

Research Article

Nigerian Organized Criminal Groups in Italy: Secrecy, Hierarchy, Rules and Conflicts

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This paper analyses Nigerian criminal groups in Italy using a theoretical perspective based on the literature on secret societies, where a criminal organization is a "judicial order" with its own rules and codes of conduct for its members. The aim of the paper is to shed light on how these criminal groups are structured, the bonds they maintain, the rules they follow, and the discrepancies between those rules and the actual behaviour of members. Additionally, it examines the strengths and weaknesses of these organizations as criminal entities. To address these research questions, we mainly analysed judicial proceedings from the past two decades involving Nigerian individuals convicted of mafia association under the Italian penal code. The paper is divided into three sections: the first introduces the research questions, theoretical framework, sources, and methodology; the second presents the research findings related to the internal organization, recruitment, rules, and conflicts both within and between the criminal groups studied; the final section discusses the strengths and weaknesses of Nigerian criminal organizations operating in Italy.

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Introduction

Foreign organized criminal groups have been present in Italy for decades. Since the 1990s, top law enforcement agencies, including the Italian National Anti-Mafia and Counter-Terrorism Public Prosecutor, have established dedicated units to combat foreign organized crime^[1]. Much of the research on Nigerian crime in Italy focuses on the sexual exploitation of trafficked women by their "mamans"^{[2][3][4][5][6][7][8][9]}. However, there is less research on the organization and internal structures of Nigerian

criminal groups. Studies on this specific topic include reports from national law enforcement and works by researchers, journalists, police officers, and prosecutors^{[10][11][12][13][14][15][16]}.

The first Italian study from the early 2000s describes Nigerian criminal groups as "horizontal rather than vertical" categorizing them as organized crime rather than mafia associations^[10]. In contrast, a 2001 Anti-Mafia Investigation Directorate report states that Nigerian criminal groups are characterized by the "tribal origins of their members, with a vertical structure led by one or two key figures"^[11]. A more recent report suggests these groups combine a hierarchical internal organization with autonomy within a transnational network, though it provides little detail on their internal structure or relationship with the broader network^[12]. Some research argues that Nigerian criminal groups fit the Italian penal code's definition of mafia-type associations but offers limited explanation of the ties binding members, referring vaguely to familism or tribalism^[13]. Other studies examine foreign criminal groups in Italy with limited focus on Nigerians^[14], while some highlight specific groups like Black Axe, Eiye, and Maphite^{[15][16]}.

Research questions, theoretical framework, and sources

This paper focuses on the organizational structure, internal rules, and conflicts of Nigerian criminal groups, without addressing their criminal activities, as this has been covered in a previous publication^[17]. The research explores the following questions: What kinds of bonds exist within these groups? How are they organized? Do they have rules of conduct and what discrepancies exist between these rules and the behaviour of actual members? As criminal organizations, what are their strengths and weaknesses?

Theoretically, we draw on the sociology of secret societies^{[18][19][20][21][22]} and mafia associations, which are viewed as organizations with their own "judicial order"^{[23][24][25][26]}. These criminal organizations establish formal rules of conduct that members are required to follow. In this sense, mafia associations are considered a distinct "system of laws"^{[27][28][29][30]}. These rules primarily focus on maintaining the secrecy of the organization and ensuring its continued existence. When a social group becomes secretive, secrecy itself defines the relationships among members and fosters trust within the group. Protecting this secrecy creates a new form of moral bond and collective discipline among members^[19].

In terms of the distinction between primary and secondary social groups, secret societies are secondary associations that aim to establish themselves as distinct entities, separate from the broader society into which their members were born. To differentiate themselves from their social context, secret societies

develop new foundation myths, specific symbols, and codes known only to insiders. The strong sense of identity that members gain from belonging to an exclusive group (which sets them apart from ordinary outsiders) needs to be offset by the creation of a central authority to enforce internal rules and preserve the secrecy of the society. As George Simmel noted, this need for order and control explains why secret societies require an internal hierarchical structure^[18].

The analysis of Nigerian criminal groups focuses on the following elements: a) organizational structure; b) ties between members; c) the rules governing the organization; and d) discrepancies between the rules and the actual behaviour of members. In this context, the social structure of these groups has two aspects: a regulatory system that outlines the rules to be followed, and the group's actual behaviour^[31]. Additionally, we examine each criminal organization's ability to confront major threats, such as member disloyalty, internal conflicts, conflicts with other criminal organizations, and law enforcement. To uncover discrepancies between rules and actual conduct, we analysed violations of rules and internal conflicts within the Nigerian criminal organizations. Externally, we examined conflicts between different criminal organizations and the strategies these groups employ in response to law enforcement actions.

To address the research questions, we collected a series of judicial proceedings from the last two decades involving Nigerian individuals convicted of mafia association under Article 416-bis of the Italian Penal Code. Importantly, we focused only on judiciary files concerning mafia-related crimes. Our aim was not to analyse why certain accusations were classified as mafia crimes while others were not. We were not interested in the legal reasoning behind court decisions, such as why some cases led to a conviction for mafia association while others were downgraded to simple criminal association (under Article 416 of the Italian Penal Code). Judicial reasoning primarily seeks to determine individual criminal responsibility. However, as social researchers, our goal was to gain an overall understanding of these organizations, independent of individual criminal responsibility from a legal perspective. In this regard, the analysis of judiciary files served as a qualitative source, offering both advantages and limitations typical of qualitative research methods^[32].

Using an inductive methodology, we interpreted the results of the judicial files, while acknowledging that this documentation does not represent the full scope of prosecutorial investigations into Nigerian organized crime in Italy over the past two decades. Specifically, we focused on mafia-related proceedings issued by the courts in Turin, Naples, and Palermo. In most cases, the accused received an initial guilty verdict for their involvement in Nigerian criminal associations. However, not all individuals involved in these proceedings were Nigerian; some were from other African countries, while others – such as Italians,

Romanians, Tunisians, and Moroccans – were drug dealers who were not affiliated with Nigerian criminal groups. In total, 136 people were involved in the proceedings, including 131 individuals (125 men and 6 women) from Sub-Saharan African countries who were identified as members of Nigerian criminal associations, though they held different roles within the organizations. A more detailed analysis focused on the 125 men, as we found no evidence that women were allowed to become affiliates of the criminal groups, along with the events described in the judicial proceedings.

Nigerian criminal groups as secret cults

Nigerian criminal groups are often referred to in specialized literature as "secret cults" due to their cultural ties to occult and esoteric practices^[33]. These associations originated in Nigerian universities in the 1960s as student self-help confraternities but evolved into criminal organizations over the following decades, partly due to their collaboration with the ruling dictatorship until the 1990s^{[34][35][36][37]}. Among the 98 cults banned under Nigeria's 2004 "Secret Cult and Similar Activities Prohibition Law"^[38], this paper focuses on those operating in Italy, for which we have gathered detailed information: Black Axe, founded at the University of Benin (Edo State) in 1977^[39]; Maphite, established in 1978 at the University of Benin City; and Eiye, founded at the University of Ibadan, Oyo State^{[40][41]}.

The main research findings are summarized below:

1) Each cult operating in Italy tends to replicate the organizational structure from its homeland. For example, Maphite, whose acronym stands for "Maximum Academic Performance Highly Intellectuals Train Executioner," is internationally led by the Supreme Maphite Council based in Edo State, Nigeria. According to a former member turned justice collaborator, the council is composed of "graduates who hold political and administrative positions in Nigeria"^[42]. Council members serve for life, and to join this top body, individuals must have previously held management positions within the organization, either in Nigeria or abroad. Below the Supreme Maphite Council is the International Don (referred to as DIC: Don In Council), who oversees the entire organization for a two-year term. Subordinate to the Don are several key positions, including the Vice-Don, who acts as the Don's deputy, the Chairman, who presides over meetings, the Announcer (also called the Fire), and the Vice-Announcer, both of whom are responsible for disseminating information about upcoming meetings, and the Checker, who is in charge of security and leads a trusted group tasked with protecting the leadership in Nigeria.

In Italy, the Maphite leadership structure mirrors that of Nigeria. The top authority is the Don (also called DIC), who reports to the International Don and oversees members in Italy. Supporting him are the Vice-Don, the Chairman, the Announcer, the Vice-Announcer, and the Checker. The Supreme Maphite Council is replicated in Italy as the Council of Professors (COP), a group of lifelong members who hold high status within the organization and provide counsel to the Don while overseeing the behaviour of all affiliates. Alongside the DIC and COP is the Coordinator in Council (CIC), an executive body composed of figures such as the Chairman and others.

At the local level, in cities such as Turin, Novara, and Alessandria (Piedmont region), where Maphite operates, the local leader is known as the Coordinator, supported by the Vice-Coordinator, the Main Chief (who leads smaller areas), and then the Fire and the Checker^[42]. The significance of each criminal branch abroad varies depending on its size and financial resources. A former Maphite member explained: "Before a Maphite group can be recognized as a 'family,' it is called a 'forum.' To be recognized as a 'forum,' it must have at least 250 affiliates and €250,000 in funds, which are collected through member contributions. If successful, the forum can then become a 'family,' requiring at least 1,000 affiliates and a budget of at least €1 million"^[42]. These conditions must be met for the Supreme Maphite Council to recognize new national cells abroad.

The organizational structures of Black Axe and Eiye are similar, though they use different titles and symbols. At the top of Black Axe is the National Head, followed by the Spiritual, who advises the Head on disciplinary matters. Beneath them are the Head of the Council, made up of senior members, the Ministry of Defence, which oversees the Butchers (members tasked with protecting the cult using weapons), the Financial Chief, responsible for the organization's finances, the Chief Eye, who manages security during meetings, and the Cryer, who announces meetings (referred to as "Programmes"). Ordinary members, known as Lords, occupy the lower ranks. In Black Axe, a "Zone" refers to a country, while a "Forum" refers to a local chapter, such as a city. Members greet each other with "Aye, Axeman," and their symbol is a black axe, representing black pride and resistance to white racism^{[43][44][45][15]}.

Eiye's hierarchy is also comparable. At the top is the Head, called the Eye or Ebaka, who is supported by the Council of Holders, a group responsible for resolving internal disputes and advising the Ebaka. Below the Ebaka are the Ostrich, the deputy head who leads meetings in the Ebaka's absence; the Flight Coordinator, who organizes meetings; the Engine (also called the Infantry), who leads punitive missions and manages security; the Eagle, who monitors internal affairs and reports to the Ebaka; the Pecker, who collects membership dues; and the Dove, who announces meetings. These roles are replicated across

different regions: the International World Body operates in Nigeria and abroad, overseeing the Italian World Body. According to a former Eiye member, the Italian World Body "coordinates all nests [local units, such as cities] and is also referred to as the Ebaka, which is the head of all local Ebaka"^[46].

2) Each cult operating in Italy adheres to the same hierarchical structure as the organization founded in Nigeria. Apart from cases discussed later in the section on internal conflicts, every secret cult maintains direct and ongoing communication with its management centre in Nigeria, which issues orders, directives, and strategic guidelines relevant to the branch in Italy. For instance, in 2017, the Eiye management in Europe established a WhatsApp group exclusively for the heads (national Ebaka) of each country, including Italy, Germany, and France, to facilitate information sharing and to keep the leadership in Nigeria updated on developments in Europe^[41].

3) Nigerian cults have a set of rules that members must follow. First and foremost, they are required to maintain secrecy about the organization, and once affiliated, they cannot abandon the cult, as membership is for life^[46]. New members must be introduced by existing affiliates and are expected to respect the hierarchy, demonstrate loyalty to their peers, and comply with internal procedures. This includes allocating a portion of the registration fees collected from new recruits to the governing bodies in Nigeria. All members are also required to pay an annual fee. Information regarding the Maphite indicates that approximately 80% of the collected fees must be transferred to the organization's headquarters in Nigeria. The annual fees vary based on the member's role: lower-level affiliates may pay several hundred euros, while mid-to-high-ranking members can pay up to a thousand euros^[42]. Additionally, attendance at meetings is mandatory^{[44][42]}.

4) All secret cults have an affiliation ritual that recruits must participate in, either willingly or under duress. This ritual involves brutal beatings, where a group of thugs assaults the neophyte to test their physical endurance and to illustrate the consequences of revealing the cult's secrets. The pain experienced during this test symbolizes the death of the old self and the rebirth into a new life as a member of the secret cult^[19].

Below is a summary of the main phases of the Eiye ritual, which took place on October 24, 2017, in a house in Palermo that was wiretapped by the police:

The music abruptly stops, and a bell rings. The local Ebaka, who officiates the ritual, asks, "Who is there?"

The recruit is ordered to step forward. Meanwhile, the music is replaced by a chorus of all affiliates chanting: “Eiye, Eiye...”

The beating of the recruit begins and lasts for about six uninterrupted minutes.

The officiant instructs the recruit to shout “Rugged” (in their internal slang, this term means “strong,” but more specifically, according to a former Eiye member who became a justice collaborator, “rugged” signifies “a brother who has gone through the devil’s passage”^[41]).

The recruit repeats “Rugged” while the others continue to beat him. The officiant asks for the recruit’s name and subsequently gives him a new one.

The oath commences: the officiant pronounces one word at a time, which the novice must repeat. This is the Eiye formula:

“I swear to support the Eiye fraternity morally, spiritually, financially, and in any other way, and if I do not, the ruthless vulture will tear out my two eyes. From today, I swear to support this fraternity with all my heart, with trust, conviction, and brotherhood, and to respect my Ebaka [the boss], my Exco [the executive council], and my godfather [the person who introduced me].”

With his eyes closed, the recruit is forced to drink a concoction (which, in other oaths, such as that of the Maphite, includes alcohol, marijuana, pepper, and onion^[46]).

Immediately afterward, the officiant instructs him to open his eyes and spits the same drink into the recruit’s face. The officiant then asks how many fingers the recruit sees; if the recruit answers incorrectly, he is beaten again.

The officiant proclaims, “All birds [fraternity members] are rugged.” They all respond in unison, “Rugged forever, Rugged forever...”

The officiant concludes, “Ok, boy, fly for your brothers. Now go greet all the members of your brotherhood, one after the other. Rugged brother, you are welcome”^[41].

After the ritual, days or weeks later, the neophyte celebrates his “ritual birthday” with all the brothers because, as a former Eiye member noted, “the birthday is mandatory, as if one were born a second time” (Ivi: 290).⁵⁾

5) Each cult possesses its own cultural and symbolic references, which serve to establish its “history,” “moral and ideal justification,” and, more broadly, its *raison d’être*. For instance, in the Black Axe Statute discovered during a police raid on an affiliate’s residence in Turin in 2003, the cult identifies itself as the

Neo Black Movement of Africa and its members as Axe Men. This movement advocates for solidarity among Black people and promotes peace worldwide. Article 2 of the Statute emphasizes the importance of protecting the interests and well-being of "brothers," asserting that any available resources should be utilized to foster solidarity among Black individuals^[44].

The axe, which corresponds to the number 7 in their internal membership language, symbolizes a tool for breaking the constraints that have historically oppressed Black people around the world. Additionally, July 7 is commemorated as the anniversary of the Black Axe's founding, and it is the day when new member affiliations occur. Members of the Black Axe wear special clothes for this occasion: a black beret with a red line, red t-shirts, and black shoes^{[45][47]}.

The Eiye cult employs avian symbolism to refer to its members. The smallest territorial unit is called a "nest," while larger units are referred to as "aviaries" and "great aviaries." According to a former member who chose to cooperate with the justice system, the Eiye secret cult traces its origins to a Nigerian deity named JekeJeke. Although it lacks specific symbolic numbers, it celebrates its foundation in the eighth month of the year. Members wear blue (representing the sky), yellow (symbolizing eagle claws), and red (representing eagle eyes, which are also depicted on their flag)^[41].

The Maphite's references derive from a text known as the "Green Bible." This document was found in Turin during a police raid on July 18, 2019, at the home of an affiliate who was likely a national leader^[48]. According to a former member, "only a Don [the national or international head] can keep the Green Bible," and upon transferring power to a new Don at the end of his two-year term, he must also pass on the Green Bible^[42]. The opening lines of this document state:

"We represent the Maphite, also known as the Green Circuit Association (GCA). We are the GCA diaspora... The world is our land, and our symbol [a flame held in two upturned palms] represents our African origins... Our actions will influence a significant portion of the nation globally. We are committed to representing the Maphite in all forms of struggle - be it economic, political, military, social, or cultural. We uphold this mission within our destiny to enhance the well-being of our families, our race, and all future generations who will carry forward what we have established through the total liberation of African universities... Every individual wishing to join the Maphite must belong to our African race."^[48]

Maphite members wear green berets and employ songs, verbal and non-verbal signs for recognition, along with specific codes of communication. The Maphite also observes a commemorative day on May 11, honouring all its members who have died in action. This day, known as "5/11," is celebrated in Nigeria and

abroad. In Italy, according to statements from a former Maphite member, numerous affiliations occur on this day. Reports indicate that approximately 150 new affiliations took place in Ferrara in 2012 and in Bologna in 2016 (both cities in the Emilia Romagna region)^[42].

6) All Nigerian cults possess both a secret and a public dimension. The secret aspect is accessible only to members, while the public dimension is managed through social networks and legal channels. The Maphite is publicly known as the Green Circuit Association, and Black Axe is recognized as the Neo Black Movement of Africa – two associations that officially exist. In the summer of 2014, the national board of Eiye in Italy, as part of a broader initiative directed by its headquarters in Nigeria, sought to publicly rebrand all Eiye cells in Europe. They attempted to register as a non-profit organization called the "Aviary Association" in a small municipality in the Veneto region^[41]. However, the distinction between the secret and public dimensions becomes increasingly blurred on social networks. This happens when cult members promote their image through these platforms. For example, on Facebook, the secret cults display their logos, flags, and typical codes of communication, such as greetings and handshakes.

Member profiles and main recruitment criteria

This part focuses on the affiliates of Nigerian secret cults, drawing on elements from judicial proceedings: the age of male members at the start of the investigation, their country of birth, and the criteria for recruitment into these secret societies in Italy. We examined information on 125 males and 6 females, all recognized as part of the Nigerian secret cults. Some women were charged under Penal Code article 416-bis, while others acted as drug couriers or were involved in sexual exploitation in collaboration with the cults. However, we have excluded these 6 women from our calculations regarding the average age of the affiliates and their places of birth, as we found no specific evidence confirming that they were ritually affiliated with the cults. First, the average age of the male affiliates ranges from 26 to 34 years old. Second, the countries of birth of the affiliates indicate that some secret cults recruit not only Nigerians but also individuals from other Sub-Saharan African countries (Table 1).

	M	F	Male average age	Country of birth for males
<i>Turin Tribunal 2007</i>				
Black Axe	6		31.1	All Nigeria
Eiye	14		26.0	1 Sudan, 1 Sierra Leon, 1 Liberia, 11 Nigeria
<i>Turin Tribunal 2016</i>				
Maphite	22		33.4	All Nigeria
Eiye	22		28.4	All Nigeria
<i>Naples Tribunal 2016</i>				
Black Axe	20	5	33.6	4 Liberia, 12 Ghana, 4 Nigeria
<i>Palermo Tribunal 2016</i>				
Black Axe	22	1	30.9	1 Ghana, 21 Nigeria
<i>Palermo Tribunal 2017</i>				
Eiye	19		28.3	All Nigeria
Total	125	6		

Table 1. *Affiliates of Nigerian secret cults by gender, average age of the males and their country of birth*

Source: *personal elaboration from judicial proceedings*^{[43][46][49][47][41]}.

This is particularly true for the Eiye and Black Axe cults. While this information applies only to certain judicial proceedings and should not be generalized, some evidence aligns with the different recruitment criteria of each cult. For example, a former Maphite member, speaking about a Ghanaian involved in credit card fraud, stated: “E. is not a Maphite member; he is from Ghana”^[42].

In a wiretapped conversation between two Black Axe members discussing violent clashes in Benin City between Maphite and Black Axe members, the national head in Italy (U) remarked to the other member (B):

U: “Okay... they said there is one death a day... I told them they need to calm down and that they are people’s children... but they do not listen.”

B: “Those people do not listen. We are going through a similar situation in Italy... people do not understand... in Verona alone, there are about 300 of them... you know they still constantly recruit new affiliates. The Maphite in Verona are more numerous than us... When you tell the ‘strong men’ [Black Axe members] that you have meetings to discuss how to avoid them [Maphite], no one shows up... only to discover the next day that they [Maphite] slapped one of ours.”

U: “The Maphite do not take people who have not gone to school.”

B: “Now they do... Verona is full of them.”

U: “They did not even accept those from the Polytechnic but only those from the University... that’s why I was surprised when you said there are so many of them.”

B: “They are getting caught here.”

U: “I’m talking about the ‘green berets.’”

B: “I’m talking about them too...”^[44].

A former Black Axe member reported to the prosecutor in Naples: “This group [Black Axe] is active in Italy, France, Spain, and other European countries, including Nigerian and Ghanaian citizens”^[40]. According to the data presented in Table 1 and the statements quoted, it appears that some Nigerian cults, such as Black Axe and Eiye, recruit members who are not Nigerian. In contrast, the Maphite selection process is more stringent and permits only Nigerians. Furthermore, based on the conversation between the two Black Axe members, we can infer that the original Maphite criteria focused on recruiting members from Nigerian universities only, while in Italy, members without university education are also recruited.

Punishments and conflicts

We systematically analysed all the information concerning violations of internal rules, conflicts within Nigerian cults, and conflicts with other criminal organizations. The latter category – conflicts between Nigerian or other criminal organization – was further divided into those driven by competition in illegal markets, such as drug dealing, and those aimed at gaining power. This distinction follows Alan Block’s^[50] differentiation between enterprise syndicates, which provide and manage illegal services and goods, and power syndicates, which exert control over legal and illegal activities through racketeering.

Although this analytical distinction can sometimes blur in practice, the first type of conflict primarily involves gaining advantages in managing criminal activities at the expense of other players, while the second focuses on asserting territorial dominance, including control over other criminal organizations. However, based on the information gathered, it was not always possible to categorize conflicts clearly according to these two categories.¹

The abbreviations we used are: Black Axe: BA; Eyie: E; Maphite: M.; Enterprise Syndicate (ES); Power Syndicate (PS).

Conflicts among cults:

Eiye:

1. E/BA: fight for territorial control, both legal and illegal activities, in the city of Turin where there are African migrant settlements^[43] (PS).
2. E/BA clash in the Tor Bella Monica neighbourhood (Rome) for control of drug dealing areas^[44] (ES).
3. E/BA clash in Castel Volturno (Caserta province) for control of criminal activities^[44] (ES).
4. E/BA clash in the Ballarò neighborhood (Palermo): E members who had previously participated in clashes between E/BA in Rome went to Palermo, where they were recognized by BA members, hence there was a punitive raid on them^[41] (Not classified).
5. E/BA clash in the Ballarò neighbourhood (Palermo), the conflict ended with the division of the drug and prostitution areas^[41] (ES).
6. E/M clash in Reggio Emilia (reason not specified in the proceeding)^[42] (Not classified).
7. E/M: E member who had a drug deal with M members stole drugs from the latter^[42] (Not classified).
8. E/M: clash in a club in Bologna between M and E members^[46] (PS).

Black Axe (in addition to what has already been reported):

1. BA/M: BA member extorted money from the female partner of an M member^[46] (PS)
2. BA/M clash for control of drug dealing squares in some areas of the city of Bologna^[42] (ES)

Maphite:

6 conflicts (the five already mentioned and one more that did not involve violence: an argument between M and Romanian exploiters for the control of prostitution areas on the outskirts of Bologna. This dispute

ended with a peaceful resolution among the exploiters who allocated one side of the road to Nigerian women and the other to Eastern European women^[42] (ES).

Expect for the three not classified mentioned events, we summarize in the table 2 the information.

	Eyie	Black Axe	Maphite	Romanian criminal group
Enterprise syndicate	3	4	2	1
Power syndicate	2	3	1	

Table 2. *Conflicts among Nigerian cults and other criminal organizations*

Conflicts within the Nigerian cult itself

Conflicts also includes violations of internal rules and possible sanctions. Rule violation can sometimes reflect a power struggle within the cult, rather than being a simple breach of rules. Where possible, it will be specified when a rule violation masks an underlying power struggle within the cult.

Internal conflicts and rule breaking: Eiye

1. Attempted murder of a member after he left the cult (the victim later became a justice collaborator)^[43] (rule violation).
2. "Illegal" affiliations: new members were recruited by individuals without the proper authority, as only national or international leaders have this right (unspecified outcome)^[43] (rule violation).
3. The national Ebaka recruited members for personal financial gain. No consequences followed, as his actions were not challenged by subordinates^[43] (rule violation).
4. Corporal punishment of a member for "bad behaviour," though the specifics of the misconduct were not disclosed^[46] (rule violation).
5. The national Ebaka was accused of conducting criminal business with members of rival cults instead of his own. However, the primary accuser aimed to replace the national leader. In a national assembly held in Turin, members urged the opposing parties to reconcile: "we are all Eiye" (unspecified outcome)^[46] (power struggle).
6. A new Ebaka was appointed for Sicily, but some members from the Catania group opposed the decision, wanting the position for themselves. The Council of Elders for Italy imposed corporal

- punishment on the head of the Catania group for contesting the appointment^[41] (power struggle).
7. A non-violent conflict arose between two members of the Palermo group, with one forbidding the other from entering his drug-dealing territory^[41] (power struggle).
 8. A conflict in Rome between two factions, each led by a leader vying for the position of city-level Ebaka, prompted the national head to resolve the dispute^[41] (power struggle).
 9. A nest in Sardinia made unauthorized affiliations without the approval of national or international leaders (this event was not investigated in the judicial proceedings)^[41] (rule violation).
 10. An affiliate showed disrespect towards the head of the Palermo group, resulting in severe corporal punishment for insubordination^[41] (rule violation).
 11. In 2017, a newly arrived Ebaka from Nigeria refused to recognize the authority of the Sicily Ebaka (over Palermo and Catania), instead creating his own group through unauthorized affiliations. This power struggle escalated to an attempted murder of the Sicily Ebaka, who ultimately survived and became a justice collaborator^[41] (power struggle).

Internal conflicts and rule breaking: Black Axe

1. During the transition between old and new management at the local level in Turin, a conflict arose between two candidates, each backed by their own internal factions. The Council of Elders resolved the issue by removing both competitors from any leadership roles and appointing new local leaders^[43] (power struggle).
2. A false victim of extortion accused some BA members to benefit others vying for a managerial position in the Castel Volturno Forum (Caserta province)^[44] (power struggle).
3. BA members of the Palermo Forum rejected the affiliation of certain new members, considering them unworthy and inadequate. This led to internal clashes between factions. The national leader intervened and resolved the conflict by suspending the protesters from the cult^[45] (power struggle).
4. A BA member hit a superior during a brawl and was later punished at a joint meeting. After he defied the beating, national leaders sentenced him to death, but he escaped before it could be carried out^[45] (rule violation).
5. BA members reported fellow affiliates to the Palermo police^[45] (power struggle).
6. A dispute arose in the Palermo Forum over the promotion of an affiliate. At a joint assembly, the head who had approved the promotion was beaten, sparking a clash between two internal factions. The conflict ended when many members of the Palermo Forum were arrested^[45] (power struggle).

7. A conflict arose between affiliates when one failed to honor agreements related to illegal transactions. This personal dispute escalated into internal clashes as two opposing factions formed^[40] (power struggle).
8. A member freed a woman who had been trafficked by the criminal organization. The group attempted to kill him, but he escaped and became a justice collaborator^[40] (rule violation).
9. Corporal punishment was inflicted on an affiliate for failing to pay his superiors for a drug shipment^[40] (rule violation).
10. A member was initially sentenced to punishment for being blamed for the disappearance of 4 kg of drugs, which caused problems for his superiors. The member sought mediation through the boss's relatives in Ghana, who persuaded the Italian leader to revoke the punishment and reinstate him^[40] (rule violation).
11. A BA member engaged in the extortion of African shops in Castel Volturno (Caserta province) without his superiors' permission and without sharing the proceeds. He was killed as punishment^[40] (rule violation).
12. An internal conflict arose over a missing drug shipment buried in a garden, but it was resolved without violence^[40] (rule violation).

Internal conflicts and rule breaking: Maphite

1. A member was threatened with murder after refusing the lawyer provided by the criminal organization, indicating that he later decided to collaborate with the justice system^[42] (rule violation).
2. A member failed to pay his superiors their share of a drug consignment. The issue was resolved non-violently by requiring the debtor to hand over the title deeds to his house in Nigeria as collateral until the drug debt was settled^[42] (rule violation).
3. Conflicts erupted between members of the Vatican Family (operating in Central-Northern Italy, centred in Parma) and rebel factions, including the Latina Family (Piedmont and Lombardy, centred in Turin), the Rome Empire (Lazio, Campania, Abruzzo, Molise), and the Light House of Sicily (Sicily and Sardinia). The disputes began internally within the Vatican Family but escalated to clashes with the rebel factions. The conflict started in 2014, when a figure known as S, who held the position of Don in Nigeria, arrived in Italy and began unauthorized affiliations, siphoning money from membership fees to form independent M groups. After over a year of conflict, S was removed from

his position and publicly beaten before the Vatican Family. Despite the clashes, the conflict remains unresolved. The international organization still views these rebel families as "illegal" but lacks the power to confront them directly. However, according to a Maphite justice collaborator, members of rebel families risk their lives if they return to Nigeria^[42] (a violation of rules, but essentially a power struggle).

4. During the transition of the Don's position in Italy, the new national head carried out unauthorized affiliations within the Vatican Family to seize membership fees and build a loyal group under his command. This led to violent confrontations at a national M meeting of the Vatican Family in Como (Lombardy) in 2015. In response, international leaders sent a delegate to Italy, who dismissed the Don for rule violations, eliminated previous leadership positions, and appointed new governing bodies^[42] (a violation of rules, but fundamentally a power struggle).
5. In 2016, some members of the international DIC in Nigeria stole €7 million from the organization and fled^[42] (rule violation).
6. An affiliate was severely beaten for conducting drug deals with non-M members without informing his supervisor^[42] (rule violation).
7. An affiliate disrespected the Coordinator of the Piedmont/Lombardy area, leading the coordinator to assign three individuals to locate and beat him (Tribunal Turin, 2019) (rule violation).
8. Some members challenged their superiors for leadership positions. The Italian leaders consulted the international body to determine the appropriate sanctions (Tribunal Turin, 2019) (power struggle).

	Eye	Black Axe	Maphite
Rule violations	6	6	5
Power struggle	5	6	3

Table 3. Rule violations and power struggle within the Nigerian cult

Strengths and weaknesses of Nigerian secret cults in Italy

The main strength of the organization is its hierarchical structure. The compartmentalized nature of the group ensures that senior leadership, located outside Italy, remains insulated from direct contact with

ordinary members in the country. However, this does not mean that members in Italy are unaware of each other or their superiors. For instance, when a high-ranking leader visits Italy from Nigeria or elsewhere, the Italian branch organizes a general meeting open to all members. This allows them to meet the visiting leader, who is there to assess the cult's operations, address internal issues, and become acquainted with the members. The international leadership is keen on maintaining close, ongoing contact with its branches abroad. Members are also required to pay an annual fee to the homeland organization in Nigeria. Moreover, the Italian branch serves as a crucial channel for managing international criminal enterprises.

The cult's compartmentalized structure and fragmented flow of information help protect senior figures from being exposed or betrayed by lower-level members. This is evidenced by the fact that the only justice collaborator able to provide a comprehensive view of both national and international operations was a former member of the Maphite cult, who had held a senior role on the Council of Professors in Italy. In contrast, collaborators from Black Axe and Eiye, who occupied lower positions in their respective organizations, were unable to provide such detailed insight. The internal hierarchy is reinforced by initiation rituals and symbolic references that are unique to each Nigerian cult. These rituals, along with real or fictitious traditional narratives about the cult's origins, instill a sense of superiority in new recruits over not affiliated. Furthermore, strict internal discipline is maintained to preserve the hierarchy. As seen in the analysis of rule violations, any transgression is met with severe punishment.

Another key strength lies in the organization's ability to adapt to law enforcement actions. After several Maphite members were arrested in Turin in the early 2000s, the international leadership introduced a rule requiring that all managerial figures in Italy must have a visa, be married, and hold a legal job. This directive was aimed at allowing senior members to move freely within Italy and abroad while avoiding unwanted attention from law enforcement. A similar approach was taken by Black Axe after law enforcement operations in 2005-2006 severely impacted their Turin branch. In response, Black Axe's international leadership halted recruitment until 2010, temporarily suspended managerial bodies, and, like Maphite, required that national and local leaders in Italy have a family and a legitimate job^{[42][45][41]}.

When examining weaknesses, these include recruitment practices, the public exposure of members on social media and internal conflicts. Any secret association that relies on recruitment faces a difficult trade-off between two conflicting objectives: expanding its membership or maintaining strict selectivity to protect the organization's integrity^{[51][25]}. On one hand, expanding recruitment offers the advantage of increasing military power, which can be used against rival cults or other criminal players, while also

securing control over Sub-Saharan migrant communities. However, this approach also increases the risk of exposure, endangering the secrecy and survival of the organization. In Italy, the Maphite cult adjusted its recruitment strategy, opting to expand membership even if it meant altering its identity and increasing the risk of disloyalty among members.

In the context of recruitment, while we might logically expect disloyalty from individuals forced to join the cult, our analysis of judicial materials found no evidence to confirm this risk. Each cult examined had two or three members who collaborated with authorities. All of these individuals, once arrested, chose to cooperate with the Italian authorities. Only one claimed he had been coerced into joining the Black Axe in Nigeria. After arriving in Southern Italy by sea in 2008 and applying for asylum, he eventually joined the Black Axe in Palermo because the cult provided him with a job, which involved drug dealing in the Ballarò neighbourhood^[45].

Secret cults implement various measures to prevent betrayal among their members. For instance, a new recruit is introduced by an existing member, and ongoing scrutiny of new members lasts for several months to test their loyalty. Moreover, there are significant social and economic advantages to being part of a cult. The solidarity among “brothers” offers protection against attacks from rival cults, while membership confers recognition within the African community as a powerful figure. Additionally, members share the profits of illegal businesses. Given that many Sud-Saharan Africans living in Italy face social marginalization, joining a cult can provide opportunities for advancement that may not be available through legal means^[52].

Many cult members actively represent themselves on social media, posting pictures that depict symbols and images associated with their cult. This information, along with other evidence, has been used in indictments to prove their involvement in criminal organizations. At first glance, their behaviour on platforms like Facebook appears to contrast sharply with the typical conduct of members of Mafia organizations, such as Italian mafiosi, who generally avoid any contact with the media^[24]. In fact, flaunting one’s cult membership online resembles the behaviour of gang members rather than that of more traditional organized crime groups. However, it is noteworthy that the average age of individuals involved in these criminal proceedings is between 26 and 34 years, indicating that they are adults, while gang members are usually much younger. Their ostentatious online behaviour is not only tolerated but may also be encouraged by the leaders of the organization, who recognize the necessity of increasing membership. A larger cult can become more powerful in its dealings with rival groups. Furthermore, the cult transfers substantial amounts of money to international bodies, both in yearly membership fees and

as a percentage of profits derived from international criminal enterprises organized by their vertical management.

As previously showed, conflicts fall into two primary categories. The first is power struggles, where cult members compete for dominance over rival cults in Italian areas with significant African migrant populations, such as Turin, Palermo, and the Caserta province. The second category involves disputes over the management of illegal activities, such as drug trafficking and the exploitation of prostitution. When a cult functions as an enterprise syndicate, conflicts with other cults can be managed through territorial agreements, dividing the areas in which each operates. However, when the cult acts as a power syndicate conflicts can escalate, potentially creating unfavourable outcomes for all involved. To prevent conflicts, international bodies of Nigerian cults, as reported by a Maphite justice collaborator, established a national organization in Italy in 2010 called the Rainbow Club. This group included representatives from Maphite, Black Axe, Eiye, and the Buccaneers and sought to mediate conflicts and promote peaceful resolutions^[42]. Despite the creation of this body, its success in preventing conflicts among Nigerian criminal cults has been limited.

However, the most weakness lies in internal conflicts arising from power struggles for personal ambitions and economic interests. In some instances, criminal organizations have addressed these internal disputes by removing and renaming all managerial figures, as seen in the Black Axe. Conversely, there are cases where the international body lacked the power to confront rebel factions, such as the Maphite, which chose to detach themselves from the original management structure. Internal conflicts are fuelled by two primary factors. First, there are personal ambitions to gain greater power and wealth within the organization. This includes instances of "illegal" affiliations and the practice of purchasing higher positions by paying superiors under the table. Second, there may be divergent interests between the homeland management and the affiliated cults operating in Italy. Despite several functional synergies between members of the same cult in Nigeria and Italy – such as coordinating drug trafficking from Nigeria to Italy or threatening the families of trafficked women back home – the international management based in Nigeria often views foreign branches primarily as opportunities to enhance its own political power within Nigeria. In contrast, the Italian branches may focus more on seizing local criminal opportunities, leading to a reduced interest in maintaining strict ties with the homeland cult. A notable example of this is a Don who, after arriving in Italy and recognizing the extensive criminal possibilities available, decided to free his cells from the control of the Maphite international body.

Conclusions

Returning to the questions outlined earlier, Nigerian criminal groups, as members of secret cults, share a common cultural universe characterized by unique affiliation rites and specific behavioural rules. The bonds that unite cult members are not based on blood ties, clan affiliations, or tribal connections (terms that evoke a distant past predating modernity). Instead, the connection among members arises from their shared participation in the same secret cult. The affiliation ritual creates an indissoluble bond between each member and the cult, providing them with a sense of belonging and a new identity. The recruit not only feels distinct from the general populace but also gains the awareness of being part of a larger entity that transcends individual destinies. The internal hierarchy and strict adherence to rules are primarily aimed at safeguarding the integrity of the cult as a whole. However, as previously analysed, organizations such as the Black Axe, Maphite, and Eiye experience recurrent external and internal conflicts. The latter, predominantly driven by internal power struggles, appear to represent the main weakness of these Nigerian cults.

In conclusion, the specific characteristic of Nigerian secret cults in Italy is their hierarchical structure and the control each organization seeks to exert over its members. From both a sociological and Italian criminal law perspective, Nigerian secret cults fall into the category of mafia associations, far from being small, disorganized criminal groups.

Footnotes

¹ In practice, identifying whether conflicts between criminal groups follow an enterprise syndicate or a power syndicate *modus operandi* depends primarily on the availability of information that makes it possible to reconstruct the dynamics of the conflict. Moreover, determining whether a conflict belongs to one category or the other is often only possible *ex post*, once its outcome is known. Under the enterprise syndicate logic, conflicts are resolved through the establishment of new agreements between the parties, such as arrangements in which retail narcotics distribution is divided into zones of influence controlled by different criminal groups. By contrast, the power syndicate logic results in the domination of one criminal group over others – an outcome that often becomes apparent only after a significant period of time. A notable example of such a power struggle in Italy is the internal war waged in the 1980s by the Sicilian Cosa Nostra faction led by Totò Riina and the Corleonesi. This conflict concluded by the end of the decade with their complete dominance over the entire criminal organization.

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