



## RESPONSES TO INFORMATION REQUESTS (RIRs)

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12 July 2005

### NGA100180.E

Nigeria: Ogboni society including history, structure, rituals and ceremonies; membership and consequences for refusing to join (April 2000-July 2005)  
Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board, Ottawa

In interviews with the Research Directorate, two scholars provided information about the Ogboni "secret society" (13 Apr. 2000; 14 Apr. 2000). One was a Professor of Political Science and Chair of the Department of African American Studies at the State University of New York at Buffalo, and who was Chair of Political Science at the University of Ibadan from 1978 to 1983. He is an ethnic Nigerian and had friends who were Ogboni members. The other scholar was an Associate Professor of Anthropology at Franklin & Marshall College in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Her research interests included symbolic and historical anthropology; cosmology, gender, and space; Igbo ethnography; West Africa (14 Apr. 2000). She stated that she lived in Nigeria in the late 1980s and that her roommates included Ogboni members and that her information on the Ogboni was based upon her general and anthropological knowledge of Nigeria (ibid.).

### History and Structure

With regard to how to describe the Ogboni, the political science professor said that members of the Ogboni "society" would likely take offence at having their organization referred to as a "cult" or a "secret society" and would probably refer to themselves as a "lodge" similar to that of the Masons (13 Apr. 2000). The anthropology professor said that in Nigeria the Ogboni are commonly referred to as a "secret society" by Nigerians, but that Ogboni members would likely self-identify the group as a social club whose members help each other in matters such as commerce, marriage, etc. (14 Apr. 2000). Consequently, in this Response the Ogboni will be referred to as a "society." The anthropology professor added that there has been a lot of "cross-fertilization" between the Masons and groups such as the Ogboni, since there are many Masons in Nigeria and that they have been there since the 19th century (ibid.).

Both scholars stated that Ogboni members are typically financially very well off and well-connected. The political science professor said that the current Ogboni society dates back to the 1930s when a group of senior Nigerian civil servants formed the society in reaction to the existing European social clubs that excluded native Nigerians (13 Apr. 2000). According to him, the Nigerians wanted a forum in which they could interact and enjoy some of the privileges of their senior status in Nigeria. The founder was a Methodist minister and, in addition to senior civil servants, Ogboni members included doctors, lawyers, senior police officials, and other elite Nigerians (ibid.). Both scholars stated that despite Ogboni origins in the Yoruba ethnic group, the membership includes persons of other Nigerian ethnicities. The anthropology associate professor stated that women are also now able to join (14 Apr. 2000).

In the Nigerian country profile section of the "Final Report on the 8th European Country of Origin Information Seminar" organized by the Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum Research and Documentation (ACCORD) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Dr. Heinz Jockers of the Institute for African Studies, in Hamburg, explained that although little is known about the traditional Ogboni society, it is not to be confused with the Reformed Ogboni Society, which he claims is an association of politicians and influential people (Nov. 2002, 166). However, Jockers provided the following information:

The traditional Ogboni society was part of the checks and balances system of the Yoruba kingdoms. They were kingmakers, and disposed of both a religious as well as a judicial function. They had also the power to dethrone the Oba (the king) and could order him to kill himself (or would give him poison). The ethnographic work on their role and function in the 19th and early 20th century dates back to the 1930s, thus no in-depth knowledge on their structure and inner workings after independence is available. They are thought to still dispose of considerable local influence, forming part of the traditional power network to regulate societies and control resources. It is assumed that through their membership they also have strong connections to official state structures (police, judiciary, omission, universities) (ACCORD/UNHCR Nov. 2002).

At the end of December 2000, *The Guardian* reported that Chief Adeleke Oyenuka, "Oluwo in the Ogboni Aborigine fraternity of Nigeria," could not state definitively when the Ogboni first emerged in Nigeria (31 Dec. 2000a). Oyenuka identified the following Ogboni "extractions":

First we have the Osugbo gbede which is normally referred to as being owned by the Oba. This is for the Oba's chiefs. There is Ogboni Aborigine fraternity of Nigeria, there is Iwule Ogboni and it is believed to be for the elderly four. Firstly we have Ogboni Otu Ife, there is Ogboni Arapa Nika, this came from Akoko in Ondo State, there is Ogboni Ara Ife, there is Ogboni Akala, and there is Ogboni Agamasa, Ogboni Ogenete and also the Reformed Ogboni Fraternity (ROF) which came out of Ogboni Aborigine. I belong to all but the ROF (ibid.).

In answer to a question about the differences between the extractions, Oyenuka stated the following:

There are so many differences in that their mode of worship differ even though they all worship Edan which is God-like.

If you look at the fact that even if you are a member of the Aborigine and not initiated to Ogboni Osugbo, you can't just say because you are initiated into Aborigine you can go and join Osugbo when they are performing. If you do, you will suffer the consequence. That is the way it is with all of them.

The Osugbo's being titled chief of the Oba can however attend functions of the Aborigine because they are respected members of the society.

It is therefore not expressly possible for a member of one society to gatecrash into another's. The Aborigine in most cases can worship with the ROF because ROF migrated from the Aborigine and their language can be spoken by the Aborigine. It is language (mode of communications) that betrays whoever wants to impersonates (ibid.).

Oyenuka identified himself as "a traditionalist to the core" and stated that he became an Ogboni member because of the assistance it gives "in troubled times," as well as the help that members extend to each other (ibid.)

Asked to state when the traditional Ogboni was created, the Oluwo Ogboni Aborigine, Iledi Iyadamilola I, Imota Chief Emmanuel Olatunji Akinyemi said nobody could say when Ogboni started. "What is known about Ogboni is that they existed before the advent of colonialism, they ruled with the Oba, they governed and adjudicated matters in traditional ways and they were so meticulous that even when the colonialists came, they found the system so formidable that they couldn't tamper with it," he explained (ibid. 31 Dec. 2000b).

## **Rituals and Ceremonies**

The American-based scholars stated that they knew nothing of any Ogboni rituals, as its members are sworn to secrecy. Based on her knowledge of other similar groups, the anthropology professor said that initiation rituals would likely involve some mystical elements and "some sort of physical transformation" (14 Apr. 2000).

## **Community Relations**

The anthropology professor said that ordinary Nigerians would likely only come into contact with the Ogboni society if they ran afoul of one of its members (ibid.). She also stated that ordinary Nigerians are afraid of the society, believing that its members are capable of using sorcery in order to get their way. However, she said that she is not aware of members of the society using violence, as the university-based cults allegedly do, although some Nigerians believe that the university-based cults are conduits that feed members into organizations such as the Ogboni (ibid.).

## **Membership**

The American-based scholars said that membership fees are very high, that members already have considerable amounts of money prior to joining, and that individuals cannot simply ask to join. The anthropology professor said that her understanding was that someone with "money and connections" could indicate his or her interest in joining to someone he or she knew to be a member and that members are generally not overly secretive about their affiliation with the group (14 Apr. 2000). That member would then bring the matter to the Ogboni society, where a decision would be made as to whether to offer membership to the interested person (ibid.). Both scholars stated that family connections sometimes play a role in the offer of membership, but the political science professor said that the invitation to join more often involved friends (13 Apr. 2000).

Both scholars emphasized that Ogboni members are members of Nigeria's financial elite and that Ogboni membership is often used as a networking tool in order to come into contact with persons who can improve one's financial position and/or power. The political science professor said that it is the "benefits and privileges that attract" members to the Ogboni (13 Apr. 2000). The anthropology professor said that it is both a social club and an "enforcing agency" that members use to ensure that affairs in Nigeria are favourable to those with money and power (14 Apr. 2000). She stated that the then-recent allegation of President Obasanjo being an Ogboni member was a way of linking him to "those [in Nigeria] who eat well." The "enforcing" aspect of the organization also involved disputes between Ogboni members in which the society is used as an adjudication tool, not only to resolve internal disagreements, but also to ensure that members follow the society's prescribed behaviour. However, she was unable to provide any information on what this expected behaviour is, since members do not discuss Ogboni matters with non-members (ibid.).

With regard to membership in Ogboni groups in general, a 31 December 2000 article from *The Guardian* reported that

[i]n spite of the Ogboni's name that is common to them all, the practices differ along with the calibre of candidates accepted for initiation. For instance, while the ROF will not accept male members of less than 21 years of age and female members of less than 30 years of age, all other extractions may admit people of lower ages.

ROF, according to its Olori Apena Otunba David Adekunle Olaiya Adeniji, emphasises that membership shall be opened to only those who embrace faith in God and who do not fancy being fetish as a way of life. It is not clear if others believe in this principle.

*The Guardian* also reported the following with respect to whether offspring of a member are expected to join an Ogboni group:

In some parts of the country like the Igbomina speaking part of Kwara State, whoever is in Ogboni is seen as harbouring devilish thoughts and capable of harming others. There is the general belief that whoever is a member donates either his or her child or loved ones at appointed intervals.

It is believed that when you greet an elderly member of the sect and he places his or her hand on your head, you are already earmarked to be enlisted into the society.

Though the Ogbonis exist in most parts of the country including that of Igbomina speaking part of Kwara, go about their businesses in secrecy.

"That is the way Ogbonis behave in the past. They are not known, you don't boast about your membership and you are not even admitted into the fold until you are matured enough to be able to keep secret or get adequately punished for revealing secrets," explains the Olori Oluwo Ogboni Olufe, Chief Adeleke Oyenuga ["also the Oluwo Alakoso of Ogboni Aborigine Fraternity of Nigeria (Ikorodu Division)"] (31 Dec. 2000b).

## **Forced Recruitment**

With respect to the possibility of individuals being forced to join the Ogboni society, the political science professor said that he was not aware of any recent examples of persons being forced to join (13 Apr. 2000). The only instance he could recall occurred in the late 1950s in Benin City, when the Ogboni were in direct conflict with another group. He said that individuals were forced to join at that time, and in that place, in order to fight members of the other group. However, he said that this distressed Ogboni members elsewhere in Nigeria (ibid.).

On the other hand, the anthropology professor stated that forced membership in the Ogboni society might be possible, although it would not be common (14 Apr. 2000). She said that there was an expectation that children of members would join. If there was such an expectation, the parents could apply considerable pressure on the individual to join (ibid.). In contrast, the political science professor said that he knew of one Ogboni member who did not want his son to join, despite his son's expressed desire to do so (13 Apr. 2000). The anthropology professor also stated that the Ogboni would not typically induct children as members (14 Apr. 2000). She said that membership would normally be offered to those considered to be elder or mature, with consideration given to whether the person was married and whether he or she had children, as these are indicators of an individual becoming a "complete person" (ibid.).

The anthropology professor also described the only instance she could think of when the society might actively pursue a person who did not want to join (ibid.). If that person's parent(s) had "dedicated" their child to the society, sometimes before birth, then the society could go after the person and force him or her to join to ensure the fulfilment of the parents' promise. She said that the person who had been

dedicated might be raised unaware that their parent(s) were Ogboni member(s). As such, they might not be approached by the society until they were thought ready to join, which could be when the individual was 30 or 40 years old. She added that she was fairly sure that the persons she lived with in Nigeria who were Ogboni did not join until they were in their late thirties.

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 additional sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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**Internet Sources:** AllAfrica.com, BBC News, FACTIVA, Ingenta Connect; Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN)

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