2.2.3. Traffickers, recruitment and modus operandi

2.2.3. Traffickers, recruitment and *modus operandi*

Many actors are involved in trafficking, including family and community members, or individuals in religious settings.124 Organised criminal groups are among the main actors involved in trafficking of human beings in Nigeria.125 In the context of migration routes, actors involved in migrant smuggling may also engage in trafficking, either by collaborating with trafficking networks or by directly exploiting migrants themselves.126

Trafficking networks exploit Nigerian victims in Europe, the Middle East (including the Gulf countries) mostly in sex trafficking and domestic servitude. Criminal groups, some linked to cults or confraternities (for more information see EUAA COI Report – Nigeria Security Situation November 2025), are highly structured and play a central role also in international trafficking. 127 Nigerian confraternities involved in sex trafficking, such as Black Axe, Supreme Viking Confraternity, Arobaga Vikings, the Maphite, and the Eiye syndicate, are becoming increasingly organised, violent, and sophisticated. These groups have expanded their networks, collaborating with European mafias and other organised criminal groups, and are shifting their focus towards a broader range of criminal activities, with human trafficking becoming less central to their operations.128 Between April and July 2024, police units across 21 countries conducted a series of coordinated operations targeting the Black Axe, one of West Africa's most notorious and secretive criminal networks involved in global trafficking, prostitution, and killing operations. The operation led to the arrest of 300 individuals.129

In January 2025, the Nigeria Immigration Service (NIS) uncovered a sect in Kaduna State, Northwestern Nigeria, allegedly linked to trafficking in human beings' activities. The group, known as ACHAD Life Mission International, is reported to promote the revival of African traditions and operates independently of any mainstream religion. Its leader, identified as Yokana, is based in Jos, Plateau State, an area recently classified as a human trafficking hotspot, particularly for cases involving the trafficking of children. According to authorities, more than 100 victims were rescued in Plateau State over the past year.130

Trafficking is often facilitated through personal and communal networks, and in some contexts, it is viewed not as exploitation but as a voluntary and viable path to economic and social advancement.131 Especially in Edo State, trafficking victims are often familiar with their traffickers, who are typically part of their community and perceived as 'sponsors' offering assistance in traveling abroad.132 Traffickers are often perceived not as criminals, but as business associates or migration agents, comparable to recruiters of professionals like doctors

and nurses.[133] As explained by Roland Nwoha, director at IRARA Nigeria,[134] most people do not recognise the criminal nature of trafficking: 'some victims even view traffickers as saviours, as people who have come to rescue them from harsh economic conditions.'[135] Most victims of trafficking who have been returned through IOM programmes from 2017 to the first quarter of 2024 reported to have been trafficked by their friend and acquaintance, while other reported having been trafficked by family members or relatives.[136]

Corruption and official complicity in trafficking[137] have remained widespread in Nigeria, undermining law enforcement and enabling impunity. Corrupt officials, security officers, and aid workers are reported to have committed sexual exploitation and trafficking crimes, particularly in IDP camps.[138]

Within trafficking networks, multiple actors play distinct and critical roles throughout the exploitation process. It often begins with an individual presenting a seemingly promising opportunity to vulnerable persons. These individuals are then connected to a central figure known as the 'Connection Man' or 'Border,' who coordinates the logistics of the trafficking operation. The 'Connection Man' arranges travel for the victims and connects them with overseas 'Buyers' who provide financial backing for the victims' journey. 'Buyers', commonly referred to as 'Madams' or 'Masters', cover the travel expenses to reduce the amount owed to the 'Connection Man' upon the victims' arrival. Once in the hands of the 'Buyers', victims may be resold or leased to 'Users' for various forms of exploitation.[139]

Sex trafficking networks operate through decentralised, specialised criminal groups involving various actors across all stages of the trafficking cycle, from recruitment to exploitation. Recruiters, including women and online agents, lure victims with false promises of jobs or education. Traditional religious figures, such as *juju* priests, perform oath ceremonies to control victims, while community leaders may issue threats. Family members may also be complicit, either through deception or financial gain. Fraudulent intermediaries and brokers in both rural and urban areas recruit victims under the pretence of legitimate opportunities. During transport, 'movement facilitators' use bribery to bypass law enforcement, while 'escorting traffickers' (also called 'Trolleys' or 'Coyotes') maintain physical control over victims. 'Logisticians' arrange travel, and 'migrant smugglers' (some of whom exploit or sell victims) support with the movement across borders. Corrupt officials may also enable transit in exchange for bribes or sexual acts. Recruitment methods continue to prey on victims' hopes for a better life by offering fraudulent opportunities. These often include false promises of well-paid jobs abroad, such as in beauty parlours, shops, salons, or as waitresses, models, nurses, teachers, hairdressers, nannies, and receptionists, as well as false study programs and fake immigration offers to Europe, countries in the North African and Middle Eastern region, or the Americas. Deceptive tactics, such as fake marriage proposals, trick victims into willingly accepting these arrangements or coerce migrant women into prostitution under the pretence of repaying fabricated debts.[140]

IOM reported that the top five means of control traffickers use against Nigerian victims are physical abuse, deception, psychological abuse, threat, and withholding wages.[141] The role of *juju*[142] oath-taking in Nigerian trafficking networks has been well documented.[143] Traffickers use *juju* oath-taking as a means of control to keep victims obedient and bound to their captors. Before victims begin their journey abroad, traffickers often take them to shrines where they are

forced to swear oaths. Belief holds that breaking the oath will result in severe consequences, including diseases, mental illness, and various forms of misfortune or harm. These oaths typically include promises to repay the traffickers for the cost of the journey and vows never to reveal the identities or whereabouts of their traffickers.144 The *juju* ceremonies are typically conducted in Nigeria, but they also occur in Libya and Europe. In certain instances, the community's religious leader is responsible for both initiating contact with the victim and issuing threats.145 Victims are usually trapped in debts, which may range from 20 000€ to 50 000€.146

In 2018, the Oba of Benin kingdom (Southern Nigeria), the traditional religious ruler who has moral authority over all *juju* priests in Edo State147, cursed human trafficking, as well as all priests who perform oaths between traffickers and their victims, and nullified all previous *juju* oaths sworn by trafficking victims.148 As noted by scholar Dr Sarah Adeyinka149 in an interview with the EUAA, the Oba of Benin's declaration was 'remarkable' and had ripple effects both in Nigeria and abroad. Delivered in a culturally resonant manner and in local language, the declaration was actively used by law enforcement in EU countries in anti-trafficking efforts between 2018 and 2020. According to the same source, during this period, there were reports of trafficked women in Italy choosing to return to Nigeria, while within Nigeria some victims reportedly left their traffickers. Some traffickers themselves also contacted victims, urging them to break off ties, fearing consequences from the curse.150

Despite its initial impact, the influence of the Oba's declaration has diminished over time.151 Also, some traffickers who do not originate from Edo State believed the Oba of Benin's 2018 curse did not apply to them. As a result, some have continued trafficking activities with little fear of spiritual consequences.152 Dr Adeyinka stated that recruitment by traffickers has not stopped, noting that 'even though, reaching Italy has become very difficult, if not impossible, many are still recruited daily, unaware that common routes are blocked or of the journey's risks, often even without realising where they are going.'153 The same source mentioned reports indicating that *juju* rituals and blood oaths continue to be used, reflecting the enduring role of traditional beliefs in trafficking practices. In addition, traffickers have also become more sophisticated in their tactics, for instance, increasingly turning to 'sextortion'. Before a victim travels, traffickers often force them to strip naked, record videos and threaten to release footage to their family or the public if the agreed costs are not repaid, intensifying the victim's fear and control.154 The Director at IRARA Nigeria stated that there are signs of a gradual resurgence in previous trafficking patterns, with traffickers becoming increasingly bold, using familiar tactics such as deception and false promises.155

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  Juju is a term commonly used to describe the traditional spiritual practices of the Yoruba people. It is a belief system that involves the use of objects like amulets and the casting of spells, often associated with witchcraft. *Juju* is prevalent in West Africa, particularly among communities in Nigeria. See Counter Trafficking Network, Tutorial: Juju & Witchcraft, 2020, url, p. 1

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Nwoha R., online interview with EUAA, 18 July 2025

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Adeyinka S., online interview with EUAA, 16 July 2025

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