

Black Axe puzzle in South Africa

Layers of criminal culpability

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Summary

South Africa, home to the most Black Axe branches in Africa, faces challenges from the group's links to cybercrime and trafficking. Contrary to Black Axe's portrayal as a centralised criminal enterprise, this study shows crime stems from autonomous individuals and fluid syndicates with no direct flow of illicit proceeds to the organisation. Yet Black Axe's secrecy, racketeering and global networks sustain affiliates' crimes. Recognising layered culpability at the individual, syndicate and organisational levels can help policymakers design targeted interventions.

Recommendations

- Black Axe needs to rebrand by rejecting criminality and mob violence exploited by syndicates.
- Law enforcement should map Black Axe structures and syndicate links for targeted responses.
- Invest in specialised cybercrime units for digital forensics and cross-border collaboration.
- Strengthen community policing with the Nigerian diaspora to identify syndicates, enhance security and reduce recruitment.
- Implement robust anti-corruption safeguards to keep law enforcement agents uncompromised and strengthen syndicate-focused operations.

Introduction

The Black Axe, a Nigerian confraternity, has garnered global notoriety as a transnational organised crime group with members implicated in sophisticated cyberfraud, drug trafficking, sex trafficking and money laundering schemes, especially in the West. In South Africa, joint operations by South Africa's Hawks (Directorate for Priority Crime Investigation), Interpol and United States (US) agencies between 2021 and 2025 led to the arrest of over 20 Black Axe affiliates, including eight high-ranking members linked to cyberfraud exceeding US\$17 million.¹ In 2017, Canada busted a US\$5 billion money laundering network while Interpol's 2024 Operation Jackal III seized about US\$3.5 million across 21 countries involving Black Axe members. These high-profile cases amplify impressions of the group as an organised criminal enterprise or a mafia group.²

Yet, the ascription of organised criminal enterprise to the Black Axe oversimplifies its complex structure, obscuring the interplay of individual, syndicate and organisational dynamics in criminal activities. This research employs social network analysis and the protection racket framework to dissect the Black Axe's role in South Africa's illicit markets, providing a nuanced understanding of its criminality while challenging monolithic narratives.

The Black Axe emerged during a period of youth activism against elitism and apartheid

Confraternities, often termed cults or secret societies in Nigeria, originated in the 1950s as university-based movements rooted in Pan-African liberation and social justice ideals.³ The Black Axe, founded in July 1977 at the University of Benin, emerged during a period of youth activism against elitism and apartheid.⁴ However, between the 1960s and 1980s, the proliferation of new and splinter groups transformed confraternities into competitive entities, driven by socio-economic strains and insecurities that pushed youths towards survivalist strategies.

Oaths of secrecy and loyalty bonded members, but rivalry fuelled violent supremacy contests, manifesting in street clashes and reprisal attacks.⁵ The sinister aspect of the confraternity landscape is that the more feared a confraternity is, the greater its appeal to influential actors seeking intimidation services. Despite various state-level laws against secret cults, enforcement falters due to political interference and judicial corruption, allowing confraternities to persist as hybrid entities straddling legitimacy and illegality.

Outside Nigeria, confraternities like the Black Axe are framed as organised criminal enterprises similar to mafia and criminal gang groups in Europe and America. In Europe, Sergio Nazzaro highlights their flexibility in exploiting local illicit markets,⁶ while Stefano Becucci describes their mafia-like operations in Italy, involving drug and sex trafficking with hierarchical discipline.⁷ For Denise Hutchings, 'the group's hierarchical structure, communication protocols, and operational discipline rival those of traditional organised crime groups.'⁸

Anna Sergi⁹ and Maia Sacchetto¹⁰ underscore a symbiotic partnership with the Sicilian Cosa Nostra, where Black Axe members handle street-level drug trade and trafficking, paying 'taxes' for protection and network access. In North America, Interpol and law enforcement emphasise Black Axe's dominance in cybercrimes, generating billions of dollars each year.¹¹

The global narrative, however, risks being reductionist. Corentin Cohen critiques the post-2015 migration crisis framing of confraternities as 'Nigerian Mafia,' arguing it criminalises Nigerian migrants and confraternities while ignoring their history and social functions for the Nigerian diaspora.¹² A 2022 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and National Institute for Security Studies (NISS) report admits that Nigerian confraternities 'are enabling organisations for a range of criminal as well as non-criminal activities' but are not inherently organised criminal groups.¹³ Yet, the propensity to ascribe mafia models and hierarchical organised enterprise models to Black Axe is high especially among law enforcement agencies tasked with addressing organised crime.

Using the case of South Africa, which has one of the largest Black Axe structures in Africa as shown in Chart 6, this research addresses the knowledge and evidence gap on the modus operandi of confraternities and their role in illicit economies. First, the paper uses social network analysis¹⁴ to examine Black Axe relationships and how individuals, subgroups and the broader network interact, revealing multiple levels of complicity and exemption in illicit activity beyond hierarchical criminal models.

Second, the paper offers an analytical framework to understand Black Axe's direct involvement in criminality. It uses the conceptual framing of 'protection network' or 'protection racket' to rethink the specific roles played by confraternities in the context of crimes by its members. This highlights multiple layers of culpability – individual opportunism, syndicate autonomy and organisational complicity – while recognising that many members, despite the violent initiation rituals, are not directly engaged in crime. The paper further shows how confraternity affiliation has a significant bearing on the modus operandi and success of people involved in crime in a way that other organisational affiliations do not.

Methodology

The research uses a qualitative methodology to provide empirical understanding of the nature of Black Axe activities and involvement in illicit economies in South Africa. This involves a critical review of existing literature and interviews with key informants. The literature review includes academic literature, media reports and data from national authorities, civil society and law enforcement agencies. This includes a review of judicial case files of prosecuted and convicted individuals with membership in the Black Axe in South Africa. Due to limited data on Black Axe's criminal involvement and the organisation's presence in South Africa, the author analysed grey literature and social media, triangulating with on-the-ground sources.

Between March and April 2025, the researcher conducted key informant interviews using semi-structured questionnaires with 45 respondents in Nigeria and South Africa. The researcher worked with two local contacts in Benin City, Nigeria as well as Cape Town and Johannesburg, to identify and set up meetings with key informants. The key informants include:

Chart 1: List of interviewees

Key informant	City	Professions and number of people	Total
Black Axe members in Nigeria	Benin City	Lecturers (2), doctor (1), businesspeople (2), undisclosed professions (6)	11
Vikings member in Nigeria	Benin City	Undisclosed profession (1)	1
Black Axe members in South Africa	Cape Town Johannesburg	Forex traders (2), businesspeople (2), undisclosed professions (2)	6
Vikings member in South Africa	Johannesburg	Businessperson (1)	1
Communities and civil society in Nigeria	Benin City	Anti-cult NGO (4), Ekosodi Vigilante group (2), activist (1)	7
Civil society in South Africa	Cape Town	Brave to Love (2), Charles Newell Foundation (1)	3
University of Benin in Nigeria	Benin City	Senior lecturers (4), university security officials (2)	6
Law enforcement in Nigeria	Benin City	Nigerian Police Force (2)	2
Law enforcement in South Africa	Cape Town Johannesburg	Hawks (2), South African Police Service (2)	4
Nigerian Citizens Association in South Africa	Johannesburg	Executive members (2)	2
Victims	Benin City Cape Town	Civil servants (2)	2
Total			45

In Nigeria, the researcher spent two weeks in Benin City from 9–22 March speaking to Black Axe members and communities to understand the group's ideals, motivations and nature of involvement in crimes. In South Africa, the researcher conducted fieldwork over two weeks, spending one week each in Cape Town and Johannesburg from 7–19 April. This enabled the author to collect data on the Black Axe's value to the diaspora communities and the types of crime linked with the confraternity.

Although the researcher initially used a purposive sampling method to identify and interview the respondents, the respondents recommended other key informants, thereby enabling snowball interviews to enrich the data. The research team prioritised one-on-one interviews with all the respondents including the Black Axe members. This created opportunities to explore individual perspectives more deeply without group influence and censorship.

The analysis enables the identification of those who may be at risk of criminal association or of being exploited by criminal groups

Prior to the interviews, the researcher along with the local contacts, spent several days between January and February 2025 establishing trust and emphasising the strict confidentiality of the research. As a result, all personal information of interviewees is withheld but represented using general identifiers. However, publicly stated names of individuals in judicial case files and media reports were used and referenced accordingly.

This paper does not debate whether Black Axe and similar groups should be called 'confraternities' as their dynamism defies fixed labels such as cults, secret societies or traditional charitable brotherhoods. For some, confraternities are a blend of 'university fraternities with traditional secret societies, vigilante and militant groups, and street gangs.'¹⁵

Rather, the paper asks critical questions relating to the structure and framing of so-called confraternities as criminal organisations. It identifies various levels of criminal culpability reflecting on the mutually reinforcing relationship between the Black Axe and independent organised crime syndicates with membership within the organisation. The analysis further enables the identification of those who may be at risk of criminal association or of being exploited by criminal groups within the organisation.

The Black Axe: ideology vs reality

The Black Axe, formally known as the Neo-Black Movement of Africa (NBM of Africa), was founded on 7 July 1977 at the University of Benin, Nigeria. Its stated goal is to 'promote social justice and equality/equity for all.'¹⁶ Similar ideals cut across most confraternities. For instance, the Pyrates Confraternity, which was the first confraternity, established in 1952, aimed to combat elitism and class privilege amid decolonisation and Pan-Africanist ideals in pre- and post-independent Africa. By the 1970s, emerging and splinter confraternities brought new dimensions to confraternity values and modes of operation.

Black Axe, one of the most popular confraternities from Nigeria today, was founded based on three major local and continental circumstances. First, the 16 June 1976 Soweto Uprising of South African schoolchildren against the apartheid regime re-ignited a strong sense of activism among youths in Nigeria, which was among the most fervent supporters of the African National Congress's anti-apartheid struggles. Black Axe's annual convention is held to coincide with the 21 March 1960 Sharpeville Massacre, commemorating resistance against African oppression under colonial rule.

Second, Black Axe emerged from perceptions of perceived oppression of university students by existing confraternities. As one of the first confraternities in Nigerian universities, graduate Pyrates occupied higher positions as lecturers and university administrators, while student members of these confraternities were considered elite, having been admitted based on high academic performance. During the interviews, a prominent member of Black Axe emphasised that 'the elitist posturing of students and lecturers from prominent confraternities at the time, created a perception of oppression and nurtured the idea for an inclusive movement.'¹⁷

Chart 2: List of select confraternities in Nigeria

Official name	Other names	Founding year	University where it was founded
National Association of Seadogs	Pirates Confraternity	1952	University of Ibadan, Oyo State
National Association of Airlords	Supreme Eiye Confraternity (SEC, NAA, Airlords, Fliers)	1965	University of Ibadan, Oyo State
National Association of Sea Lords	Buccaneers Confraternity (Fine Boys, Ban Boys)	1972	University of Ibadan, Oyo State
NBM of Africa	Axemen, Black Axe, Aye	1977	University of Benin, Edo State
Green Circuit Association International	Maximum Academic Performance Highly Intellectuals Trained Executioners (Maphites)	1978	University of Benin, Edo State
De Norsemen Kclub International	Supreme Vikings Confraternity (Vikings, Adventurers, Aro-mates, Vultures)	1982	University of Port Harcourt, Rivers State
Eternal Fraternal Order of the Legion Consortium	The Klan Confraternity, KK	1983	University of Calabar, Cross River State
Female confraternities mostly act as auxiliaries to male confraternities, sometimes providing espionage or engaging in sex work			
Black Bra Confraternity	Axe Queens	Late 1980s	
Daughters of Jezebel	Jezebel	Late 1990s	

After its formation, the Black Axe movement sought to establish its dominance as a preferred student confraternity in Nigerian universities in concert with old and emerging confraternities as indicated in Chart 2.

Third, as the first confraternity from Benin City, the Black Axe received support from local leaders who were keen on backing a home-grown movement rather than those coming from rival kingdoms in the Southwest.¹⁸ There are strong claims that the Oba of Benin allegedly gave his blessing to the Black Axe and was present at the launch of the movement at the Ekehuan Campus of the University of Benin. This lent credibility to the group and encouraged locals from Benin City and neighbouring areas to join.

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As confraternities proliferated, respondents highlighted two major strategies adopted by the Black Axe to gain members and assert its relevance: lowering the academic criteria for membership and forcefully establishing supremacy.

Liberal recruitment

The Black Axe significantly lowered the criteria for membership by accepting willing applicants through recruitment drives and friendship circles. This approach was different from earlier confraternities such as the Pirates, which targeted and recruited students with high grades. Black Axe’s liberal recruitment approach therefore gave room for a wide range of membership, an approach that many other confraternities established around the same period also adopted. The confraternity landscape is predominantly male confraternities. But there are a few female confraternities that have emerged as auxiliaries to the male confraternities, as indicated in Chart 2.

Members of
confraternities
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each other and insist
that an 'injury to one
is an injury to all'

As members graduated, they formed alumni structures called zones and promoted recruitment programmes across university campuses. The constitution of the Black Axe stipulates that individuals can join the group provided that they are 'a graduate or matriculated undergraduate of an institution of higher learning.'¹⁹ In reality, Black Axe recruited young people in their communities and even boys in primary and secondary schools.²⁰ A senior Black Axe member told ENACT that the decision to compromise academic criteria in favour of more membership proved costly as it led to the spread of vices within the group.²¹ Individuals with criminal and violent inclinations became more vocal and dominant members.

Culture of violence

In a competitive landscape, members of confraternities strongly believe in loyalty and protection to each other, insisting that an 'injury to one is an injury to all.' This, therefore, triggers mob reprisal attacks when a member is intimidated or attacked by a rival group or a perceived opponent. Between the 1980s and 1990s, a period marked by military dictatorships, the use of force became normalised among confraternities not only for the protection of members but as a sustaining strategy.²²

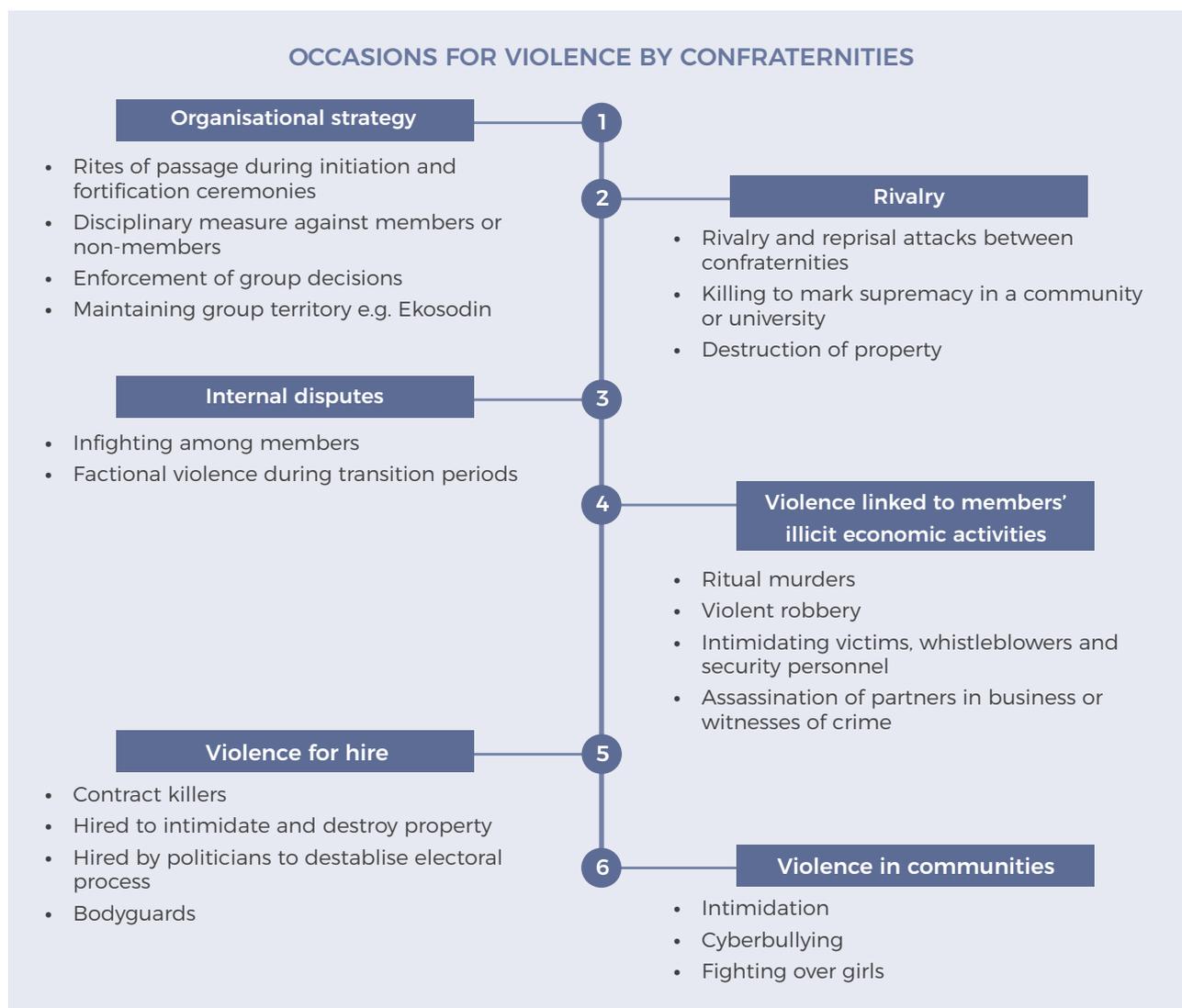
State officials and university leaders allegedly armed groups such as the Black Axe to suppress student activism, as exemplified by the 1999 Obafemi Awolowo University massacre.²³ With the return of democracy in the early 2000s, political elites further entrenched this violence by employing confraternities for thuggery, transforming them into tools for intimidation and electoral manipulation.²⁴

Young recruits, particularly 'Temple Ayes' – university members – and recruits from disadvantaged communities, are at the centre of Black Axe's violent subculture. Most of them are sponsored by graduate 'Zonal Lords' – graduate members – to attack rivals or to protect political and economic interests.²⁵ A respondent narrated how some individual members of the Black Axe supported them during school days and how they tended to be forever indebted to these sponsors.²⁶

This subcultural violence attracts vulnerable youths seeking protection or patronage, yet exposes them and their families to reprisal attacks, often recorded as 'football scores,' such as 4:3, depending on casualties from either side. Respondents in Benin City's Ekosodin community described a reign of terror by confraternities, who use intimidation, extortion and *juju* (spiritual fortification) to evade vigilantes and security forces.²⁷

Confraternity violence operates through a decentralised yet coordinated system. Temple Ayes wield 'cut-to-size' hunter guns and machetes, while sophisticated weapons, donated by graduate members or clients, are passed down through the leadership. A symbolic tool of violence is the axe, also referred to as '7',²⁸ which is a key part of the Black Axe logo reflecting

Chart 3: Types of violence



Source: Author's compilation of patterns of violence associated with the Black Axe

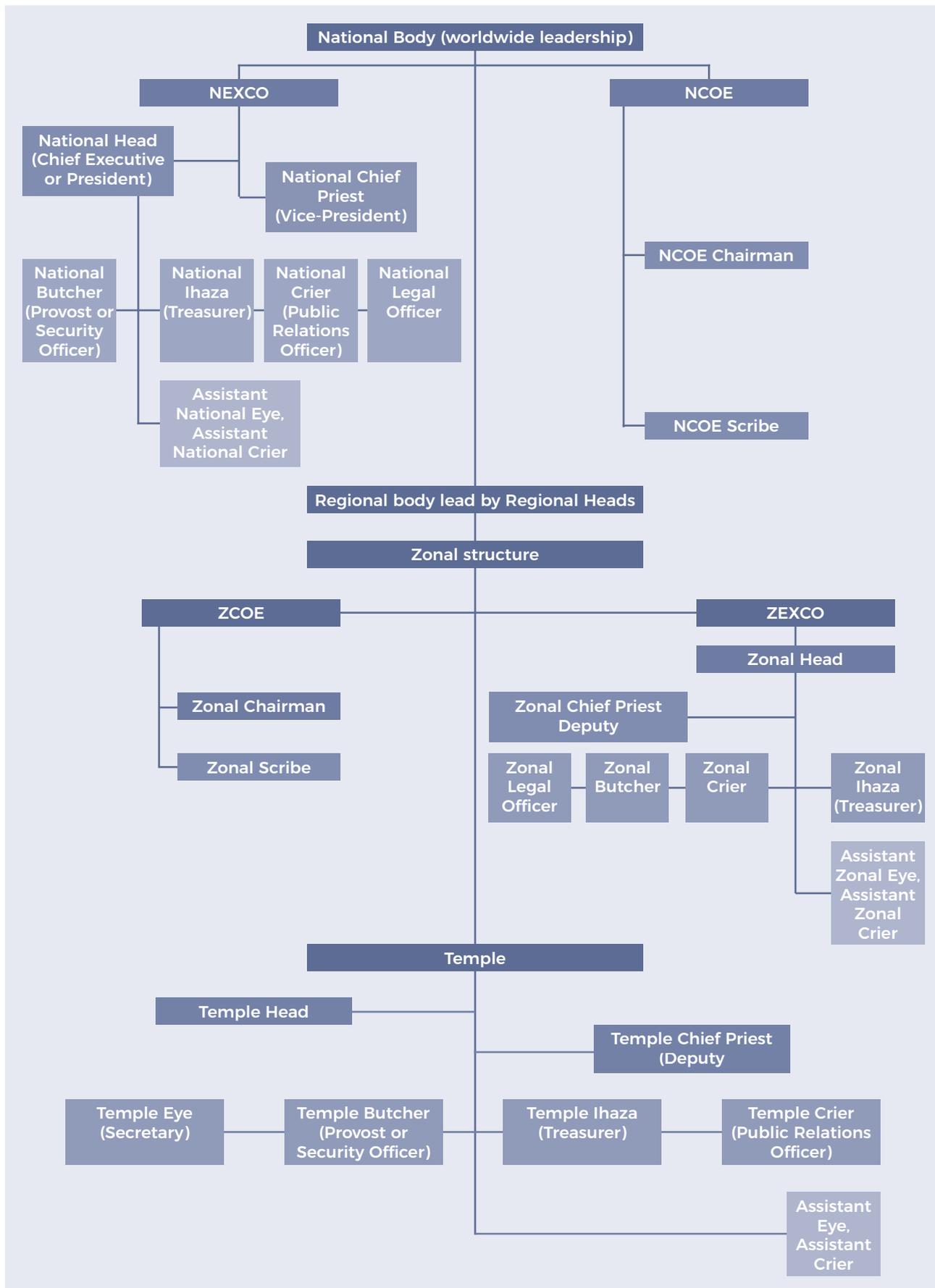
resolve to break free from oppression. Violence serves dual purposes: establishing supremacy and securing contracts from political and economic elites.

Various state-level laws proscribe cult groups in Nigeria. Edo State's most recent law²⁹ imposes harsh penalties, including death for fatal attacks and imprisonment of 21 years for sponsors, yet confraternity violence persists. Confraternity members now occupy key positions in political, judicial and law enforcement institutions. As patrons, they protect these groups while resisting and undermining calls for internal reforms.³⁰ Nigeria's Secret Cults (Prohibition) Bill, 2001 never became a law because it wasn't approved by the Senate a necessary step before presidential assent. University payments to confraternities, as reported at the University of Benin, highlight institutional helplessness, perpetuating a cycle where violence is both a problem and a perverse solution.³¹

Black Axe organisational structure

In 1994, the NBM of Africa registered as a non-governmental organisation (NGO) with the Corporate Affairs Commission.³² In the same year, the organisation had its first constitution, which was amended in 2004, 2014 and 2019. The 2019 version is currently under review. The Black Axe has an elaborate organisational structure described in Chart 4.

Chart 4: Organisational structure



Source: Author's visual representation of the structure as outlined in the NBM constitution

The structure above shows the intricate order of the Black Axe with the National Executive Council (NEXCO)³³ led by the National Head in Benin City, serving as the seat of the organisation’s worldwide leadership. The National Council of Elders (NCOE)³⁴ serves as the advisory and legislative arm with the authority to approve recommendations from the NEXCO. The organisation maintains a Board of Trustees and Body of Founders.

The regions are the next layer of Black Axe structure. Regional Heads lead and manage at the regional level. The regions are organised along geographic order and comprise various zones. Zones are the operational hubs of the Black Axe. Zonal structures mimic those of the national leadership with the Zonal Executive Committee (ZEXCO) leading the zones while the Zonal Council of Elders (ZCOE) serves as the advisory arm.

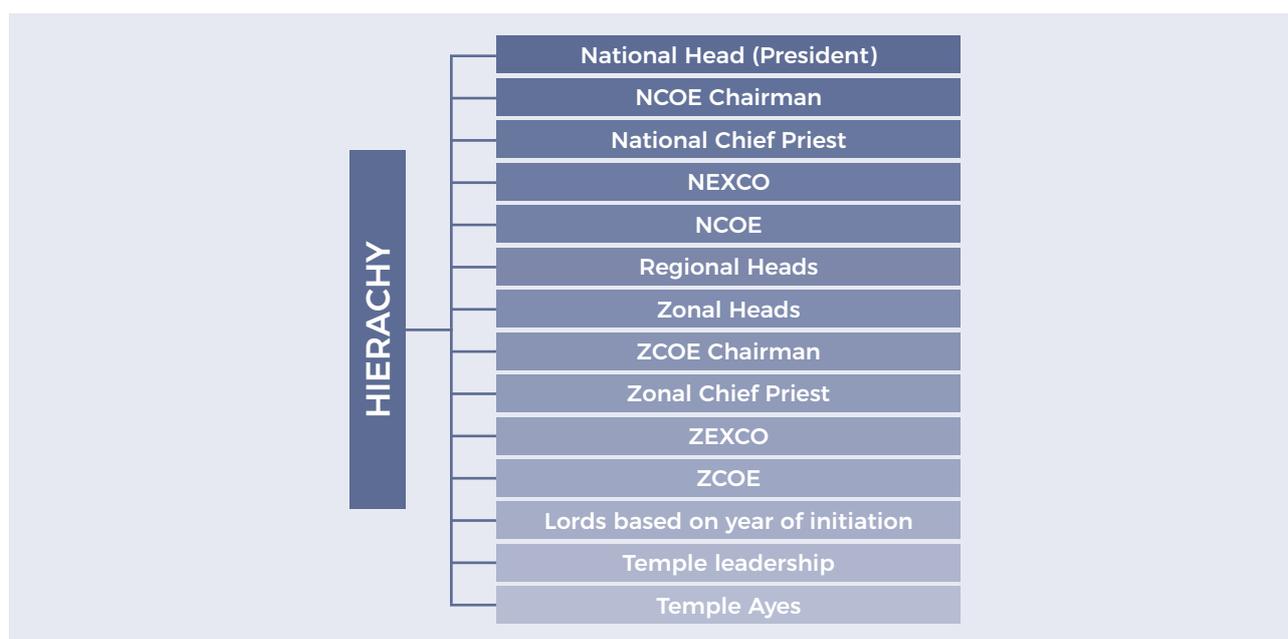
More zones are created regularly from subzones, also called forums, whose membership has grown in prominence. Forums are a lower administrative level of governance under the zones. Zones and forums are made up of graduate members who are referred to as Lords as opposed to undergraduate members within the university who are called Temple Ayes.³⁵

Lords hold aliases, also referred to as ‘strong names,’ adopted from the names of prominent and influential African figures. Contrary to some claims that the use of strong names is meant to mask individual identity, a strong name presents the individual as a reincarnation of African power and dignity, exemplified by those figures. For instance, the immediate past National Head of NBM Africa, Olorogun Ese Kakor JP, replaced in August 2025, is also known as Lord Dawda Jawara, after the Gambian leader who championed democracy and regionalism. Other members bear strong names such as Thomas Sankara, Muammar Gaddafi, Patrice Lumumba and Nelson Mandela.

Tertiary institutions, such as universities and polytechnics, are known as Black High Temples or Temples. Although Black Axe grew from tertiary institutions, current undergraduate members are seen as junior members and are referred to as Temple Ayes.

For the Black Axe, along with many other confraternities, the tertiary level remains their primary recruitment base because tertiary institutions are a platform where energetic youths³⁶ are keen to make a name for themselves and impress relevant authorities. Temples have the same leadership structure as the Zonal and National levels. But they are managed by zones in the areas under their control. This tends to make them subservient to successful Lords who promise them connections or employment if they are loyal and responsive to their dictates.³⁷

Chart 5: Hierarchy within the Black Axe



Source: Author’s visual representation of the structure as outlined in the NBM constitution

Identity crises: philanthropy or criminality

The Black Axe alias, synonymous with the NBM since its inception, originated from the organisation's early publication, *Black Axe Magazine*, which was used to promote its ideals in Nigerian universities during the late 1970s. Although the magazine was renamed *Uhuru*, the Black Axe moniker endured. Respondents in Nigeria and South Africa consistently affirmed that the NBM and Black Axe were indistinguishable, sharing identical membership, leadership, rituals and networks. NBM members are also known as Ayes or Axemen, which are the greeting codes of the organisation. However, the Black Axe alias has become a liability due to its association with high-profile crimes, prompting the NBM to publicly dissociate from it.

In June 2024, for instance, NBM founding members held a press conference to reject the Black Axe label, emphasising the organisation's commitment to eradicating criminal links.³⁸ In 2024, Kakor stated on Arise TV that 'NBM of Africa has nothing to do with Black Axe,' framing it as a separate entity.³⁹

As a way of rebranding its image, the NBM has been reactive in suspending or expelling members convicted of crimes, citing violations of its constitution, which mandates 'eradicating all forms of oppression, corruption, neo-colonialism and social vices.'⁴⁰ The constitution further prohibits membership in conflicting organisations, such as cult, occult, criminal or terrorist organisations.⁴¹ High-profile expulsions include former National Heads Mayor Onyebueke (2005–2009), Augustin Bemigho Eyeoyibo (2012–2016) and Felix Kupa Edore (2016–2021),⁴² along with the suspension of eight Cape Town Zone members over criminal prosecutions⁴³ that identified them as Black Axe members.

The NBM further altered its founding date from 7 July 1977 to 16 October 1977, to suggest a temporal distinction from the Black Axe's supposed origins. The logo was redesigned, see the images below, and 'AYE' was replaced by 'NBM,' signalling a break from the alias's cultural markers.



OLD LOGO



NEW LOGO

The organisation has further increased its philanthropic activities to emphasise its role in humanitarian efforts.⁴⁴ The NBM is currently operating under a state of emergency for a year from April 2025 to April 2026 in response to the litigation against it worldwide. The state of emergency was advocated by the then national head and the NEXCO to deal decisively with issues, including the amendment of the constitution.

The NBM's disavowal of the Black Axe alias is a strategic attempt to restore legitimacy through impression management, yet it fails to address the structural factors enabling criminality within its network. Respondents argue that the NBM must address criminality proactively by ending liberal and violent recruitment practices in universities, which attract vulnerable youths prone to exploitation.⁴⁵

Friends with benefits: confraternity or criminal enterprise

Black Axe's dual identity – legitimate confraternity versus criminal organisation – complicates analytical framing because the organisation does not appear to be designed for criminality, yet its members are regularly indicted for high-stakes crimes. While outlining crimes involving the organisation, respondent views show that criminality is not directed through a centralised organisational strategy.⁴⁶ Instead, it manifests through fluid syndicate groups that operate within the broader confraternity network. Similar findings are reported in research by Solomon Lazarus, which shows that crimes such as business email compromise (BEC) are executed by autonomous cells, with no evidence of illicit proceeds flowing directly to Black Axe's

national or zonal leadership.⁴⁷ Criminal syndicates involved in BEC schemes allocate compensation based on task value rather than organisational rank.

Black Axe's membership spans diverse professions such as lecturers, doctors, politicians and security personnel. Belonging to Black Axe, like most confraternities, is a source of pride for members as it offers a familial network beyond state borders. Membership dues and voluntary contributions, some potentially from illicit sources, sustain the organisation's operations, but these funds are not systematically linked to criminal enterprises. The autonomous crime by members complicates culpability, as criminal actors exploit the network's resources without implicating the entire organisation.⁴⁸ Blanket criminalisation, therefore, risks misleading law enforcement agencies and alienating legitimate members, potentially driving criminal elements underground.⁴⁹ A critical question therefore is: why is Black Axe implicated in crimes by members and affiliated groups who hold membership in different other organisations?

Social network theory provides a framework for understanding the complex interplay of criminality involving Black Axe. Within this framework, individuals and syndicates, referred to as nodes, leverage the confraternity's global network, or ties, to access collaborators, resources and protection. The Black Axe network across the globe provides criminal entities with a large pool of battle-hardened members who are bound by oaths of secrecy and loyalty, having been exposed to violent behaviour at university. The Black Axe's initiation process, known internally as 'blending' or 'baming,' fosters a culture of loyalty and secrecy through gruelling tests, sometimes resulting in fatalities.⁵⁰

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The NBM constitution states: 'No person shall be qualified as a member except if he has taken the oath of membership as contained in the membership procedure of the organisation.'⁵¹ Members swear an oath to Korofu, the Unseen God, to protect each other by reciting the following key lines:

That I will live, speak and fight for the best interest of all within the Neo-Black Movement. That with the cooperation of my fellow Axemen shall fight and struggle for the unity of all oppressed people. A cry from any one of us in the Neo-Black Movement shall echo in the body of our common goal, and in self-defence, we shall protect our common interest. The day I become an agent of murder, oppression or discrimination against the black race, should this Kokoma squeeze life out of me. So help me God.⁵²

Criminal syndicates capitalise on this loyalty, recruiting members committed to confidentiality and years of participating in collective violence. While the Black Axe operates legally, its network serves as a platform for sourcing collaborators.

On its own, it is directly complicit in criminality in view of its role as a protection racket. It provides extra-legal governance through protection of members and people seeking protection for a fee. As indicated earlier, the more violent a confraternity is, the higher the likelihood it has of being employed by both legitimate and illegitimate entities seeking protection or security services. In some cases, the confraternities create insecurities that compel homage and affiliation with the group. The protection-racket disposition of confraternities, also called cult groups, is summarised in a report by the UNODC and NISS:

[They] protect businesses from attacks by random criminals but also make business impossible for those who refuse to pay extortion money (homage) or to cooperate otherwise. Through this homage, cult groups fill a governance vacuum for a profit. Once a cult group has secured the monopoly on violence in an area it controls, the group is able to license the criminal enterprises carried out in that area to group members or to outsiders, such as illegal oil bunkering groups. Those attempting to carry out unauthorized criminal activities in areas of cult control are severely punished.⁵³

Various syndicates affiliated with the Black Axe are involved in different types of crime such as theft, oil bunkering, cybercrime, drug and human trafficking, kidnapping and extortion. However, they rely on their confraternity's violent machinery – honed through a culture of mob loyalty – to enforce agreements and resolve disputes in the underworld. For instance, when conflicts arise over illicit proceeds, the Black Axe mobilises fighters to intimidate or eliminate threats, often framing these disputes as rival confraternity clashes. Due to the global reach of confraternities, they execute attacks against opponents and other targets across the globe.

A Johannesburg member highlighted the influence of wealthy individuals, who often use ill-gotten gains to dominate the organisation, mobilising its violent resources to protect narrow interests.⁵⁴ Affluent members, some involved in criminality, further entrench their influence by funding organisational activities, blurring the line between legitimate and illicit contributions. For influential people who secure higher positions in the Black Axe, the greater their ability to mobilise and exploit the group's violent machinery. This dynamic traps members in a cycle of violence, deepening inter-confraternity rivalries.

The organisation's protection extends to legal support, as seen in 2018 when the Cape Town Zone, along with other zones, contributed to the legal fees of prosecuted members in Italy. This reciprocal relationship – where the Black Axe offers protection and benefits from members' allegiance and contributions – mirrors a protection racket. The symbiotic relationship underscores the Black Axe's dual role as a social network and a facilitator of criminality, complicating efforts to dismantle its influence.

Black Axe expansion: drivers of migration to South Africa

The Black Axe has transformed from a tertiary fraternity into a global entity with about three million members across five continents: Africa, Europe, South America, North America and Asia.⁵⁵ The chart below highlights Black Axe zones, as compiled by the author based on feedback from key informants.

Chart 5: Identified zonal structures across the globe

Continent/Country	Region	Zones
Europe	United Kingdom/Ireland Region	Manchester Zone
		Upper Manchester Zone
		Ireland Zone
		London Zone
		Yorkshire Zone
		Midlands Zone
		Essex Zone
		Northeast England Zone
		Merseyside Zone
	North European Region	Austria Zone
		Belgium Zone
		Netherlands Zone
		Sweden Zone
		Russia Zone
	South European Region	Paris Zone
		France Zone
		Northern France Zone
		Germany Zone
		Cyprus Zone
		Istanbul Zone
		Italy Peninsula Zone
Italy Colosseum Zone		

Continent/Country	Region	Zones
Europe cont.	South European Region cont.	Turkey Zone
		Italy Zone
		Rome Zone
		Greece Zone
		Spanish Zone
		Swiss Zone
Asia	Asia Region	United Arab Emirates Zone
		China Zone
		India Zone
		Japan Zone
		Karnataka Zone (shut down)
	Northeast Region	Malaysia Zone
		Kuala Lumpur Zone
		Philippines Zone
		Cambodia Zone
		Egypt Zone
		Indonesia Zone
		Thailand Zone
United States	Northeast Region	Chicago Zone
		New York Zone
		Maryland Zone
		Boston New England Zone
	Southeast Region	Dallas Zone
		Los Angeles Zone
		California Zone
		Georgia Zone
		Atlanta Zone
Houston Zone		
South America	South America Region	Brazil Zone
		Mexico Zone
Africa except Nigeria	West Africa Region	Ghana Zone
		Accra Zone
		Central Cape Coast Zone
	Southern Africa Region	Cape Town Zone
		Durban Zone
		Johannesburg Zone
		West North Gauteng Zone
		Pretoria Zone
		Ekurhuleni Zone
		Kenya Zone
Nigeria	Abuja Region	Abuja Zone
		Karu Zone
		Kubwa Zone
		Niger Zone
		Mpape Zone
		Gwagwalada Zone
	Edo Region	Uhun Ogbeini Zone
		Ovia Zone

Continent/Country	Region	Zones
Nigeria <i>cont.</i>	Edo Region <i>cont.</i>	Ikpoba Zone
		Benin Zone
		Warri Zone
		Egor Zone
		Toru Ebe Zone
		Orhionmwon Zone
	Lagos Region	Lagos Zone
		Lekki Zone
		Apapa Zone
		Ikoyi Zone
	Western Region	Ibadan Zone
		Ekiti Zone
		Oke Ibadan Zone
		Ondo Zone
		Ajirosun Zone
		Osun Zone
	Midwestern Region	Etsako Central Zone
		Agenebode Zone
		Esan South-East Zone
		Owan Zone
		Bendel North Zone
		Esan East Zone
		Akoko Edo Zone
	Delta Region	Sapele Zone
		Ughelli Zone
		Delta Zone
		Isoko Zone
		Ethiope Zone
		Agbon Zone
		Agbarha-Orogun Zone
	Anioma Region	Bendel East Zone
		Aniocha Zone
		Kwale Zone
		Asaba Zone
		Ogwash-Uku Zone
	Northern Region	Makurdi Zone
Gboko Zone		
Otukpo Zone		
Kaduna Zone		
Kogi Zone		
Jos Zone		
Lafia Zone		
South-East Region	Owerri Zone	
	New Owerri Zone	
	Umuahia Zone	
	Orlu Zone	
	Okigwe Zone	
	Abia Zone	

Continent/Country	Region	Zones
Nigeria <i>cont.</i>	Upper South-East Region	Idemili Zone
		Anambra Zone
		Upper Enugu Zone
		Upper Anambra Zone
		Anambra South Zone
		Enugu Zone
		Nsukka Zone
		Abakiliki Zone
		Upper Ebonyi Zone
	South-South Region	Calabar Zone
		Akwa Ibom Zone
		Ibom South Zone
		Ika-East Zone
		Oron Zone

Source: Authors compilation based on feedback from informants

Initially, country names were used to define zones, e.g. South Africa Zone, Italy Zone, Ghana Zone, etc. In recent years, the country-based names were replaced with city names due to the rapid expansion of Black Axe zones across the globe.

Outside Nigeria, South Africa has the third highest number of zones, behind the United States (US) with 10 and the United Kingdom (UK) with six. In Africa, South Africa has the highest number of zones with six identified zones in Cape Town, Durban, Ekurhuleni, West North Gauteng, Johannesburg and Pretoria. One of the long-running zones, the South Africa Zone, was recently closed due to internal conflict, although members claim they will remain operational. Some zones in South Africa reportedly have over 200 active members each, though exact numbers vary. Members are predominantly Nigerian, with some having lived in South Africa between five and 30 years. There is unconfirmed information that some non-Nigerians have been recruited.⁵⁶

Black Axe's expansion is driven by a combination of societal factors, as well as individual and group decisions. These include the endemic 'japa syndrome' in Nigeria – a Yoruba term meaning 'to escape' that reflects the desire to seek better opportunities abroad due to economic hardship, insecurity and limited academic and professional prospects – members' threat-based decisions and the expansion strategies of crime syndicates.

Escape from 'threat to life' is a key factor motivating Black Axe members to flee to other countries

First, Black Axe's global expansion, including expansion to South Africa could be linked to the flare of migration among Nigerians since the 1980s.⁵⁷ People from Edo State, the birthplace of Black Axe, are among the most widely travelled, along with the Igbos from the South-East. As a result, some Black Axe zones and syndicates appear ethnically homogeneous,⁵⁸ but they include members from various Nigerian ethnic groups. Solidarity among confraternity members serves as the basis of cohesiveness, rather than ethnic groupings.

Secondly, escape from 'threat to life' is a key factor motivating Black Axe members to flee to other countries. As highlighted earlier, the confraternity landscape in Nigeria is fraught with intense rivalry and violence between confraternities. Members' lives are also threatened internally through disciplinary measures, factional disputes and action against deserters. Respondents in Nigeria recount stories of graduating students and youths who often flee, sometimes through irregular means, to avoid becoming victims of rival groups or former members.⁵⁹ Some families sponsor their at-risk wards to leave the country formally.

Third, business groups and criminal syndicates affiliated with the Black Axe seek to have an extensive network to broaden their reach and facilitate their activities. Although Black Axe syndicates' mastery of technology enables global operations, migrant networks allow them to deploy individuals who provide a human touch to their operations. As a result, criminal syndicates encourage or sponsor their collaborators to move and live in targeted destination countries.

For instance, the US recently convicted three individuals linked to the Black Axe who operated in South Africa between 2016 and 2017. Two of them later relocated to Canada, where they were arrested, while the other remained in South Africa before being arrested at his luxury home in Sandton in 2022.⁶⁰ Evidence showed that such movements enhance syndicates' capabilities and range. As a result, well-resourced syndicates can sponsor multiple collaborators from the same organisation to travel abroad, increasing the number of individuals associated with criminal activity in zonal structures abroad. Additionally, syndicates recruit struggling members of the Black Axe and Nigerian diaspora to expand their operations.

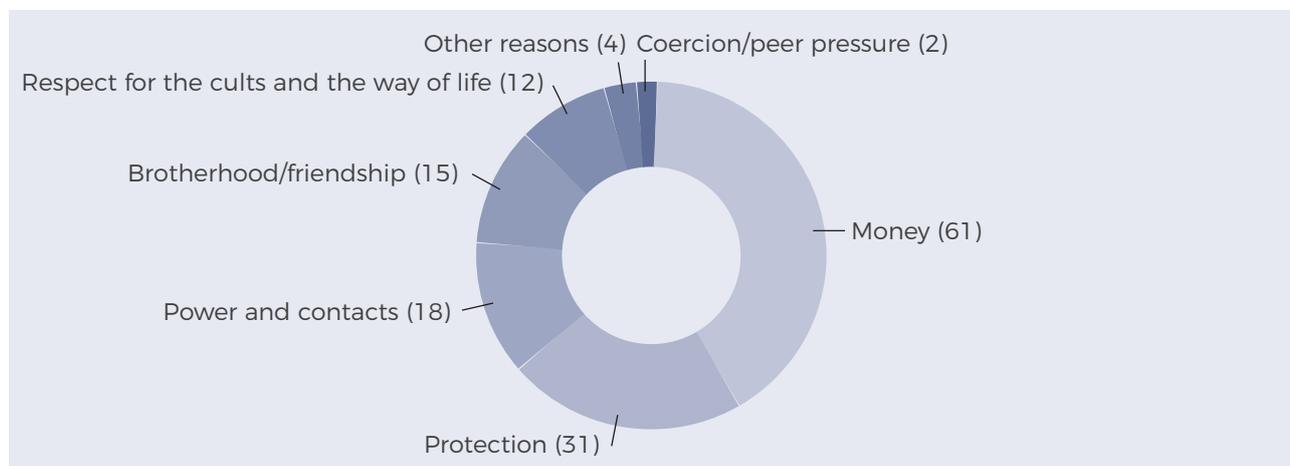
In Africa, South Africa's relatively stable economy in the post-apartheid era offers significant opportunities for migrants seeking to enhance their livelihoods.⁶¹ Black Axe members in Cape Town and Johannesburg describe how their members actively seek and join a zone in the cities where they live. The applicants must display knowledge of the Black Axe's code of conduct, and their previous zone must acknowledge knowing them.⁶²

The US recently convicted three individuals linked to the Black Axe who operated in South Africa between 2016 and 2017

Additionally, some members who flee rival clashes in Nigeria rejoin their confraternity groups in destination countries. This allows them to maintain information flow and gain protection against potential conflicts with rival groups in the new area. This is critical due to the global presence of confraternities, which means reprisal attacks and killings can happen in far-away countries. Those fleeing from their former confraternities either lay low or join a new confraternity in the destination country. The latter is most probable if the individual intends to undertake illicit activities – a context where interactions with confraternities are most likely.

In the diaspora context, however, the Black Axe provides a meeting space for members to reconnect, share and learn from one another's experiences in a foreign country. A member in Cape Town said: 'For me, the group is what has kept me all this while. When I started school, I had no money even to pay my school fees. The Black Axe members came through for me when I am in need. Even here, we support each other.'⁶³ Indeed, most members who joined the group joined for monetary and protection reasons.

Chart 7: Reasons people join cults (number of mentions)



Source: UNODC and NISS 2022

The application form alongside further emphasises the fact that people join because of the perceived support members give each other, especially in terms of livelihood support.

A Black Axe respondent explained: 'If you are new and want to do your papers, we have people that can help you process the papers for a fee,' reflecting how the network provides support to the diaspora.⁶⁴ The organisation supports members through monthly dues to zones that generate revenue depending on the number of paying members. Each zone worldwide pays an annual levy of 400 000 naira (about US\$262 as of July 2025) to the National Body in Benin City, with 300 000 naira allocated for the annual convention and 100 000 naira for operational expenses.⁶⁵ While monthly dues enable zones to secure operational funds, voluntary contributions from members are critical to cover shortfalls to support new and older members seeking financial support as well as philanthropic activities.

NEO-BLACK MOVEMENT OF AFRICA
(MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION FORM)

1. Name: _____ Tel: _____
2. Date Of Birth: 10/10/1977
3. Marital Status: Single
4. Nationality: Nigerian 5. Religion: Christian
6. L.G.A./ State Of Origin: Anambra
7. Residential Address: _____
8. Permanent Home Address: _____
9. Work Place Address: _____
10. Next of Kin: Uche
11. Academic Qualification: WABC
12. Secondary School Attended With Date: _____
13. Post Secondary School Attended With Date: _____
14. Association Belong/Position Held: _____
15. Occupation / Profession: Business
16. Why do you wish to join NBM Of Africa? I want to be a stronger person because I advise my close friends into one members and I like to have their own to each other
17. Name Two Referees (Members) 1. Uche
2. Osama
18. Declaration: I affirm that the information provided above is correct and true of my person. If accepted I shall abide by the rules and regulations of the Movement and will do nothing to bring the image of the Movement to disrepute.
19. Signature of Applicant: _____ Date: 11/12/11

Official Use Only:
Approved / Not Approved: _____ SIN: _____
NCOE Chairman Signature: _____
National Head Signature: _____

Source: NBM147watch⁶⁶

Zones in South Africa: history and internal conflicts

Black Axe respondents told ENACT that formal zonal structures began to emerge in the early 2000s as the Nigerian diaspora community in South Africa grew.⁶⁷ One of the first zones was the South Africa Zone, which was formally established in about 2003.

This zone is deliberately not included in the current list because the National Body in Benin disbanded it in April 2025 following a dispute between the zone and the NEXCO over the formation of new zones, as will be discussed further in this section. The South Africa Zone, which claims to still operate outside leadership control, is situated within the Gauteng province, particularly within the Johannesburg area. It was registered on 14 September 2007 as a non-profit organisation (NPO) with the name Neo-Black Movement of Africa and the enterprise number M2007026508.

The Cape Town and Durban Zones were established afterwards, sometime between 2010 and 2015. The zonal structure in Cape Town was recognised in 2013 by the NBM in Nigeria. Perry Osagiede, founder of the Cape Town Zone, became the Zonal Head for five years from 2013 to 2018. After his leadership, he became part of the ZCOE. Enorense Izevbogie took over from him in 2018 until his arrest in 2021 alongside Osagiede and others for involvement in criminal activities.⁶⁸ The South African BIZ platform shows that the zone was registered on 21 February 2018 as NBM of Africa Cape Town Zone (Pty) Ltd with registration number K2018090899 and a contact address in Parklands. The registered directors are Izevbogie, Osagiede and one other (name withheld).

There were two more recent registrations on 5 March 2025 with the names NBM of Africa Worldwide, enterprise number 2025/182217/08 and West North Gauteng Zone with enterprise number K2025182267. The two NPOs have the same contact address and three directors (names withheld). The first two directors were also listed under the 2007 NBM-registered NPO. The new registrations were likely carried out by the Gauteng-area zones just before the disbandment of the South Africa Zone. The disbandment offers insights into the internal dynamics within the Black Axe, including how new zones are created and internal tensions between criminality and the organisation's values.

The dispute revolved around the creation of a new zone called the West North Gauteng Zone in late 2024 following endorsement by the then national head in Benin City. The South Africa Zone leadership objected to the new zone, arguing it would split their territory and complicate the chain of command.⁶⁹ They

claimed that the new zone was driven by members who allegedly lost leadership positions in the zonal electoral circle.

After its creation in December 2024, the South Africa Zone issued a damning public letter on 20 February 2025, accusing the national leadership of destabilising interference in its operations.⁷⁰ The letter also warned that the West North Gauteng Zone was led by kidnappers and violent individuals, likening them to the Temple Ayes in Nigerian universities. This underlines the fact that Black Axe members are aware of criminal elements within their ranks.⁷¹ Several factional attacks have been reported in the area, including a shootout in Kempton Park. The letter accused a member of the West North Gauteng Zone who was a former zonal chief priest for shooting one of their members and planning to use *juju* to harm other members. An official from the Nigerian High Commission in Johannesburg reported receiving numerous cases of deaths involving confraternity members over the past two years.

The South Africa Zone accused the national leadership of destabilising interference in its operations

Members of the South Africa Zone also accused the former national head of engaging in money politics by favouring those who pay to have their way, including creating zones to serve the interests of the highest bidder.⁷² He is also accused of creating numerous zones under the guise of expansion while the new zones were designed to accumulate funds and secure patronage. The South Africa Zone said it would continue to operate as a zone and has stopped recognising the national leadership in Nigeria, which it described as being 'bought over' until 'the movement is freed from the shackles of tyranny.'⁷³

In response to this letter, the NBM's NCOE, on the recommendation of the NEXCO in Benin, de-axed or expelled⁷⁴ 21 members of the South Africa Zone in April 2025.⁷⁵ This includes terminating the zone and urging members to desist from any engagement or face de-axeation. The Johannesburg Zone and the Pretoria Zone were formed as replacements. De-axeation is common within the group,⁷⁶ but large-scale instances could lead to further insecurity, especially among Nigerian diaspora communities.

Similar internal challenges exist in KwaZulu-Natal where the Ekurhuleni Zone was carved out of the Durban Zone. This led to conflicts among members, including the use of law enforcement officers to intimidate opponents. For instance, rival members reportedly informed on the Zonal Head, prompting the police to search his premises for firearms and other illegal items. He was accused of doing the same to his rivals. In such cases, law enforcement agents risk being used as pawns in internal rivalries. At the time of writing, it remains unclear how the new leadership dynamics in August 2025 will affect the climate of insecurity within the Black Axe zones in South Africa.

Illicit activities in South Africa

In South Africa, awareness of the Black Axe became more widespread between 2021 and 2025 following the arrests of more than 20 people for orchestrating multimillion-dollar fraud schemes targeting US citizens. These arrests originated from extradition requests from the US. In the past, crimes involving Nigerian citizens in South Africa were often ascribed to the broader Nigerian diaspora community, leading to misinformed responses. This section expounds on the modus operandi of Black Axe involvement in illicit economies based on feedback from respondents and court cases involving Black Axe members. It highlights how these crimes reflect individual and clique-based activity rather than being directed and run as organisation-wide operations. The section further highlights where the Black Axe becomes culpable in the crimes of its members.

Internet fraud

Black Axe members are most prominently linked to high-stakes cybercrime such as advance-fee schemes, romance and lottery scams, BEC schemes, identity theft, unemployment insurance fraud, investor fraud and associated money laundering.⁷⁷ Interpol, in concert with countries such as the US, Canada, Germany, Italy,

Ireland and the UK, are leading sting operations to dismantle so-called Black Axe financial fraud syndicates.

Cybercrime costs South Africa over R2.2 billion annually.⁷⁸ Hawks agents in Cape Town told ENACT of multiple fraud cases involving Nigerian nationals, but said they were unsure of any links to Black Axe, highlighting their limited knowledge of confraternities.

In 2021, the arrest of eight high-ranking Black Axe members in Parklands, Cape Town, illuminated the autonomous strategies of cybercrime syndicates whose members derive protection from the Black Axe structures.⁷⁹ The group included the zone's founder, former Head, Chairman of the ZCOE, Chief Ihaza (treasurer), Chief Eye (secretary), Assistant Eye and Assistant Butcher (disciplinarian). A former Chief Butcher, a co-perpetrator, remains at large, wanted by the US Secret Service.⁸⁰

The syndicate employed multiple fraudulent schemes to defraud individuals, companies and even universities, amounting to over US\$17 million. In one case alone, the Cape Town syndicate defrauded a US company of US\$2 million in less than two months in 2020. In a separate BEC scam involving three Black Axe members resident in South Africa, a US company lost over US\$6 million between 2016 and 2017.⁸¹ Individuals and syndicates linked to the Black Axe are successful in using phishing tactics and ransomware to steal sensitive information, including login passwords, credit card details and account numbers.⁸² The sophisticated schemes show that the syndicate relied on members affiliated with the Black Axe in the US, Canada, Ireland, China, Italy and elsewhere to orchestrate these complex crimes. The use of affiliated members across the globe ensures that confidentiality is maintained and all parties adhere to the terms of the agreement.

Most of the indicted syndicates used romance as a central strategy to defraud victims or launder illicit funds. In terms of the former, the syndicates routinely target victims through email, social media and online dating sites using false identities. They pose as engineers deployed for an assignment in South Africa.⁸³ They gradually fabricate emergencies to pressure victims into sending money or valuables, either to South Africa or to accomplices. When victims are reluctant, the fraudsters threaten to expose their sensitive information and pictures.⁸⁴

In 2022, the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the US Secret Service sent out a questionnaire 'seeking individuals who may have knowledge of or have fallen victim to romance scams, advance-fee schemes, and business email compromises, perpetrated by a suspected criminal group, originating from Cape Town, South Africa starting in 2013.'⁸⁵ While BEC schemes

Cybercrime costs South Africa over R2.2 billion annually

resulted in high monetary losses, the majority of the victims of the Cape Town suspects were from romance scams.

Within South Africa, a Black Axe member known as South Africa's Tinder Swindler, was arrested in Roodepoort in 2022 for defrauding an elderly South African woman of about US\$120 000 in six months via a romance scam on Tinder posing as an American engineer, Larry Cole.⁸⁶ Evidence shows that fraudsters often use the names of Caucasian American males to target their victims across the globe.⁸⁷ According to the 2023 ENACT Organised Crime Index: 'South Africa is also one of the top countries globally where people are most likely to fall victim to online romance scams.'⁸⁸ Elderly people, especially women, are primary targets because they tend to be more trusting and have limited knowledge of the Internet, although anyone can be targeted.⁸⁹ Some victims are encouraged to invest in cryptocurrencies managed by the syndicates, with several losing their life savings.

In terms of using romance scams to launder illicit proceeds, South Africans, especially women, are routinely recruited as money mules.⁹⁰ For instance, a syndicate involving eight Nigerian men and three South African women was arrested in Johannesburg in 2022 for using a BEC scheme to defraud a US-based mental health institute of about US\$500 000.⁹¹ Investigations revealed that the funds were transferred into multiple bank accounts, including those of the South African women, who believed the money funnelled into their accounts were from legitimate sources.⁹²

Hawks officials claim these syndicates will go to any length, including exploiting romantic relationships, to recruit money mules. Two of the women pleaded guilty to money laundering in 2023 and 'were sentenced to a fine of R10 000 each, plus five years' imprisonment wholly suspended for five years.'⁹³ Using the bank accounts of local citizens serves to distance the syndicates from illicit funds while lending credibility that encourages victims to send money.

Research on six million credit cards shows that South Africa ranks 12th among the most affected countries by credit card fraud

Women are also recruited to facilitate credit card fraud by cloning cards or sharing card details obtained from restaurants, hotels, bars and airline offices. The syndicates also buy cloned cards. Research by NordVPN on six million credit cards on eight major dark web marketplaces shows that South Africa ranks 12th among the most affected countries.⁹⁴ These cards are used to fund luxurious lifestyles and buy high-value items that are later resold for cash. An intelligence officer described how cloned cards and cards bought on the dark web, were also used to buy airline tickets for collaborators and unsuspecting passengers, who paid cash to the fraudsters.⁹⁵

Despite the involvement of senior Black Axe members, the fraudulent schemes lack evidence of organisational directives, consistent with networked crime's emphasis on fluid, adaptive structures. Their criminal activities are typically carried out within closed syndicates, with illicit proceeds shared among participants according to individual contribution rather than position and not funnelled to the broader organisation. Respondents with insights on confraternities maintain that Black Axe structures exist to provide members with access to collaborators and security guarantees.⁹⁶

In Nigeria, cybercrime training academies, or 'hustling kingdoms' run by 'Chairmen' affiliated with the Black Axe and other confraternities, recruit vulnerable undergraduates and graduates who work relentlessly to defraud victims, referred to as 'Mugu' or 'Maga.'⁹⁷ They justify cybercrime as a means of reclaiming wealth stolen from Africa,⁹⁸ targeting global victims indiscriminately while portraying them as greedy.⁹⁹ These hustling kingdoms manage a vast pool of experienced young fraudsters, fuelling the adaptability and sophistication of cybercrimes. Syndicates sponsor some of these young fraudsters to migrate abroad.

Drug trafficking

Nigerian confraternities are widely reported to be involved in drug trafficking in Europe, especially in Italy. In South Africa, Nigerian nationals are frequently linked to drug trafficking. The Nigerian High Commission in Pretoria has acknowledged and pledged to address drug-related crimes involving Nigerian citizens.¹⁰⁰ Several Nigerians have been linked to the trafficking and trade in illicit drugs such as cocaine, heroin, crystal meth and CAT.

However, the extent to which those arrested are linked to the Black Axe and other confraternities is not reported by the media and law enforcement agencies, mostly due to the limited knowledge of Nigerian confraternities in South Africa. Moreover, drug trafficking mainly focuses on possession, unlike cybercrime, which requires analysing emails, social media and money-laundering chains to map suspects' networks and affiliations.

Nevertheless, court cases, such as those involving the suspects in Cape Town, show that a member of the syndicate had already been convicted for drug trafficking in 2009.¹⁰¹ This highlights the extent to which members operate multiple organised crimes in a flexible manner and are willing to transition from one criminal activity to another. Accounts from Black Axe members in Cape Town and Johannesburg show that a significant number of those involved in drug trafficking are linked to confraternities because they need the protection offered by these networks. The drug syndicates in South Africa collaborate with counterparts in Europe, who have ties to cartels in South America, especially Brazil,¹⁰² Columbia and Mexico, enabling the syndicates to traffic drugs into South Africa or produce them locally.

Most of the meth produced in Nigeria is exported to South Africa, where 1 kg can sell for up to R200 000

Syndicates collaborating with Mexican partners produce meth in Nigeria, which has become one of the largest meth-producing countries in Africa. Reports show that most of the meth produced in Nigeria is exported to South Africa, where 1 kg can sell for up to R200 000.¹⁰³ Interviews with Hawks officials and Black Axe respondents reveal that these syndicates are now producing meth in South Africa. In 2019, South African authorities busted a multimillion-rand drug lab in Sandton operated by Nigerians.¹⁰⁴ Several manufacturing tools and chemicals were found at the house along with Mandrax estimated at about R2.5 million and CAT worth R500 000.

In 2016, a Nigerian, along with two Taiwanese and two Mozambicans, was arrested in a warehouse with crystal meth manufacturing equipment and chemicals worth about 96 million naira.¹⁰⁵ Reports show that syndicates from Nigeria 'control most of the meth production and upper-level distribution in Southern and East Africa' although they compete with Afghan and Pakistani meth producers.¹⁰⁶ When they are not producing drugs, syndicates linked to confraternities allegedly use South African women and vulnerable members as drug mules to traffic drugs such as cocaine from South America into South Africa.¹⁰⁷

Respondents indicate that individuals affiliated with the Black Axe are involved in the street-level trading of drugs such as cocaine, meth and heroin in South African townships and city brothels.¹⁰⁸ In Johannesburg, these activities occur in Berea, Hillbrow and Smit Street, while in Pretoria, they are concentrated in Sunnyside and Kempton Park.¹⁰⁹ In Cape Town, neighbourhoods such as Bellville, Sea Point, Table View and Parklands are notorious for drug trade by various syndicates, including those linked to the Black Axe.

These areas are shared with syndicates from other confraternities, but some respondents claim that syndicates only operate in brothels owned or managed by their confraternity members to avoid clashes.¹¹⁰ When syndicates face challenges with other rival confraternities or traders, they call on their Black Axe network for protection and to intimidate opponents.

For instance, several killings involving rival confraternities in South Africa have been linked to business deals gone wrong or the quest to control the illicit drug trade in certain areas, prompting the concern of the Nigeria Union in South Africa.¹¹¹ In the inner cities of Durban and Johannesburg, unconfirmed sources

indicate clashes between the Vikings and the Black Axe over the control of the drug trade.¹¹² Additionally, two Nigerian nationals linked to the Black Axe were murdered in the Kempton Park area in January 2022. One of them was a South African-based Nigerian rapper, who was known for singing about the NBM.¹¹³ It is uncertain whether it was an inter-confraternity clash or one motivated by internal rivalries.

The drug trade landscape also involves other actors, including Tanzanians, allegedly key players in the supply of heroin to South Africa.¹¹⁴ However, little is known about the extent to which the syndicates linked to the Black Axe cooperate with local gangs involved in drugs, highlighting the need for further research.

Sex trafficking

There is ample literature on the role of madams in trafficking Nigerian women, especially from Edo State and the South-East. However, little is known about the key role of confraternities in the sex trafficking chain. While the Eiye Confraternity is sometimes cited as the major purveyor of sex trafficking,¹¹⁵ Black Axe syndicates are also cited as key players in many European countries, including Italy, Germany, France and Switzerland.¹¹⁶ Some Black Axe members facilitate sex trafficking by recruiting madams, managing brothels and controlling victims through threats of violence and black magic.¹¹⁷

In South Africa, ENACT's review of evidence from Brave to Love, an NGO supporting victims of sex trafficking, shows that some Black Axe members are involved in sexual exploitation. The author further verified the names of the suspects on Black Axe's communication materials. Allegations show Black Axe members exploit women from the region including South Africa and Zimbabwe, unlike European syndicates, which mainly target their own nationals.

Women are introduced to drugs, creating dependency on the syndicate and leading to further exploitation

Sources report that syndicates recruit young women from disadvantaged townships in South Africa to work as sex workers in brothels and pubs.¹¹⁸ For those working in brothels and on the streets, men pay syndicate members directly. The women are compensated based on the number of encounters after the syndicate takes its cut under the guise of providing security and space. In some cases, the women are introduced to potent and addictive drugs, creating dependency on the syndicate and leading to further exploitation.¹¹⁹ In 2024, for instance, a Nigerian was sentenced to life imprisonment for sex trafficking including using drugs to control women

in Centurion where he ran a brothel.¹²⁰ The affiliation of the individual is unconfirmed, although respondents insist it is likely that he operates with a confraternity group.

Second, some trafficked women are forced to work from flats owned or rented by the syndicates, which also manage their social accounts, negotiate prices and coordinate appointments between clients and the sex workers. Some victims of sex trafficking say they are sometimes held captive, an approach employed in a separate incident by a Nigerian syndicate.¹²¹ Respondents note that South African women and a few Nigerian women are trafficked to work in the adult entertainment industry in major cities.¹²² However, most victims are of local origin.

Brave to Love reported an incident involving a Black Axe member who allegedly kidnapped a South African woman for weeks until the Brave to Love team along with officials of the South African Police Service raided his hideout in Johannesburg.¹²³ Sources say the case is linked to the syndicate involved in kidnapping mentioned in the public letter by officials of the erstwhile South Africa Zone.

Money laundering

Money laundering by Black Axe syndicates involves a complex placement and layering process to disguise the origin of funds. This involves the use of conspirators, multiple money mules, sham companies, charities and religious institutions.

Respondents report that funds for drugs are sent through money mules and conspirators to shell companies in Europe and South America. For cybercrimes, conspirators use multiple accounts, with several money mules receiving and distributing funds to the syndicate. On one occasion, for instance, a Black Axe member¹²⁴ operating from South Africa cooperated with a US citizen to defraud multiple companies and elderly citizens in the US.¹²⁵ The US Attorney's Office for the Southern District of New York stated that:

[A co-conspirator in the US] controlled multiple US and foreign bank accounts that received funds from victims targeted by these schemes. [He] also obtained and provided his foreign co-conspirators in South Africa with cell phones with American numbers subscribed to his plan, which were used to contact and defraud victims. And on at least one occasion, [he] personally contacted a victim pretending to be a government official involved in detaining the victim's partner to induce the victim to send money.¹²⁶

Each money flow chain involves a wider network of beneficiaries reaching the masterminds. The Black Axe membership guarantees the beneficiation process for each member involved. For instance, when a collaborator or money mule – referred to as an 'Axeman' or 'Picker' – fails to distribute illicit proceeds as agreed, the organisation steps in to mediate or enforce through intimidation or violence. Should they occupy high-level positions, fraudsters could mobilise the entire Black Axe violent machinery against rivals. A respondent noted that non-members lacked this 'guarantee' highlighting how fraudsters align with confraternities as a form of extra-legal governance in environments where law enforcement is inaccessible.¹²⁷

Syndicates in South Africa rely on local money mules to receive transferred funds. This is evident in the case of the two South African women convicted for receiving illicit proceeds and disbursing them to syndicate members. Bank employees are also major targets for these syndicates, as they enable the group to execute transactions and avoid transactions that could warrant investigation. A respondent reported that the role of some syndicate members was to enter into some form of romantic relationship with a woman target to convince them to be a money mule. Some victims hand over full control of their bank accounts to the syndicates, which shows that victims of romance scams are not only swindled but also coerced into acting as conspirators to launder funds.

Syndicates linked to the Black Axe operate several sham companies and NPOs. In the case of the eight suspects in Cape Town, some illicit funds from BEC scams were wired by conspirators and money mules to the syndicates spurious business accounts in South Africa. Fake businesses such as Abravoo Trading Company, Edosflex (Pty) Ltd, Otubu Properties (Pty) Ltd and Peroski Auto & Spares (Pty) Ltd were used to

A Black Axe member operating from South Africa cooperated with a US citizen to defraud multiple companies and elderly citizens in the US

receive funds from BEC and romance scams. Those involved in drug trafficking also use fake companies to send funds to their suppliers abroad. Respondents alleged that syndicates operated Nigerian-owned churches and charity organisations to receive and transfer funds.¹²⁸

Case files show how syndicate groups move illicit funds through local and foreign bank accounts, cryptocurrency exchange accounts and mobile wallets to further distance the funds from criminal activity. Interpol notes that Black Axe and similar groups are early adopters of technologies like cryptocurrency, which facilitate anonymous transactions. Additionally, these syndicates are adept at using fake passports and false identities to transfer funds via platforms such as Western Union, MoneyGram, Coinbase, Green Dot and prepaid cards.¹²⁹

Beyond cash, syndicates and conspirators buy high-value items such as cars in Europe and ship them to so-called car dealers in South Africa or send them as gifts from relations abroad. The cars are then sold in South Africa, disguising the origin of the funds. Case files show that some successful syndicate members own luxurious private homes, rental properties and executive cars, all paid in cash. The complex laundering tactics complicate the 'follow-the-money' approach making it difficult to trace and recover funds.

Options for response: levels of culpability

South Africa's collaboration with international bodies such as Interpol and the US has enabled arrests and asset seizures linked to Black Axe, but many syndicates remain unknown due to a limited understanding of confraternities and their ties to crime groups. As South Africa deepens its understanding of Nigerian confraternities, it is critical to develop a context-specific, nuanced strategy to address the multifaceted nature of Black Axe's involvement in crime, which spans individual agency, syndicate autonomy and organisational complicity.

As described above, the examples of illicit activities linked to the Black Axe show that criminality linked to the organisation involves independent agencies of individuals and groups, deviating from the traditional hierarchical mafia model, where a centralised authority orchestrates illicit operations. These syndicates operate independently and fluidly, adapting to emerging opportunities and market conditions. Unlike a top-down criminal enterprise, the Black Axe as an organisation does not appear to strategically direct these activities. Rather, members leverage the group's network for access to collaborators and protection, while the broader organisation remains insulated from direct involvement.

Affluent members, some potentially involved in illicit activities, use their financial influence to secure dominance within the Black Axe. These contributions, while discretionary, can shape organisational priorities and provide cover for criminal actors seeking to launder money or gain social capital. This dynamic reflects a form of 'elite capture' within the organisation, where criminal actors leverage wealth and influence to maintain power without necessarily implicating the broader membership.¹³⁰ The interplay between legitimate and illicit financial flows underscores the need for law enforcement to trace money trails within specific syndicates, rather than targeting the organisation's general revenue streams.

The Black Axe's complicity in criminality is most evident in its protection-racket culture, which operates as a quasi-institutionalised mechanism for enforcing agreements and resolving disputes in the criminal underworld. Syndicates engaged in cybercrime, drug trafficking or other illicit activities rely on the Black Axe's network to enforce transactional agreements when deals go awry.

This protection racket extends beyond criminal disputes to include legitimate business owners affiliated with the Black Axe. In areas such as Kempton Park, Black Axe members have confronted rival groups and even their own members engaged in extorting Nigerian business owners, demonstrating the group's dual role as both protector and enforcer.¹³¹ Yet, these businesses could end up being coerced into paying homage to the most prominent confraternity in the area to secure their businesses. Such actions blur the line between racketeering and communal defence, aligning with criminological theories of 'hybrid organisations' that combine legitimate and illicit functions.¹³²

Conclusion

This study examined the intricate dynamics of Black Axe highlighting its stated ideals and its elaborate governance structure, which contrasts with the criminality linked to the organisation. Far from a centralised criminal enterprise, Black Axe's illicit activities stem from autonomous individuals and syndicates exploiting its loyalty bonds and violent machinery. These syndicates, driven by individual opportunism and market adaptability, leverage the confraternity's protection-racket culture – physical and legal support – to secure their operations in the criminal underworld. While many members are not directly involved in crime, the organisation's violent subculture, rooted in historical rivalries and socio-economic desperation, heightens their culpability and vulnerability to criminal influence.

The NBM's rebranding efforts, including disavowing the Black Axe alias, signal internal reform but are insufficient without proactive measures to curb violent practices and elite influence. The international community therefore has a transformative role to play to prevent blanket criminalisation, which risks alienating legitimate members and driving syndicates underground, entrenching the resilience of criminal groups. South African authorities must adopt targeted strategies: disrupting key syndicate nodes through network analysis, tracing illicit financial flows and addressing socio-economic drivers, such as unemployment and insecurities, that fuel recruitment.

Recommendations

Based on the above analysis, the study puts forth the following key recommendations:

Black Axe

- **Proactively fight crime within the organisation**
Suspend members known for criminality, withdraw collective support for illicit activities and cease legal and financial backing of criminal entities. Cooperate with authorities during the ongoing state of emergency to identify criminal syndicates, rebrand the organisation and eliminate unnecessary secrecy that undermines its integrity.
- **End mob protection for members**
Penalise the use of force and mob-protection practices. Restructure recruitment to admit graduates only, preventing non-graduates from being drawn into violence. Maintain non-violent benefits such as networking and addressing local and diaspora challenges, while promoting a lawful organisational culture.

South African government and law enforcement

- **Target syndicates with network analysis**
Map Black Axe-affiliated syndicates using social network analysis, identifying key actors in cybercrime, drug trafficking, money laundering and sex trafficking. Focus extended investigation on co-conspirators without disrupting legitimate members.
- **Enhance cybercrime and financial forensics**
Invest in specialised cybercrime units trained in digital forensics and cross-border collaboration with Interpol, Europol, the US and Nigeria to disrupt romance scams and BEC schemes. Strengthen financial forensics to trace and seize illicit assets, reducing the profitability of Black Axe-affiliated syndicates.
- **Strengthen community prevention and policing strategy**
In collaboration with the Nigerian High Commission, provide vocational training, mentorship and economic opportunities for at-risk Nigerian diaspora youths, reducing their susceptibility to syndicate recruitment. Enhance policing in high-risk areas to offer legitimate security alternatives and weaken the appeal of Black Axe's protection rackets.
- **Bolster anti-corruption measures**
Improve law enforcement remuneration and oversight to prevent bribery ensuring agents remain uncompromised and enhancing the effectiveness of targeted operations against syndicates.

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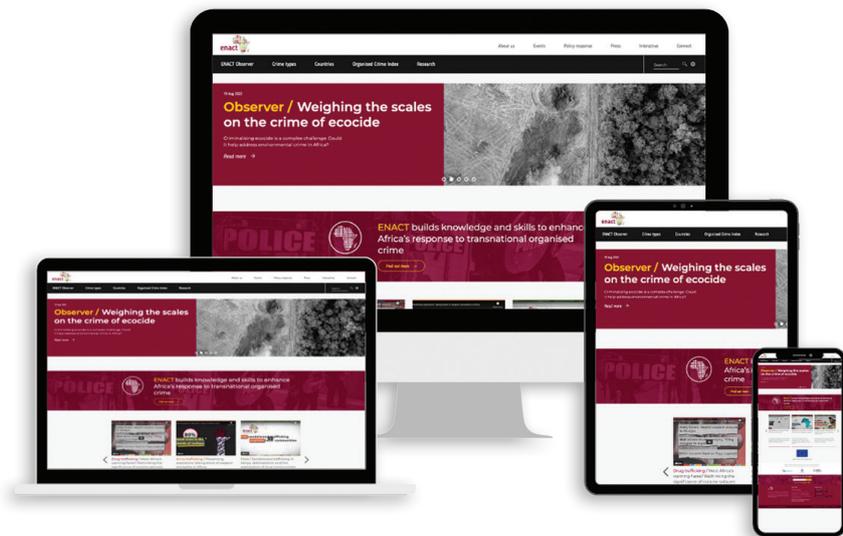
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