Nigerian migration, as shown in the previous graph. Formerly composed mainly of young people between 25 and 34 years old, from 2014 onwards it was marked by the arrival of young people between 15 and 24 years old, of school age in Nigeria, as well as by the sharp increase of those under 15 between 2014 and 2017.

Figure 2
Nigerian Immigration to Italy, by Age Group and Year, 2008-2018



Migratory Trajectories of Nigerian Men

Interviews with Nigerian men in France between 2018 and 2021 shed light on the extremely precarious living conditions of these migrants. All arrived in Europe between 2012 and 2017. Most of them were born in villages around large cities such as Benin City (Edo State), Warri (Delta State) Onitsha (Anambra State), Aba and Oweri (Imo State), and none have more than a high school education; they have been waiters, cab drivers, and shop workers; some are middle class from these

⁶⁰ An asylum seeker is defined by Eurostat as “a person who has lodged an application for international protection or has been included in such an application as a family member during the reference period.” All the informants we met utilized these procedures once they were in Europe.

cities, others grew up in rural areas before moving there to find work. They speak of several motivations for migration: the lack of future prospects, insufficient wages, and family pressure, sometimes in a state of impoverishment. They spoke neither Italian nor French when they arrived in Europe. Often, the men had to divide their migrations. They reportedly paid between 400,000 and 2 million naira (or between 800 and 4,000 euros) to reach Libya. Arriving directly from southern Nigeria, they spent several weeks in Agadez, Niger, or in southern Libya, notably in Sebha, and then several weeks or months in informal camps on the Libyan coast, often working in the construction sector. Many were subjected to violence, and some were taken hostage and forced to call on their families to pay a ransom to the security forces. Others were forced to work to pay off these “debts” and were released only after several months of forced labor. Dividing up the trip allows those with the least money or who have spent all their money on the road to pay another network of smugglers – who offer to take them across the Mediterranean for a price that ranges from 100 to 300 euros. Once in Italy, some seek to join family members or acquaintances who may have facilitated the journey, so many head directly to smaller European cities. A great many of these men seem traumatized by their journeys, whether because of the violence that marked them, their harrowing crossing of the desert, then the Mediterranean, or the conditions in Italian camps.

Under the so-called Dublin procedure, which requires that asylum applications be processed in the country of arrival in Europe, the vast majority of these men were biometrically registered in Italy or Greece, and therefore filed an initial asylum application in these countries which they do not understand. In Italy, some were encouraged to apply for humanitarian protection, until that designation was cancelled by Matteo Salvini in 2018, forcing them from then on to live clandestinely. These men often keep their distance from social structures. Unfamiliar with administrative processes, they tend to reproduce their peers’ strategies and approaches. Their precarity inevitably exposes them to fraud. Like trafficked women, some find themselves forced to give money to “counsellors” who promise them a visa or protection in exchange for several hundred euros.

When applying for asylum, most of them therefore repeated biographical accounts that resonated with current media events and the European view of the rest of the world.

In the early 2000s, some claimed to be former child soldiers from Sierra Leone, or presented themselves as Congolese, Sudanese or Somalis.⁶¹ Others highlighted their homosexuality, claiming to have been “initiated” by priests or Westerners and then become “addicted,” in the stereotypical terms of many of the testimonies read, citing threats that echo the persecution and violence that LGBT people and communities in Nigeria indeed face. More recently, men have reported being attacked by Fulani men. But most of the asylum claims filed play on the growing discourse about confraternities. Most of the men interviewed said they had refused to be initiated into a confraternity or secret society (Ogboni in particular, sometimes Black Axe). They say that, following the death of their father, they were forcibly enlisted, and then, after persecution resulting in the death of a close relative, brother or uncle, they decided to flee their hometown and go to Europe. These stories have fostered a belief among some social workers and asylum officers that confraternities are on the increase.

⁶¹ Paul Obi-Ani, Ngozika Anthonia Obi-Ani and Mathias Chukwudi Isiani, “A Historical Perspective of Nigerian Immigrants in Europe”, art. cited, p. 9.

Administrative Precarity Preventing Access to Legal Jobs

For all the asylum seekers interviewed, the main difficulty upon arriving in Europe is the need to implement strategies to circumvent legal obstacles to their survival, in a context where they are mostly criminalized and excluded from social support. Some have been able to get by through informal employment. Their early contacts with employers on the outskirts of refugee camps or in the fields of southern Italy were often marked by racism. Recruited as seasonal workers, the men moved between Puglia and Emilia-Romagna according to harvesting times, sometimes for several years. Others begged in the center of Naples or in cities in northern Italy. Having been ordered to leave the territory when their asylum application was rejected, most of them moved on to other European countries. All the men interviewed had therefore reapplied for asylum in France, then appealed, before considering trying again in another European country. The men often move for several years between different countries, sometimes borrowing money from relatives to finance a new trip.

This precarity and administrative irregularity have direct implications on the integration strategies adopted. They prevent them from opening a bank account and make them dependent on members of the diaspora who are already legally integrated, especially Nigerian women. Some get their first job in a hairdressing salon when they make it to France a few months or several years after arriving in Italy. After starting out recruiting customers or handing out flyers, some go on to become hairdressers or barbers, or even manage to get hired on a fixed-term contract as salesmen or hairdressers, and subsequently pay income tax.

At the same time, these men tried to obtain identity documents to be eligible to work. Some of them turned to intermediaries who developed a business “renting” identity documents in exchange for sums ranging from 20 to 50 percent of the wages received. In France, these intermediaries work in conjunction with several sectors which, according to my informants, “turn a blind eye” to fraud, in particular “photos and dates of birth that don’t match.” The maintenance and cleaning subcontracting sector is one of them. Many interviewees mention hotels and office buildings in the La Défense business district of Paris, around the airports of Le Bourget and Roissy-Charles-de-Gaulle. In some cases, hotel chains directly hire migrants with false papers. Temporary employment agencies in the construction industry are another sector that provides jobs. Lastly, some fast-food restaurants are known to use this type of labor, especially in the Paris region. Several of them are thought to have numerous “ghost” employee positions, occupied by different men registered on the same document. Such establishments are looking for staff willing to work outside declared hours, after closing time or in the morning before the restaurant opens. For all the men we met, these jobs helped them to escape living on the street, constituting “good tips” passed among friends and family that were combined for a few years and seen as a stabilizing force.

Establishment Under Constraint

This is the context in which the establishment and role of the confraternities in Europe should be viewed, where the influx of labor constitutes a recruiting ground for illegal and informal activities which their members try to take advantage of. Some of them are said to have been established in Europe since the 1980s, but the zones or chapters were organized in a scattered and uncontrolled manner in the early 2000s.

Not all Nigerian confraternities have experienced the same path of internationalization. Those in the southeast of the country, such as the Icelanders and Greenlanders or the Klansmen Konfraternity, are marked by their associations with Niger Delta rebel groups and, with the exception of the Supreme Vikings, seem to have a limited presence in Europe, unlike the Black Axe, Supreme Eiyé and Maphite confraternities which grew out of universities in the country's southwest area. As with other organizations, their development was not planned,⁶² but took place as their members moved in. For example, in 2001 the Black Axe reportedly had three different groups in the Netherlands whose members were not connected to each other. These groups were competing for "opening up" and taking the leadership of the "Holland" zone, achieved in 2002.⁶³ Similarly, investigations of the Eiyé and Maphite confraternities in Italy reveal that the "families," particularly the so-called "Vaticana," were created in Rome in the early 2010s to end disputes among members of the Italian national forum. At the same time, Eiyé nests are thought to have proliferated, counting more than twenty areas in Italy by mid-2010. The same phenomenon seems to have occurred in France, with strong rivalries between families and chapter members. The first Maphite zone in Europe is said to have been created in London in 2009 with, according to its founder, "27 members, of whom only four came to the meetings," before he structured the family and had it "registered," officially creating a "convent."⁶⁴

While the modalities of these openings abroad vary among confraternities, in each one the members are supposed to pay a registration fee to be admitted. They then commit to abiding by the rules of the organization, which they may call upon to arbitrate disputes or access services in exchange for payment. As confraternities in Nigeria were unable to control registration of new members, they quickly set up international registries to handle them and reap the benefits. Then, when they could no longer control recruitment, they prohibited the enrollment of new members. This seems to have been the case as early as 2010 for the Black Axe, which only allows fifteen individuals to be recruited per year in Holland.⁶⁵ Most Supreme Eiyé and Black Axe zones in Europe were still not allowed to recruit in 2020 and have to wait for international meetings that occur every two years in order to bring in new members. The new constitution adopted by the Maphites in 2017 states that all European

⁶² Federico Varese, "How Mafias Take Advantage of Globalization: The Russian Mafia in Italy", *The British Journal of Criminology*, 52 (2), March 2012, pp. 235-253.

⁶³ Interview, April 2021.

⁶⁴ Recorded exchange cited in a legal case.

⁶⁵ Interview, May 2021.

chapters of the organization are “still” prohibited from recruiting in Europe, and the 2018 convention confirmed the adoption of rules forcing international chapters to file membership and cadre lists.⁶⁶ According to an analyst with access to internal membership lists and account books in Spain, 90 percent of Black Axe affiliates registered in the country were reportedly “baptized” in Nigeria.⁶⁷

Contrary to the rhetoric about confraternities expanding in Europe, only two of the twenty or so Nigerian asylum seekers interviewed on this subject in France are members, and were initiated before coming to Europe, while a third individual works for members of confraternities. The latter’s trajectory illustrates how confraternities have been able to take advantage of this influx of Nigerian men in a precarious situation. Upon arriving in France after a year in Italy, this man began working in a hair salon owned by a member of a confraternity. Thanks to his skills as a graphic designer, he was asked shortly afterwards to make flyers for the salon – always informally –, and then to create posters for concerts organized by a historical member of the confraternity. Like many confraternity figures in Europe, this man presents himself as a DJ and music producer. His party posters are sometimes marked with symbols or references to the confraternity, in which he has held an international position. For this informant, it was not a matter of joining the confraternity, but rather of making the most of the windfall from the activities of some of its members, while multiplying jobs that enabled him to support his family.

These parties seem to be the focus of a significant symbolic investment, both because they delineate a space of sociability within which the different confraternities meet (and fight, sometimes between gangs of the same confraternity), but also because they are the object of moral condemnation. They are often seen as encouraging “hustling” and illegal street activities, helping to form success story constructs.⁶⁸

The Role of Men and Confraternities in the Trading Economy: An End to Madams?

Organizing trafficking for sexual exploitation provides opportunities for men seeking ways to survive and for members of confraternities and madams looking for subcontractors. The literature on Nigerian trafficking has focused on the strategies of control it uses, describing it as a predominantly female activity, organized around the figure of madams and traditional *jujus* (*grigris*), who threaten the girls that are victims of trafficking with death if they break their oath. However, several recent studies have shown that trafficking is based on a form of contractualization inherited from slavery and the practice of pawnship⁶⁹ and that it must be studied by taking into account the role played by women, who are often reduced to passive

⁶⁶ Internal documents.

⁶⁷ Interview, April 2021.

⁶⁸ Interviews with Nigerian men and victims of human trafficking in France, 2017-2019.

⁶⁹ Laurent Fourchard, “Prêt sur gage et traite des femmes au Nigeria, fin XIX^e-années 1950”, in Bénédicte Lavaud-Legendre (dir.), *Prostitution nigériane, entre rêves de migration et réalité de la traite*, Paris, Karthala, 2013.

“victims,”⁷⁰ but also the success story constructs and family pressures that shape migration strategies⁷¹ in a context of socio-economic vulnerability.⁷² In fact, Nigerian prostitution networks rely on a variety of actors: women’s clubs,⁷³ pastors and various religious actors,⁷⁴ and men who receive income in exchange for promises of marriage.⁷⁵

Members of the confraternities also participate in these networks. For one former trafficking victim, this involvement reflects first of all the use of confraternities by madams: “most of the men who bring girls [...] are neutral, they have no relations with the confraternities, it’s part of their activities,” even if “most madams use members of confraternities, either to watch over the ‘woods’ [Bois de Vincennes on the outskirts of Paris, here], or a particular person.” But, as court records reveal, the victims don’t always know about these affiliations. This creates a bias that several research studies have reproduced by focusing on interviews with victims. Can a trafficking victim have links to different confraternities?

“Yes, it is possible, because she doesn’t know what she’s doing. A madam will have a brother in the confraternity, the girl doesn’t know that her madam knows the boy she’s dating is from a different confraternity, and the girl won’t know either, she’s just dating the guy. There will be a fight...”⁷⁶

A first type of involvement has been brought to light in France in several court cases, notably that of the Authentic Sisters, which revealed alliances between madams and their husbands (who acted as pimps, threatening or assaulting victims and families who did not pay trafficking debts). In this case, the main defendant and his associates and henchmen were all affiliated with the Supreme Eiyé and worked together. But members of the confraternities seem to act mostly as subcontractors. Trafficked persons are indeed considered to be “commodities”, and not necessarily exploited directly by the beneficiaries and owners of their debts. The latter (sometimes referred to as “sponsors”) may be at the very end of the value chain.⁷⁷ They often reside in Nigeria, are not always known to the victims, employ several madams and individuals who serve as brokers and generate the promised income.

The day-to-day management of prostitution thus relies on the subcontracting of tasks to a plurality of actors, who either charge for them individually or have a stake in them. As with financial products that have different return prospects, victims’ debts can be exchanged or shared. Through tontines, some victims can simultaneously conduct their activities and raise

⁷⁰ Irene Peano, “Migrant Nigerian women in bonded sexual labour. The subjective effects of criminalisation and structural suspicion, beyond the trafficking paradigm”, *Africa e Mediterraneo*, 79, 2013.

⁷¹ Elodie Aparé, Precious Diagboya and Vanessa Simoni, “‘La prostitution, ça ne tue pas !’ Projets d’ascension sociale familiale dans le contexte de la traite sexuelle (Nigeria-Europe)”, *Politique africaine*, 159 (3), 2020, pp. 51-82.

⁷² Erlend Paasche, May-Lenn Skilbrei and Sine Plambech, “Vulnerable here or there? Examining the vulnerability of victims of human trafficking before and after return”, *Anti-Trafficking Review*, 10, 2018), pp. 34-51.

⁷³ “United we (net)work: an online and offline analysis of Nigerian Women’s clubs”, *IFRA-Nigeria Working Papers Series*, 58, March 2019.

⁷⁴ Corentin Cohen and Precious Diagboya, “Le rôle des acteurs religieux dans la traite d’êtres humains entre le Nigeria et l’Europe”, *Sciences Po-CERI, Observatoire du religieux*, bulletin 18, 2018.

⁷⁵ Omorie Pat Iziengbe, “The economy of international prostitution in Benin and the place of the ‘Purray Boys’”, *IFRA-Nigeria Working Papers Series*, 34, July 2017.

⁷⁶ Interview, November 2017.

⁷⁷ Interviews with victims, Paris, 2018-2019.

money collectively to bring in women to work for them, thereby accelerating the repayment of their debts. The table below does not represent all transactions or give a comprehensive account of the trafficking model, but it does show the range of activities that are necessary to extract a debt. Although Nigerian trafficking is often described in the literature as feminine because of its interest in the figure of the madam, its management relies on male labor. It is therefore a resource for income seekers and members of confraternities. Several interviews and legal files show that the accumulation of these activities allows a form of economic stabilization and can go as far as enrichment.

In a case tried in Lyon, an evangelical pastor assisted by ten Nigerians organized tours for a fake music group, the “Victorious Gospel Band,” to bring women to Europe. Subcontractors oversaw the prostitution of these women on a daily basis, ensuring that the twenty vans used were repaired and made available, as well as surveillance activities and money transfers, etc., thereby managing to earn enough money from the services they offered to develop their own pimping activities. Several of them took advantage of their position to bring in prostitutes from Nigeria, building up a “capital” of several young women working with them, or for them via other subcontractors.

Table 1
Transactions Around Trafficking Activities for Sexual Exploitation

Recruitment and Debt Establishment	Journey to Europe	Prostitution Activities in Europe
Recruitment of women through paid intermediaries.	“Troleys” and accompaniment of women in Nigeria.	Provision of housing with electricity and food.
Taking an oath at a traditional temple, which gives rise to payment for services and sometimes a debt share.	Intermediaries facilitating border crossings, payments of customs and police forces.	Payment to an intermediary who monitors and protects prostitution activities.
Acquisition of passports, original or counterfeit travel documents through specialized intermediaries and bribes.	“Connection houses” in certain cities (Agadez, Sebbha) and accompaniment, local surveillance.	Payment of intermediaries for collecting money from prostitution and transferring it.
Possibly obtaining a visa and payment of a bribe in a European consulate.	Paying a smuggler or accompanying him just before the crossing from Libya.	Renting parking spaces, vans and/or prostitution sites with the associated “fees”.
Transfer by public transport to a house where the victims are grouped, for example in the vicinity of Lagos.	In Italy or Greece, exiting or escaping from the camp and bypassing biometric registration via bribes to the police force.	Payment of a financial intermediary for money transfer via Money Gram & Western Union or “euro to euro”, informal system.
	Travel logistics to reach the city of prostitution in Europe with accompaniment at each step.	Money laundering.
	Accompaniment for registration of asylum requests and medical and social appointments.	Extorting victims.
	Purchase of a written asylum application.	Producing fake documents or scamming victims online, promising to pay their debts or to access official documents..

Source: Corentin Cohen, based on interviews with victims, actors within these networks

Membership in a confraternity appears to play a role in accessing these networks due to the relationships of trust it facilitates, enabling members of the same confraternity to subcontract and sell services to each other. However, the money generated by prostitution only flows between members, not through or to the organization. Confraternity members and police officers interviewed all agree that, even in cases involving the transfer and laundering of trafficking proceeds to Nigeria, no profits were passed on to any entity or third party representing a confraternity.⁷⁸

The confraternity serves as a network facilitating interactions between members. In a city in eastern France in 2018, one member of a confraternity served as an anchor for a gang of Nigerians from the same confraternity who had arrived from Italy with women whose prostitution they oversaw on the street and in apartments. This member, who was not involved in illegal activities, hoped to take over the leadership of the group from another member of the confraternity who was bringing women in from Italy. After operating for several months and benefiting from a partnership with the owner of a local hair salon who provided housing, in the end the gang disappeared overnight, probably moving to another city.

Has the increasing involvement of members of confraternities in Nigerian trafficking enabled them to handle the prostitution market? The political economy of Nigerian trafficking has been transformed in recent years with reduced debts and the evolution of certain costs, such as those involving migration, rising from 8,000 to 10,000 euros for air travel with a passport at the end of the 2000s, to 3,000 or 4,000 euros for the migration route via Niger and Libya, or via Morocco. The size of the debt, which could reach 50,000 or 60,000 euros, is now estimated at around 20,000 or 30,000 euros, reflecting a shortening of exploitation periods.

At the same time, in 2018 the Oba of Benin, the traditional authority in Edo State, vetoed the oaths taken before Ayelala temples and cancelled debts contracted by trafficking victims, contributing to a decrease in the madams' hold over them.⁷⁹ In addition, with restrictions on access to the migration route through Libya due to the civil war, the number of new arrivals has decreased since 2016. From then on, the issue was no longer to bring in women from Nigeria, but rather to control prostitution and attract those who wished to free themselves from their madams. Some members of confraternities are therefore competing with the latter in controlling debts and exploiting the women,⁸⁰ taking advantage of their role as boyfriends or partners to profit from the income they generate, and possibly increase the number of women they exploit. But this dynamic does not lead to a disruption of the market. Victims who have paid their debts rarely wish to continue their activities. Furthermore, while some women may take advantage of matrimonial alliance strategies, they might prefer to run their own businesses and become madams themselves.

⁷⁸ Court records and interviews with French and Dutch police sources, 2021.

⁷⁹ Interviews with support groups and social services in various French cities, 2019-2020.

⁸⁰ Interviews with victims and social workers in France, 2019-2021.

The Confraternities' Involvement in Illegal Activities Depends on the Context and Territory

In Europe, confraternities cannot speak and mobilize on behalf of youth. They evolve according to constraints in the territories in which they operate, where they lack political protections and often operate within pre-existing informal or illegal markets.

In Sao Paulo, too, the trajectories of Nigerian men and confraternities are indissociable from this context. Many of the Nigerian migrants interviewed between 2015 and 2018 arrived in Brazil without visas, via Ecuador, with the prospect of getting work on construction sites related to the 2014 soccer World Cup and the 2016 Olympics. But some of them found themselves in great financial difficulty, with no income or means to return to Nigeria. This was a godsend for the confraternities, notably Black Axe and Maphite,⁸¹ who took advantage of their precarity to develop networks for recruiting mules to transport cocaine at lower than the prevailing cost at the time.⁸² Since this initial research, the role of networks of Nigerian middlemen and recruiters in transiting mules from Latin America to Europe through Brazilian hotels and travel agencies has been highlighted. These mules, now recruited in Venezuela or among Venezuelan refugees in Brazil, leave the country via the border and the city of Boa Vista (Roraima State), then take the road to Guyana and Suriname, where they ingest drugs before heading to Cayenne to fly to Paris and Holland⁸³. Some of the profiles identified suggest that the main actors in this network are members of confraternities. They work in connection with other countries in Latin America and Asia, notably through confraternity members affiliated with evangelical churches⁸⁴.

Conversely, in Benin City in the mid-2010s, the Black Axe was reportedly involved in territorial struggles for control of several parking areas and the income they generate. Members of the confraternity then opposed the election of one of the candidates for governor. They had been recruited by one of his competitors⁸⁵ in exchange for maintaining control over the parking access market, in which members of other confraternities, who also owned parking spaces and garages, had a direct interest. This partnership involved the payment of funds but was directly managed by the group leader in agreement with the zone leader. The recruited members in this group, which could be described as a gang, therefore had no personal ties to politicians. They sometimes worked with other individuals and thugs who did not belong to the confraternity, which led to internal tensions regarding sharing the money paid by the politicians.

⁸¹ Maphite opened a chapter in the city in 2014.

⁸² Corentin Cohen, "Development of the Brazilian drug market toward Africa: myths, evidence and theoretical questions", *Journal of Illicit Economies and Development*, 1 (2), 2019, pp. 134-144.

⁸³ <https://alianza.shorthandstories.com/MULAS-Una-red-nigeriana-recluta-a-venezolanos-para-llevar-droga-a-Europa/index.html>

⁸⁴ Interview with Uche Tobias, April 2021.

⁸⁵ Interview with a member of the group in Benin City, December 2017.

SPREADING OUT TO REPRODUCE A CONSERVATIVE ORDER?

African states have implemented a number of strategies to maintain control over their diasporas, including allowing dual citizenship since the 2000s, and reaffirming and expanding voting rights for non-resident citizens. In Nigeria, renewed interest in the diaspora under President Obasanjo (1999-2007) resulted in a new focus on the “lost and marginalized children”, who were not contributing to the national wealth, in an attempt to secure remittances.⁸⁶ The confraternities appear to be involved in this attempt by elites to capture wealth from the diaspora’s activities. While they claim pan-Africanist ideologies, whether their members play up their fame as DJs or assert their involvement in a form of empowerment meant to enrich them, they are a political instrument reinforcing a conservative social order. The confraternities cement relationships within the diaspora and provide a kind of youth supervision, ultimately contributing to the reproduction of Nigerian moral and social institutions.

From Street Ethos to Notability, a Difficult Climb

In principle, members of confraternities can have access to sources of income and a network of solidarity that help them to become emancipated. But “soldiers” at the bottom of the hierarchy or those who have been initiated illicitly remain subordinates. They continue to be dependent on their relationships with the big men of the confraternities, who are not bound by the latter’s rules.

• Street Ethos and Illicit Insiders

In Nigeria, confraternities connect elites with a portion of the middle class that has access to higher education, members of lower social extraction and thugs. In Benin City, a member of the Black Axe described a structure organized around “his group leader and the zone leader,” a far cry from the organization’s official organizational chart, but considers the existence of different categories of members to be more significant.⁸⁷ In his view, the latter can be divided into two groups: the “politicals”, university students and elites, also referred to as “socials” (who are “within society”), and the “streets”, or “thugs”. According to him, while the most socially integrated individuals often occupy managerial positions, relationships between members can lead to alliances and even reversals of this hierarchy, as a thug or street person can become a “leader” and “command individuals from higher social backgrounds.” Weekly meetings organized in bars and sometimes hotels are the window for these meetings and exchanges

⁸⁶ Okechukwu C. Iheduru, “African states, global migration, and transformations in citizenship politics”, *Citizenship Studies*, 15 (2), 2011, pp. 181-203, 185.

⁸⁷ Interview, December 2017.

with the “socials”; despite different identifications and statuses, there would appear to be a fluidity of roles, certain positions requiring one to be ruthless, while others call upon so-called political qualities. Furthermore, the “politicians” must constantly show their shrewdness and ability to maintain their status. These actors make use of the disorder they engineer against the state, particularly to become involved in it themselves or to restructure client networks. During elections, for example, if they support a local politician, “[...] they must make sure they have enough money to feed members of the group”: otherwise, they run the risk of others taking up arms to disrupt the election, making things difficult for the leader or leading to his removal from office, with violence serving as a political resource and bargaining chip.

In Europe, due to the migratory context, the stratification and relationships between illicit members, streets and socials appear more rigid. Among the Maphites, this situation is further accentuated by the fact that, according to the constitution of the confraternity, members can be “conditionally recruited” by the host family. Others spend at least a year with “temporary status,” starting with a period of 120 days, which enables them to be “educated,” followed by a period of 90 days, at the end of which the lieutenants must seek the advice of the members, with a vote at the end of another 120 days.⁸⁸ Furthermore, in order to circumvent the prohibitions on recruitment and control mechanisms put in place by the confraternities in Nigeria, many migrants have been baptized or blended into their European branches,⁸⁹ i.e., they have joined confraternities in Europe or worked for established members of them, have been tested as “soldiers” for several months, introduced to the confraternity’s rituals, but have no status within the organization. These initiates are referred to as “corner bams” in the Black Axe.⁹⁰ This kind of illicit enlistment has created a highly exposed subcategory of affiliates. While not all of these new members have the same level of protection, depending on the personal ties they may have formed, they are expected to respect the framework of the organization, of which their leaders are the guarantors, translators, and depositories. One leader felt obliged to remind some new members, who were in his apartment at the time, of the organization’s rules and hierarchy, after asking them to think “about what they can do for Eiye, and not the other way around”:

“Note that the Ibaka’s function allows him to pronounce a sentence on one who has failed... His word is as good as an order. And is to be respected. He is the “world Ibaka”. But I imagine that for all the flying birds, the rules were fully explained to them before entering the Eiye.”⁹¹

Moreover, the status of these insiders is incompatible with long-term upward mobility or enrollment in the organization. The Black Axe constitution states that its members must be graduates or enrolled in a university, and the Green Bible stresses that registered members must have a university degree “within six years.” Even if these requirements are not enforced, they serve to exclude and filter entry into the group. For example, to become a Maphite chapter

⁸⁸ Rules and constitution of the confraternity in the *Green Bible*.

⁸⁹ Interviews with members of confraternities in eastern France, 2018-2019.

⁹⁰ Interview, Uche Tobias, April 2021.

⁹¹ Recording cited in a court file examined.

leader, one must have “a job, [a] business, and [a] resident permit in that country.”⁹² Some informants added that members are urged to have a family and a clean criminal record. This injunction seems contradictory to the demands made on “soldiers” and “streets”, especially those involved in illicit activities.

- **Notability, Dynasties and Declines**

This stratification is reinforced by an imbalance between old-timers and newcomers. The oldest members, often in Europe for fifteen years or so, play a central role in the confraternities, moving from one country to another, using their legitimacy and experience to try to assert the organization’s predominance, sometimes for their own benefit. The trajectories of some leading members show that careers within confraternities and circulation are becoming more and more international. But it is hard to say whether this process could translate into competition between overseas and Nigerian members, like the two soccer teams at the Maphites’ forty-year convention in 2017. The National Head of the Black Axe is said to have been a zone leader in South Africa, while the general leading the Maphites in Europe is said to be a former Don from the Ugbowo area of Benin City, where the university is located, as well as from Ekpoma (Edo State), sent to Italy to organize the brotherhood before being expelled for recruiting new members.

These senior executives profess solidarity among members, while reaffirming dynastic rationales. Some files and interviews show that, as with trafficking for sexual exploitation, brothers sometimes share an area, or cousins manage several nests together in Europe, asserting the rights of “big families” to their state or region. Caesar, the vice-president of the Maphites, played on the ambiguity around this solidarity in front of the members of the Italian “families”:

“In my family we are four brothers and three sisters, all four of us are members of the Maphites [applause], my other three brothers live in Canada, I live more in Nigeria, and if you’re in Nigeria you can come and visit me, as you are my brothers, so if you come to Nigeria, you have a place to stay [...]”⁹³

Some zones and chapters contribute to building notability. For the Black Axe and Supreme Eiyé confraternities, London zones are considered the most prestigious because they are the oldest and most established.⁹⁴ For the Maphites, on the other hand, it is the chapter heads in Germany who are regularly involved in resolving disputes in other European countries. This notability is not a reflection of an area’s “attractiveness”, but of a hierarchy created while it was being structured. Because of higher potential profits, the Scandinavian zones, particularly in Norway and Sweden, have become the most attractive⁹⁵.

It appears from several court files examined that most of the tensions and interventions of the parent organization or of notables relate to the actions of this “nobility,” and in particular to the illicit registration of new members in Europe and their appointment to positions of

⁹² *Green Bible*, p. 23.

⁹³ Recording cited in a survey examined.

⁹⁴ Interviews with members of these confraternities, 2017-2018.

⁹⁵ Interview Uche Tobias, April 2021.

responsibility. These lapses sometimes lead to expulsions, suspensions or dismissals of executives. For instance, the Maphite Don in charge of Italy was expelled for supporting and organizing illegal affiliations for his benefit, while Eiye leaders of families in southern Italy were suspended for the same reasons.⁹⁶ As several internal documents attest, the confraternities' international "notables" were highly in demand for managing local elections of members, some of whom were competing with each other in the 2010s. According to one informant, these elections were regularly disrupted by internal "coup attempts," including assassinations of recalcitrant figures or the overthrow of figures appointed by the international organization but lacking local legitimacy.

Maintaining Social Control and Capturing Income

Beyond their status and the organization's hierarchical structure, the big men seem to seek control and management of members' individual activities, often more for their own personal benefit than for that of the confraternity.

In principle, members of confraternities are expected to pay dues and have equal rights and duties. The Green Bible states that "if anyone has any business or earnings, he should reserve 10 percent for the association," and the confraternity's 2017 and 2019 conventions stressed that members should pay monthly dues, as these favored pro-rated payments to the international structure. But, in the case of the Black Axe in Benin City, as one member specified:

"They collect money, every months, or so... But it depends on your relationship with the treasurer, with the chief. It can be paid annually, and what you pay is also proportional, you can always negotiate... I haven't paid anything for a long time and then I paid to support a member who had health issues."⁹⁷

Requests to members go far beyond the issue of membership fees and also involve their activities, leading to a form of clientelism. Confraternities established in Europe try to develop a monopoly of activities in order to access the income. Many executives force members to work among themselves, forbidding them to collaborate with those in other confraternities. In trafficking cases in Ile-de-France brought to light in a court file, for instance, madams and their husbands repeatedly opposed prostitutes who interacted with members of other confraternities, to the point of threatening to kill them. According to one victim of a prostitution ring, "If the husband is Eiye, she has to use it, because she has to follow the rules. If her boyfriend is Aye, she will follow Aye's rules."⁹⁸ This rationale is echoed in many of the testimonies.⁹⁹

These rivalries sometimes lead to violence. But the use of violence and the confraternity's support also depend on client relationships. A conversation about a cannabis exchange between members of the Black Axe and Maphite confraternities confirms how selective and arbitrary

⁹⁶ Interview, Naples, and internal documents from the organizations.

⁹⁷ Interview, Benin City, December 2017.

⁹⁸ Interview, November 2017.

⁹⁹ Interviews with victims of trafficking, Paris, 2018-2019.

the mechanisms of solidarity are within confraternities, mobilized depending on the interests of their “leaders”. Here, a leader has decided not to protect a member who traded with non-members after he cut him out of the deal:

A: Me, my girlfriend and the JB's went to the place where they had called us and someone came and took half of the stuff [code for narcotics].

B: What kind?.

A: Wood [code for cannabis]. .

B: You know that's my specialty, why didn't you call me?.

A: Uncle... uncle....

B: But why didn't you call me before initiating the deal?.

A: We called C and D. [...].

B: You know there's a law in the organization that anyone who does business must do so only....

A: I know, I know...

B: E isn't a Maphite .

A: E and F's conditions were good, three and a half (350 euros), JB's wife was supposed to take the money above the store [code]...

These tensions run through all confraternities, giving rise to varying perceptions of the solidarity and protections that are meant to be afforded. In another intercepted telephone exchange, for instance, when a member of the Supreme Eiye was swindled by a member of the Black Axe with whom he had worked, his supervisor decided not to assist him. Although he personally had profited from his activities with other confraternity members, he described him as a renegade who didn't follow the rules and chose not to get involved in a conflict with another confraternity despite the loss of his affiliate.¹⁰⁰

Reproducing Social and Neotraditional Institutions

The space of transnational sociability created by the confraternities has contributed not only to producing social relations and hierarchies, but also to projecting elites and power structures of southern Nigeria, and particularly in Edo State, where it tends to cement and reinforce existing neo-traditional and religious or magical institutions, due to the centrality of their “shrines” (dedicated to a deity), which play a leading role in the administration of traditional justice.¹⁰¹ These institutions appear to be in a co-construction relationship with the Nigerian state. In consequence, the space created by the confraternities appears to be characterized by the limited visibility of ethnic or religious categories, overshadowed by the geographies of traditional powers.

Meetings organized by the confraternities in France play a role in structuring a space of sociability around Nigerian society's moral authorities and institutions. Visits from their “honorable” members show that they are first received as “social” figures. This is the case, for example, of

¹⁰⁰ Recording cited in a court file examined.

¹⁰¹ Corentin Cohen and Precious Diagboya, “Le rôle des acteurs religieux dans la traite d'êtres humains entre le Nigeria et l'Europe”, art. cited.

a pastor established in the United States who has his own foundation and has been invited by the members in that capacity. After being consecrated a traditional chief, he was more recently a candidate for the post of governor of a state in southern Nigeria. Such events around pastors or traditional leaders appear to be common. Furthermore, when association meetings are held in Europe, members of the Eiyé or NBM confraternities pose on social networks, presenting themselves in traditional dress or at the royal palace in Benin City and plan weddings marked by these referents rather than by ethnic categories. Moreover, the initiation rites and ceremonies the confraternities organize, film and broadcast on social networks, like the songs they write, participate in a reaffirmation of the magical-spiritual power of these traditional authorities.

The network developed by the confraternities has created links within society and the diaspora. The last president of the Maphite confraternity was a lawyer who advised several states in southern Nigeria and was a senior executive in the Nigerian Bar Association. In Nigeria, the confraternities' involvement in maintaining order and the role of straddling is highlighted by the trajectories of militia groups in the Niger Delta. The case of Ateke Tom, leader of the Ijaw militia and the Niger Delta Vigilante armed group working against oil facilities, is emblematic. According to his former comrade-in-arms and then rival Dokubo Asari, Ateke Tom integrated some of his militiamen into the Icelanders, a confraternity that grew out of the alliance of a branch of Viking descendant groups with a branch of the Klansmen Konfraternity. The confraternity is particularly active in Rivers State, where Ateke Tom was inducted as a traditional leader in 2016 in the presence of several governors.¹⁰² But some confraternities appear to have deeper ties to traditional and spiritual justice systems, recognized as moral authorities by members. In Edo, for instance, this so-called native justice system and Ayelala temples were used to seal the debts of trafficking victims.¹⁰³ In the late 1970s, when the Black Axe was created, traditional authorities fought against their marginalization. In his inaugural speech, Oba Erediauwa (in power from 1979 to 2016), lamented political decline and proposed to "restore Edo tradition,"¹⁰⁴ announcing a reinvolvement in the management of local order through traditional justice, while taking advantage of the fact that the reorganization of local powers by the British in 1935 had made it the Sole Native Authority. In a context where traditional societies were losing influence, the confraternities may have taken part in reasserting this power among the youth and constituted a tool for restructuring that justice by securing what would later become an armed wing. Stephen Ellis notes that the NBM oath makes explicit reference to Oba Akenzua II, Oba from 1933 to 1978. In this sense, the NBM's international committee has recently affirmed its loyalty to these traditional authorities on several occasions. As a result, several Black Axis figures have reinvested their money and influence in "buying" the titles of traditional leaders in Edo State.

This movement also affects politics, helping to capture income and involve confraternity members in the governance of institutions and spaces, especially urban ones. In 2017, the Maphites' annual meeting took place on sports fields at the government house of one of the Niger Delta states. A

¹⁰² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YdjWR638COo>.

¹⁰³ "Sustenance of sex trafficking in Edo State: the combined effects of oath taking, transnational silence and migration imaginaries on trafficked women from Edo State", *IFRA-Nigeria Working Papers Series*, 56, March 2019.

¹⁰⁴ "Traditional rulers cannot afford to be left behind. Gradually by political evolution and a series of legislations, traditional powers have whittled down; first the legislative; then the judicial and finally the administrative." David Edebiri, *Moonlight at Noon*, Benin City, Allen Publishers, 2004, pp. 30-37.

former governor of Alambra, who was a presidential adviser, was then introduced as a member when being welcomed to deliver a speech. In Edo, a leading figure in the confraternity, honored at an annual meeting with the organization's Godfather Award, headed the state's Anti-Pipeline Vandalization Taskforce, which employs vigilantes to patrol the oil infrastructure. The sphere of migration to Europe and repatriations to Nigeria organized under European Union-backed schemes have also been taken up by members of the confraternity. Another Godfather Award winner – a prominent pastor – was coordinator of the Benin City IDP and refugee center and a hospice for orphans in the city's historic center. And the Black Axe has reportedly set up a program for refugee resettlement, creating a center in Benin City with a stated budget of \$1.38 million.¹⁰⁵

The confraternities therefore work in synergy with the main institutions of power, procuring income from refugees and returnees in Europe as well as in Nigeria. A few years before his arrest in Holland in 2019 and unaware that the police were listening in, the vice-president of the Maphites declared to his members gathered in an Italian hotel that his confraternity was going to get the post of commissioner in charge of the diaspora:

“We are growing in Edo State, and with the grace of God we will be in power there within three years [applause]...Icansayforsurethatwewillhaveacommissioner,amayor,andothermembersofgovernment... I'm sure most of you are from Edo State, so if you go back to Nigeria and you have any problems with the Nigerian police, you can be sure that someone will be there to give you a hand and solve your problem.”

CONCLUSION

While European legal and police approaches have helped produce forms of criminalization of Nigerian migration, the discourses they relay, echoed by the media, increase the deep social stratification within confraternities by laying the burden on the most vulnerable individuals. Contrary to what is relayed in the existing literature, which focuses on women and trafficking, Nigerian migration to Europe is predominantly male and, since 2014, increasingly young. Due to their lack of resources, precarity, and intense administrative barriers, Nigerian men who have crossed the Mediterranean to Italy and France are forced to develop strategies for survival and access to informal or illegal work. As we have seen, it is most often legal entities in the construction, restaurant and hotel sectors that have taken advantage of the precarity of this workforce.

The expansion of confraternities in Europe should be analyzed with this in mind. They do not recruit new members, but their executives illicitly take advantage of the latter's differences in status and of the workforce they claim to emancipate. The expansion of certain confraternities in Europe in the early 2000s, in particular Black Axe, Supreme Eiyé and Maphite, marks a new phase in their development, as it was carried out in a disorganized and conflictual manner, according to their members' movements. The mechanisms for controlling recruitment, intended to reaffirm the primacy of these organizations in Nigeria, were circumvented, leading to the emergence of

¹⁰⁵ <https://harpers.org/archive/2019/09/the-black-axe-nigeria-neo-black-movement-africa/>.

member sub-categories and a European elite in the confraternities. This stratification reinforces already existing tensions between “street” members, often clandestine, and “social” or “political” ones, who constitute a set of notables seeking to turn the confraternities’ rules to their advantage and procure its members’ income.

The dynamics observed therefore vary depending on the history of each confraternity, the (legal and illegal) markets and the territories in which they are located. In some contexts, such as Benin City, the confraternities participate in the management and politics of certain areas through alliances with politicians, jointly exploiting urban income. In Brazil, their members have been involved in the use of migrants as mules, later moving on to the exploitation of Venezuelan refugees. As for the trafficking of Nigerian women for sexual exploitation in Europe, our research has shown, contrary to the existing literature, that it relies on subcontractors and individual entrepreneurs, including members of confraternities, without the latter as institutions having a stake in it. On the other hand, these activities have enabled their members to grow richer and show their increasing involvement in the trade. These differences need to be considered. Like the works on Latin and Central American gangs, future ethnographic research should be carried out on a specific territory, in a comparative manner between confraternities, and between European and African spaces. This approach would be all the more useful as it would shed light on the way in which the confraternities’ codes and practices may or may not structure the daily life of small groups of members marked by sharp differences in status. In order to better understand these power dynamics, it is particularly important to ask whether and how ethnicity and religion are mobilized “on a grassroots level” in the everyday life of confraternities. As this study has shown, the latter’s primary determinants and factors of identification are first and foremost linked to so-called traditional practices (Edo or Delta). It is also important to document the magical aspect of these societies, too often essentialized or the subject of rhetoric about folklore, in order to grasp the way in which it contributes to establishing power and group dynamics within them, particularly in the face of “enemies”.

In the absence of direct state control over its citizens, the confraternities contribute to projecting institutions abroad that supervise youth and to reaffirming the power of traditional authorities, as well as of religious and magical ones, with whom they have historical ties. The revolutionary language of their elites has reinforced and exported a conservative order to the diaspora. Rhetoric about emancipation, solidarity and brotherhood among members has enabled them to justify stark inequalities in status and contributed to reproducing this social hierarchy outside the country. In Europe, this language masks the central role of individual capital, the importance of notabilities, families, and career paths that remain dynastic, forged of alliances and a co-construction of power with traditional and religious authorities (pastors). These social institutions, churches, traditional authorities, and secret societies glean income from the diaspora, whether within the Nigerian government, on its territory, or directly in Europe. As their members play prominent political roles in Nigeria, a study of the markets and legal and illegal activities to which the confraternities are linked would provide a deeper understanding of how they fit into networks of clientelism.

*Translated from the French by **William Snow** on february 2022*

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