

# Responses to Information Requests - Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

Nigeria: Ogboni society, including structure, rituals, ceremonies, and current status; membership and the consequences of refusing to join or trying to leave; relationship with police and judicial authorities (2017-April 2019)

## 1. Challenges in Gathering Information

In correspondence with the Research Directorate, an official at the Canadian High Commission in Abuja stated that there is "very little concrete information or evidence available about the Ogboni society" or information that is not speculative (Canada 27 Mar. 2019a). For the purpose of this Response, the official gathered information from other officials in Nigeria who provided comments and references to "speculations ... based on local knowledge and research/consultations with local sources in Abuja and Lagos" (Canada 27 Mar. 2019b). The Canadian official also noted that locally-held beliefs about the cult were strong and local sources were fearful of speaking openly about the Ogboni society, leading to extrapolation and inference based on available information (Canada 27 Mar. 2019b). In correspondence with the Research Directorate, a professor of Yoruba language and culture at the University of Indiana stated that information on the structure of the Ogboni Society and its rituals is accessible only to its members or individuals who are very close to a member (Professor 27 Mar. 2019).

## 2. Overview

For information on the Ogboni society's history, rituals and ceremonies, see Response to Information Request NGA104213 of November 2012. More recent information on these topics could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

According to a representative of Nigeria's National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), as stated in correspondence with the Research Directorate, the word "Ogboni" is a generic term that can refer to "several Ogboni societies," such as the Osugbo, Aborigine Ogboni Society, Awo Opa, or the Reformed Ogboni Fraternity (ROF), for example (Nigeria 21 Apr. 2019). However, some sources stated that the "traditional" Ogboni society is distinct from the ROF (Sociologist 27 Mar. 2019; Centennial Professor 18 Mar. 2019), which is described as a "Nigerianised version of the Freemasons with some 'traditional' elements" (Centennial Professor 18 Mar. 2019) and was founded by educated elite Yoruba Christians in 1915 with voluntary membership for the purpose of networking (Centennial Professor 14 Mar. 2019).

Sources state that the traditional Ogboni society was an organization created among the Yoruba ethnic group in Nigeria as a society of elders (Sociologist 27 Mar. 2019; Canada 27 Mar. 2019a; Centennial Professor 20 Mar. 2019), with ranking (Sociologist 27 Mar. 2019), leadership (Canada 27 Mar. 2019a) or prestige in the group based on old age (Centennial Professor 14 Mar. 2019).

The NHRC representative described the Ogboni society as a Yorubaland social-

cultural institution that "functioned as a town council, civic cult, and electoral college for selecting a new king and dethroning a bad or unpopular one" (Nigeria 21 Apr. 2019). The Ogboni society is referred to as a "cult" (Canada 27 Mar. 2019a), a "secret society" (Centennial Professor 14 Mar. 2019), or a [translation] "traditional secret society" (France 27 Feb. 2015, 3). In correspondence with the Research Directorate, a centennial professor of anthropology at the London School of Economics (LSE), whose research focuses on Yoruba-speaking areas of Nigeria, stated that the Ogboni has "historically" been "feared" as a society of Yoruba elders due to the fact that its members were "very old" and seen as carrying authority due to their closer proximity to their ancestors (Centennial Professor 20 Mar. 2019). The rituals and practices of the Ogboni society are not known to outsiders or the uninitiated (Professor 27 Mar. 2019; Canada 27 Mar. 2019a; France 27 Feb. 2015, 2).

The Professor of Yoruba studies also commented that the cultural belief in the supernatural cuts across all spheres of life in Yorubaland, even among nominal Christians and Muslims, and "especially" among "traditional religious practitioners" (Professor 27 Mar. 2019). Without providing further details, the Canadian official noted that there is a belief among non-members that the Ogboni society engages in "supernatural" rituals and practices that can be "brutal and violent" (Canada 27 Mar. 2019a). Sources indicate that Ogboni society is alleged to engage in activities such as ritual human sacrifices [or sacrifices involving body parts (Canada 27 Mar. 2019a)] (Sociologist 29 Mar. 2019; Professor 27 Mar. 2019) or blood rituals, or rituals aiming to become wealthy (Professor 27 Mar. 2019). Further information on rituals and activities of the Ogboni society could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response. For further information on ritual practices in Yorubaland, see Response to Information Request NGA104602 of November 2013.

### 3. Current Status

According to a 2018 article in the *Guardian* Nigerian newspaper, the Ogboni society plays a role in the "socio-political and religious affairs of the Yoruba people" and, in pre-colonial times, the judiciary of Yoruba kingdoms was under the "tutelage of the Ogboni," though "this [has] changed and translated into dubious tendencies, attaching a derogatory tag to the group" (*The Guardian* 16 Sept. 2018). The Professor of Yoruba studies said that, "traditionally," the Yoruba had their own political system of government in which the Ogboni society played a role like a "secret service" for the town, enforcing the law and bringing criminals to the Yoruba kings for judgment; however, since colonization and Nigerian independence, Yoruba kings only have ceremonial positions, rather than the role and power they once had (Professor 27 Mar. 2019). Sources indicate that the influence of the Ogboni society has declined in past decades (Centennial Professor 14 Mar. 2019; France Dec. 2016, 49-50) or is "waning" (Sociologist 29 Mar. 2019). One source said this decline started in the 1950s (Centennial Professor 14 Mar. 2019) while France's Office français de protection des réfugiés et apatrides (OFPRA) states that this decline has been taking place since the 1990s (France Dec. 2016, 50). The Centennial Professor expressed the view that the Ogboni society's "[p]resent-day membership, presence, and activities are insignificant" (14 Mar. 2019) and that the traditional Ogboni is "now almost defunct" (18 Mar. 2019). According to the same source, the traditional Ogboni society today "has no power or influence" and it is stigmatized as a "pagan remnant" of the past (Centennial Professor 14 Mar. 2019). Similarly, a 2016 OFPRA fact-finding mission interviewed a Nigerian researcher who stated the following: [translation] "In those

days, [the 1990s], if you were not O[gb]oni, you could not be part of the government, have a job with a position of authority. Nowadays, Christianity has taken over, it is seen as shameful to belong" to the Ogboni society (France Dec. 2016, 49, brackets in original). The same source gave examples that, in the past, in order to become the director of her university, or to get positions in other institutions, with the police, etc., a person had to be Ogboni, remarking that [translation] "this is no longer the case today" (France Dec. 2016, 49). A representative of International Crisis Group, interviewed for the OFPRA fact-finding mission, also stated that the group's influence has not completely disappeared, but is much less important than in the past, noting that what matters in politics today is money, and that the political influence of [translation] "godfathers [politicians]" is greater than that of traditional societies such as the Ogboni society (France Dec. 2016, 50, brackets in original). In correspondence with the Research Directorate, a sociologist at the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), who has researched cults in Nigeria, indicated that the Ogboni society is "not widespread compared to other religious movements" and that "traditional belief systems, such as Ogboni" are giving way to other religions like Christianity and Islam (Sociologist 29 Mar. 2019).

## **4. Membership, Structure, Recruitment**

### **4.1 Location of Members**

Information on whether Ogboni society members are present within major cities of Nigeria, including non-Yoruba areas, was scarce among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response. The Nigerian *Guardian* states that the Ogboni society "functions in a few remote kingdoms and is popular in Nigerian Yoruba and Igbo-speaking communities" (*The Guardian* 16 Sept. 2018). Sources report that Ogboni society membership is regionally located in Yorubaland (Professor 27 Mar. 2019) or in "mostly Yoruba-speaking areas of Nigeria" such as the south-west states of Ogun, Oyo, Lagos, Osun, Ondo and Ekiti, as well as parts of Edo state in the south-south of Nigeria (Sociologist 27 Mar. 2019). The Sociologist added that cities such as Abeokuta, Warri, Benin, Ibadan, and Osogbo, as well as "several of the rural areas," have "strong presence of Ogboni practice" (Sociologist 29 Mar. 2019). The rural areas of Yorubaland have more traditional beliefs than big cities, though such beliefs also exist in the cities, according to the Yoruba studies professor (Professor 27 Mar. 2019).

### **4.2 Recruitment and Motivation for Joining**

Sources indicate that membership to the Ogboni society is voluntary (Canada 27 Mar. 2019a; Sociologist 29 Mar. 2019; Professor 27 Mar. 2019) or by invitation through contacts (Professor 27 Mar. 2019). The Professor remarked that a person has to agree to join, and generally cannot be forced to do so, while noting, however, that "supernatural powers" may be used to try to "compel" a person to join (27 Mar. 2019). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

According to the Sociologist, people join voluntarily because

they believe that the Ogboni belief system confers extraordinary abilities and powers from deities, especially when human sacrifices are alleged in the performance of rituals. However, those who are expected to retain membership as a family heritage may be coerced or forced when they reject it. (Sociologist 29 Mar. 2019)

The Sociologist stated that people who join the Ogboni society are those who "seek spiritual protection from evil forces, or who want to use the powers of Ogboni lodges to gain advantage in political or religious circles" (Sociologist 29 Mar. 2019). The Professor similarly explained that people join groups like the Ogboni society due to promises of protection, favours, patronage and connections (Professor 27 Mar. 2019).

### **4.3 Structure and Membership**

The Sociologist explained that the Ogboni society is organized into age-grades and ranked in terms of seniority, noting that in its traditional organization, membership of the various ranks is exclusive and even the names of the topmost leaders are not known to those below (27 Mar. 2019). The Professor of Yoruba studies stated that often a person's membership only becomes known when they die and the Ogboni members appear at the funeral to perform funeral rites (Professor 27 Mar. 2019). Further and corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

According to information provided by the Canadian official, membership is reportedly based on being a wealthy member of the community and "signifies a high level of power and prestige, which some members do not hide," and may display indicators that they belong to the group, such as banners, markings or clothing (Canada 27 Mar. 2019a). Membership is predominantly male and "generally considered" to be based on lineage with nobility connected to the Yoruba Kingdoms (Canada 27 Mar. 2019a). Further and corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

In order to join the group, a person has to take a vow not to reveal the secrets of the group and to protect one another (Professor 27 Mar. 2019). Similarly, the Canadian official stated that the "organizational structure is a secret available only to members of the Ogboni" (Canada 27 Mar. 2019a).

Sources report that non-Yoruba members can join (Canada 27 Mar. 2019a; Sociologist 29 Mar. 2019) if certain "requirements" are met; however these are not publicly known (Canada 27 Mar. 2019a).

### **4.4 Inheritance of Positions in the Ogboni Society and Recruitment**

Information concerning the inheritance of positions in the Ogboni society was scarce among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response. The Professor of Yoruba studies said that she had not heard of cases in which a person was forced to take up an inherited position in the Ogboni society after the parent died, though parents who are members may try to convince their children to join (Professor 27 Mar. 2019). Without providing further details, the Sociologist stated that "male children ought to inherit their late fathers' rights in the organization" (27 Mar. 2019). Underage children do not join the Ogboni society, according to the Professor (27 Mar. 2019). The Canadian official stated that it is reportedly common for a first-born son to "inherit" the position of their Ogboni father, but that taking the position is not mandatory, unless the Ogboni member "commit[ed] their unborn child or teenager to the group," in which case the child reportedly "will be compelled to join when he is of age," which is 21 for males and 40 for females (Canada 27 Mar. 2019a). Further and corroborating information could

not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

The Nigeria researcher interviewed by OFPRA during its 2016 fact-finding mission made the following observation about hereditary recruitment:

[translation]

"When the parent dies, the oldest child has to remain in the house and he will be initiated – this is normal. An Ogboni man or a woman always initiates their eldest child in the Ogboni to perpetuate the lineage. If my father was Ogboni, given that I am the eldest child, I would refuse to desecrate my father's remains, but if I take part, I would understand that it is my destiny and I would volunteer to join. This is normal; many eldest children take part." (France Dec. 2016, 50)

Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

## **5. Consequences for Refusing to Join or for Leaving, and Documented Instances of Harm and Violence by the Ogboni Society**

According to the Canadian official, "it is assumed" by the sources that the mission consulted that the child of a member who refuses to join the Ogboni could encounter harassment by the society, "even to the point of death," and that those who want to leave the group may face "tough consequences" or may be killed for revealing the group's secrets to non-members, noting, however, that "[n]o recent information is available to support or refute such claims" (Canada 27 Mar. 2019a). According to the Professor of Yoruba studies, "[i]f you already joined it is very hard to leave because it is breaking a vow. You already know the secrets of the cult"; "[i]t is very difficult to come out of the group because people are afraid of" supernaturally-inflicted severe consequences for leaving the group stemming from the "magical" or "spiritual" power of the group (Professor 27 Mar. 2019).

Nigerian news media have reported the following examples of alleged harm by Ogboni groups (without clearly referring specifically to the traditional Ogboni Society):

- A 2016 *Vanguard* news article reported that a woman sought a divorce from an Ikole court, Ekiti State, due to allegations that her husband threatened to "deal with her by reporting her to the Ogboni cult," whom she claimed had previously "summoned her to appear" before them in 2012 (*Vanguard* 15 June 2016). The woman claimed that her husband threatened to use her "'hair and pants for rituals to [drive her] mad'" if she attempted to leave him (*Vanguard* 15 June 2016);
- Without providing further details, a 2018 article in the *Daily Trust* reports the case of a Lagos woman who petitioned a court for a divorce because she alleged that her husband was a member of the "'Ogboni Confraternity"; she said that he was "'devilish and demonic'" and accused him of "attacking her and [their] children spiritually" with his "'devilish powers'" in order to prevent the children from marrying (30 July 2018);
- In 2018, the *Nation* wrote a story in which a man claimed that, a few years earlier, the Ogboni Society's "'oracle'" had "'chosen'" him and that members had

tried to initiate him by force because the man had "royal blood"; he alleged that "the cultists" attacked him in 2006 in Ijebu Ode [Ogun state] and tried to "abduct" and "forcibl[y]" initiate him, and, in two separate incidents in 2013, they set fire to his barn in Lagos and tried to kidnap him on his wedding day, forcing him into hiding (*The Nation* 5 Oct. 2018). The article quotes a member of the family who stated that "[a]ll these attacks on him were reported to the police but nothing came out of it" (*The Nation* 5 Oct. 2018);

- A January 2019 news article by the *Nation* indicated that a man from Ogun state claimed that "suspected members of [the] Ogboni fraternity" had been "intimidat[ing] and harass[ing]" his nephew since 2014 because he refused to join the group and take over the former leadership role his father had held (*The Nation* 5 Jan. 2019). The man claimed that his nephew was "brutally attacked" in 2016 and that the police handled the matter "with levity" and did not ensure his nephew's safety (*The Nation* 5 Jan. 2019). The same article claimed that the nephew's Lagos residence was "stormed" by "old men" who threatened to punish him for "turning down his nomination as new head of the cult group" (*The Nation* 5 Jan. 2019).

Corroborating information for these incidents could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

The Canadian official from the High Commission in Abuja stated that the mission had no knowledge of reports that it deemed credible of ongoing or recent cases of targeting or killing of Nigerians by the Ogboni, or those fleeing from the Ogboni society, including in major centres of Western Nigeria and the capital, among mission contacts, local contacts and media sources it consulted (Canada 27 Mar. 2019a). The Sociologist indicated that during his research on cult groups in Nigeria, he had not come across direct mention of the traditional Ogboni society being involved in violent attacks, for instance, against individuals who refused to join or who left the group (Sociologist 2 Apr. 2019). The NHRC representative stated that they had not received any reports of cases of people being targeted by the Ogboni society using violence because a person refused to join or left the group (Nigeria 21 Apr. 2019).

## **6. Relationship with the Police and Judicial Authorities**

Information on the relationship between the Ogboni society and the authorities, including police and judicial authorities, was scarce among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response. The NHRC representative stated that there is "no evidence" that the Ogboni society has influence on the police in main cities in Nigeria, such as Abuja and Lagos (Nigeria 21 Apr. 2019). The Canadian official stated that in Abuja, the group is not recognized and not known to have influence within the Nigerian authorities (27 Mar. 2019a). The Canadian official noted that the Ogboni society "does not have legitimate or legal influence in any federal institutions," however, there is "a great belief" that securing a prominent government or law enforcement position requires being a member (Canada 27 Mar. 2019a).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

## References

Canada. 27 March 2019a. Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC). Correspondence from an official at the High Commission in Abuja to the Research Directorate.

Canada. 27 March 2019b. Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC). Correspondence from an official at the High Commission in Abuja to the Research Directorate.

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*The Guardian* [Nigeria]. 16 September 2018. Chidirim Ndeche. "[The Most Prominent Secret Societies in Nigeria](#)." [Accessed 15 May 2019]

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## Additional Sources Consulted

**Oral sources:** Civil Resource Development and Documentation Centre; CLEEN Foundation; Committee for the Defence of Human Rights; Institute for Security Studies; International Crisis Group; Human Rights Watch; lawyer and development practitioner in Nigeria; Legal Defense and Assistance Project (LEDAP); Network on Police Reform in Nigeria; senior researcher at the Peace Research Institute Oslo; professors (15) who study relevant topics pertaining to Nigeria; United States Institute of Peace.

**Internet sites, including:** *The Abuja Times*; *Africa Confidential*; African Arguments; Amnesty International; EU – European Asylum Support Office; ecoi.net; Factiva; Human Rights Watch; International Crisis Group; *Leadership*; Minority Rights Group International; News Agency of Nigeria; *The Nigerian Observer*; *Nigerian Tribune*; Nigeria Watch; *Peoples Daily*; *The Punch*; *This Day*; UN – Refworld; University of Ibadan – Institute of African Studies.