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# 2.13. Individuals targeted by student cults

COMMON ANALYSIS
Last update: February 2019
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This profile refers to individuals targeted by student cults (e.g. Eiye, Black Axe), including a specific reference to the situation of former members of such cults. In addition, reference is made to secret societies (e.g. Ogboni).

## COI summary

[Targeting, 3.10, 3.11]

**Student cults** thrive in the Southern states of Nigeria. Nowadays, they often operate outside universities, where the phenomenon originated.

Cults use several distinctive signs, such as bodily decorations (e.g. tattoos or piercing), clothing with specific colours, and coded language.

Around 100 cults were banned in 2004 under the Secret Cult and Cult Related Activities (Prohibition) Bill. Hundreds of cult members have been arrested and prosecuted over the years, however, cults continue to operate [Security situation 2021, 1.4.1.1].

Student cults currently operate similarly to militia groups [Security situation 2021, 1.4.1]. They have violent initiation rites, and engage in illegal activities, including killings, human trafficking, drugs trafficking, etc. Cults are also used by political parties and party members to commit violence during elections, and against political rivals [Targeting, 2.3.3].

These groups continued to operate in 2019 and 2020 by engaging in off-campus violence and crime, especially in Lagos and Rivers state. For 2019, Nigeria Watch recorded cultism in 21 states in Nigeria resulting in 536 fatalities through 168 lethal cult incidents. ACLED’s dataset recorded in the whole of Nigeria in 2020, 35 cult-related incidents, resulting in 58 fatalities. [ Security situation 2021, 1.4.1.1]

Recruitment and initiation rites may be forced, including following a kidnapping. Initiation often involves violence, such as beating and rape. Potential members may also be forced to commit crimes. According to some sources, it can be ‘extremely difficult’ to leave a cult after having been initiated, and former members may be killed for fear of revealing the cult’s secrets. There is no information on the consequences of refusing to join a student cult.

**Secret societies** are known to operate in Nigeria. There are no particular accusations of human rights violations by and against actual or former members. However, if a person reveals the secrets of the society it is reported that there may be repercussions.

### Risk analysis

Individuals targeted by **student cults**, including former members, could be exposed to acts which are of such severe nature that they would amount to persecution (e.g. killing, physical violence, rape). With regard to former members of student cults, it should be clarified that the legitimate law enforcement and prosecution response by the authorities would not amount to persecution.

Not all individuals under this profile would face the level of risk required to establish well-founded fear of persecution. The individual assessment of whether there is a reasonable degree of likelihood for the applicant to face persecution should take into account risk-impacting circumstances, such as: past membership to a cult, (perceived) intention of the applicant to reveal the secrets of the cult, etc.

There is no reliable information indicating risk of human rights violations by **secret societies**, including with regard to former members.

### Nexus to a reason for persecution

According to available information, the targeting of **victims of the cult's criminal activity** is generally without nexus to a Convention reason for persecution, since the crimes are committed for profit and can affect anyone. This is without prejudice to individual cases where nexus could be established based on additional circumstances. For example, in relation to the use of cults to commit violence against political rivals, see the profile Members and perceived supporters of political parties.

Although it can be found that **former and current members of student cults** have a common background that cannot be changed (past participation in a cult) and a distinct identity in Nigeria, because they are perceived as being different by the surrounding society, it is found that the potential persecution which former members face by the cult is not for reasons of such membership of a particular social group. Therefore, the nexus requirement would generally not be satisfied in the case of former members of student cults.

Exclusion considerations could be relevant to the sub-profile of former members of student cults (see the chapter on Exclusion).

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