



## RESPONSES TO INFORMATION REQUESTS (RIRs)

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12 July 2005

### NGA100376.E

Nigeria: Reformed Ogboni Fraternity (ROF) (April 2001-July 2005)  
Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board, Ottawa

The following information was provided in correspondence to the Research Directorate from the Olori Oluwo-the Head of the Reformed Ogboni Fraternity (ROF):

The Reformed Ogboni Fraternity (Inc.) was instituted on 18 December 1914 by a Clergyman, the late Hon. Archdeacon T.A.J. Ogunbiyi, CBE, L. Th. of the Anglican Mission. It was later incorporated under the land (Perpetual Successions) Ordinance 1942 of the laws of the Federation of Nigeria on 17th day of June 1943.

It is a friendly society which stands for a system of morality and discipline, on the practice of Truthfulness, Honesty, Uprightness, Righteousness and Beneficence (the doing of good) with complete abstention from any taint of Maleficence (the doing of evil) in any shape or form. ...

Before 1900 in Nigeria, it was the spread of foreign freemasonry and the seizure of control by the Europeans that impelled our nationalists then to begin to advocate the kind of indigenous freemasonry represented by societies like the ROF.

The founder emphasized its usefulness and members found in it stimulation for national aspirations. The ROF inculcated the spirit of brotherliness and it embraces people of all creeds. Every member is expected to be a man or woman of respect and integrity, must confided [sic] absolutely in all members and help members in distress. Apart from its founder, the first sets of ROF initiates were Medical Doctors, Lawyers, Clergymen and successful BusinessMen and Merchants in the society. ...

At formation, the ROF was named "Ogboni Fraternity of the Christians" but as time went on the founder considered it to admit his friends who are [sic] not Christians provided such entrants embrace a non-idolatrous belief in God. ...

There is no given circumstance whatsoever in which membership in the ROF (inc.) would be compulsory for any Nigerian. For instance, it is not compulsory for my wife or children to be members except when it comes of their own volition.

There are no instances or circumstances as far as the ROF is concerned in which non-members will be placed at risk by ROF Activities. None at all. Like it was in Western Europe of the fifties with Communism, so it is with "Ogbonism" in Nigeria of today, highly misconstrued, vilified and misrepresented to our society as a bogey, a bugbear or an execrable evil, deserving only to be hated and abhorred. It is the handwork of our detractors. It is a pity. However one thing is certain, if the ROF is evil, the government ought to have proscribed it.

There are no "fetish" practices in the ROF that will in anyway place our members and non-members alike at any risk whatsoever, and my answer is equally applicable to the ROF initiation rituals (28 March 2001; see also ROF 1998).

The Olori Oluwo wrote that he was unable to provide any information on other groups using Ogboni in their name since he "subscribe[s]" only to the ROF (ibid.). When asked whether it is possible to distinguish "Ogboni" groups in Nigeria known as "campus-based cults" he responded: "[i]t is highly confusing, as it is erroneous and misleading to equate the ROF with the deleterious so-called University Campus-based Cults. The ROF has no youth wing" (ibid.).

*The Guardian*, an independent newspaper based in Lagos, provided the following report on the ROF:

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.

But observations by *The Guardian On Sunday* revealed that most members of all the extractions belong to either Christianity or Islam, indicating that their member of Ogboni is just a way of socializing and ensuring that fraternal assistance is available when the needs arise. ...

While bickerings exist among the various extractions, they have a common antagonist in the church. The antagonism which is total is seen as emanating from the belief that Ogbonis are fetish and anti-God. That notion still holds especially as there are moves by some members of the House of Representatives to proscribe the society. ...

Oshowole [a representative of the ROF] said the problem people have in defining Ogboni is the Yoruba meaning of the word. In the Holy scriptures, for instance, in Ezekiel 23 verse 23, the expression "Great Lords and renowned" is translated in the Yoruba version as "Awon Ogboni ti oni okiki"

According to him, the word refers to a distinguished personage who assists in the administration of a domain. "This is why in Yoruba towns and communities, the highest council of chiefs comprise the Ogbonis. Holders of this title are not fetish or idol worshipers but they are the administrators of their communities, guiding the Obas," he said (ibid.).

In further reference to the perception of Ogboni as fetish, Olori Oluwo Ogboni Olufe, Chief Adeleke Oyenuga - ["also the Oluwo Alakoso of Ogboni Aborigine Fraternity of Nigeria (Ikorodu Division)"] stated that:

though the Ogbonis of whatever extractions are not allowed to do anything devilish, they are encouraged to stand by one another as they are taught to see themselves as brethren. Which is why they are referred to as Omo Iya. "It is our tradition to be ever ready to assist our fellow Omo Iyas maybe that is why they say we are in a cult," he emphasised (ibid.).

The following information was obtained from a Website identified as that of the Reformed Ogboni Fraternity (ROF) with a contact address of 38 Abeokuta Street, Ebute Metta, Lagos, Nigeria (n.d.a).

The Reformed Ogboni Fraternity was founded on December 18, 1914 at Obun Eko in Lagos. The original name of the Fraternity was, "Egbe Ogboni Onigbagbo" which could be translated to mean, Ogboni Fraternity of the Christians. Originally, it was a society planned exclusively for Christians, as the primary objective of the founder was to

cement truthfulness, love and sincerity among Christians with the view of lending a helping hand to the Church in its exponents (n.d.b).

It was "duly registered and issued certificate of incorporation" on 17 June 1943 (ibid.). The Constitution of the Reformed Ogboni Fraternity Incorporated lists its aims and objectives as:

- 1 (a) To associate for the promotion of the Principle of Universal Fatherhood of God - the All-Seeing Eye, and Universal Brotherhood of man, without any discrimination of Race, Color, Creed, Sex, Religion or Political affiliations.
- (b) To associate for the principal purpose of knowing God better such that all the Undertakings of the fraternity will be in accordance with His Holy will.
2. To encourage the diffusion of the practice of benevolence, charity and chastity.
3. To offer assistance (as a bounden duty) to all poor and distressed Brothers and Sisters of this Fraternity, without detriment to themselves and their connections, or injustice to others who are not members of this Fraternity.
4. To see to the mortal remains of any deceased members, by providing a coffin, up to a reasonable limited cost and to give his/her remains a decent deposit in the bosom of Mother Earth.
5. To inculcate in all the members, the constant practice of the Golden Rule, "to do unto others (members and non-members) as one would wish them to do unto him".
6. To provide necessary funds, for the successful prosecution of the business of the Fraternity, according to this Constitution.
7. To keep and obey the Laws and Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria and those of any other Country in which one resides (1998).

The Olori Apena, Otunba David Adelkunle Olaiya Adeniji of the ROF and "until his retirement in 1976 a deputy commissioner of police" explained to *the Guardian*, what ROF is.

ROF is anything clean, holy, transparent and honourable. It doesn't have anything to do with the use of fetish means, and that has been the mode of events since that fraternity was founded in 1914, the same year that Nigeria was amalgamated, by an Anglican Archdeacon, late Thomas Adesina Jacobson Ogunbiyi. ...

ROF was founded at Isale-Eko and named Christian Ogboni, but when friends and wellwishers of Archdeacon Ogunbiyi saw and marvelled at what had been founded - both male, female Christians and non-Christians applied to join and the society could no longer be called Christian Ogboni. That brought about its change of name to Reformed Ogboni Fraternity (31 Dec. 2000c).

Asked to explain why the ROF uses the name "Ogboni", the Olori Apena stated:

What baffles many people and even church members is the name Ogboni. But their worry would have not been necessary if they bothered to find out what Ogboni means.

Ogboni is a circle of elderly, wise people who advise the Oba on matters affecting the town - they stand by the Oba day and night, they are always in the Oba's court.

In those days they ruled the town in such a way that whatever disputes arising in the town is settled. In modern days, we call them Oba's court. Even when the Europeans

came they met the institution - they wanted to find out ways of banning it but they discovered it was a formidable society.

Again they discovered the do's and don'ts. They were pleased that it was a peaceful society. What you should do is to find out about the history of Abeokuta - the Ogboni history in Abeokuta.

Why then do people have to fear Ogboni? It is because they are always upright in whatever they do. They are always firm in their decisions and they are not given to acting under the influence of sentiments. Then if they say someone should be killed that person is killed because their judgement is based on transparent investigation.

I can also assure you that the manner of making enquiries is representative and judgement sound. For instance, if you were accused of murder or theft, emissaries were sent to the paths leading to the stream or paths leading to the farm to eavesdrop on what passer[s]-by would say about the accused persons. If per adventure the majority message is it serves him right, this is not his first time - that person is allowed to face the judgement. But if they say that person is not bad, it is a mistake that person is eventually set free.

So judgement then was people-oriented, whatever message brought to the Oba determines at the end of the day what becomes of an accused. It constituted a major part of adjudication in whatever matter and Ogboni used to coordinate them (ibid.).

Speaking about the aims and objectives of the ROF, the Olori Apena said:

We also associate for the principal purpose of knowing God better such that all the undertakings of the fraternity will be in accordance with His Holy will. Our major concern is to make good men, Christian or Moslems better men. We encourage the diffusion of the practice of benevolence, charity and chastity.

Our aims and objectives also include the offer of assistance (as a bounding duty) to all poor and distressed members and non-members, without detriment to themselves and their connections, or injustice to others who are not members of the fraternity.

While striving to inculcate in all members, the constant practice of the golden rule, "do unto others (members and non-members) as one would wish them do unto him", we ensure that as responsible citizens our members keep and obey the laws and constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria and those of any other country in which one resides (ibid.).

Professor Akin Alao of the Center for African and African-American Studies at the University of Texas credits the ROF with providing the best example of a successful merge of Yoruba traditional religious belief with Christianity (24 Jan. 2003). In a paper entitled "Yoruba: An Enduring Legacy," Alao argues that the ROF "as conceived and brought into the Christian church remains the most visible imprint of Yoruba cultural tradition in Christianity" (ibid.).

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), University of Texas at Austin.

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