



## RESPONSES TO INFORMATION REQUESTS (RIRs)

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6 July 2010

### NGA103485.E

Nigeria: Consequences for a person to refuse a chief priest or fetish priest position for which they have been selected in south and central Nigeria  
Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

Information about the consequences of refusing the position of "chief priest" or "fetish priest" in Nigeria was limited among the documentary sources consulted by the Research Directorate. However, four academic researchers with expertise in religion in Nigeria provided the Research Directorate with the following information.

In 22 May 2010 correspondence, a Professor of Anthropology from Franklin & Marshall (F&M) College stated that a chief priest is an individual in charge of a particular shrine (22 May 2010). The F&M Professor wrote that a fetish priest is a "priest who is in charge of working with and caring for the power object at the heart of a particular shrine..." (22 May 2010). A fetish priest might also be a chief priest or there may be different people performing each role (F&M Professor 22 May 2010). In 3 June 2010 correspondence, a Professor of Anthropology at Southern Illinois University (SIU) who has researched fetish priests in Abia State (Igbo), indicated that there are various types of fetish priests and stated that these priests could be referred to as "shrine priests."

The F&M Professor wrote that in some cases, the office of chief priest or fetish priest could be heritable, passing either from father to son or from maternal uncle to nephew (22 May 2010). Similarly, a Professor of History at the African Studies Centre (ASC) located at the University of Leiden stated in a telephone interview that a successor would likely be chosen from within the shrine priest's family (11 June 2010). The ASC Professor, who researched a traditional shrine in southeastern Nigeria, said that the successor could be a member of the priest's extended family (11 June 2010). According to the ASC Professor, the office of chief priest or fetish priest does not necessarily have to be passed on to the eldest son, since this is a European and not an African tradition (ASC Professor 11 June 2010). It is often rather a sister's son who is selected (ibid.). A Professor of Sociology and Anthropology at the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) stated in a telephone interview that traditional succession systems (with respect to shrine priests) are no longer functioning in the country (10 May 2010).

The University of London Professor, who has written a book on religion and the Yoruba, further said that the influence of traditional religion is declining in Nigeria (10 May 2010). This information is corroborated by the F&M Professor who stated that Christians and Muslims are "by far the more powerful force in Nigeria today, while the indigenous religions languish" (F&M Professor 22 May 2010).

In contrast, the ASC Professor stated that in rural communities, local shrines are influential and community members "respect and even fear" the shrine priest (11 June 2010). The ASC Professor said that local shrines serve as informal arbitrators of

justice, particularly given that Nigeria's criminal justice system is "not functioning" (11 June 2010). Similarly, the SIU Professor wrote that the shrines are "not really religious institutions" but rather "legal institutions," adding that they are becoming more influential as Nigeria's criminal justice system "deteriorates" (3 June 2010).

The ASC Professor also said that Nigerians will go to a shrine to swear oaths, adding that criminals may swear oaths pertaining to various illegal activities (11 June 2010). This information is corroborated by a report on victims of trafficking produced by the Danish Immigration Service based on two fact-finding missions to Nigeria (Denmark Apr. 2008, 3, 22-23). The document reports that Nigerian women who are trafficked in Europe have been required to swear oaths of secrecy in traditional shrines - oaths which they are frightened of breaking (ibid., 22-23). According to the ASC Professor, who is also an expert in Nigerian organized crime, some people believe that anyone who reneges on oath sworn at a shrine will come to harm by supernatural means (11 June 2010). The ASC Professor stated it does happen that harm comes to a person who breaks an oath, adding that this harm may be attributable to someone working on behalf of the shrine (11 June 2010).

Similarly, the SIU Professor stated that in his opinion people working for shrines can be responsible for killing or harming those who offend the shrine (3 June 2010). The SIU Professor wrote that many senior fetish priests are well-connected to organized crime, corrupt police, smugglers and other sources of power in Nigeria (3 June 2010). The SIU Professor stated that police "fear the powerful fetish priests" and that anyone who felt "endangered" by a shrine would be more likely to go to a church for assistance than to the police (3 June 2010).

The ASC Professor expressed the view that it would not be considered an offence against the shrine for someone to refuse the role of chief priest or fetish priest (11 June 2010). The ASC Professor stated that he had never heard of the priesthood being forced on anyone in Nigeria (11 June 2010). The shrine would want a successor who had the interest in and aptitude for the role, in the opinion of the ASC Professor (11 June 2010). The successor would also likely be initiated at a young age (ASC Professor 11 June 2010). The University of London Professor said that his research indicates that there are no consequences for someone who refuses a position of chief priest or fetish priest (10 May 2010). Similarly, the F&M Professor stated, "Christians have been refusing to take their inherited offices in shrines since the beginning of Christian missionization in Nigeria - that is, since the middle of the 19th Century" (F&M Professor 22 May 2010). The F&M Professor further stated that "in the old days," if an individual did refuse to assume the inherited position as a shrine priest, the servants of the shrine might "force" the individual to assume the role (ibid). The F&M Professor added that

even today, there are people who maintain their ties to indigenous religion who swear that the shrine deities will find a way to punish those who refuse this. (ibid.)

The F&M Professor, who is an expert in the Nigerian popular press, also stated that traditional religion is "sensationalized" in the media; "demonized" by Pentecostal Christians; and generally viewed as "wicked" by many Nigerians (ibid.). This information is corroborated by the University of London Professor who said other religions attribute "all kinds of heinous acts" to the shrines, adding that the media perpetuates the view that fetish priests are "demons" (10 May 2010).

The SIU Professor wrote that in many communities it would be considered "a big problem" if someone refused to take on the inherited role of shrine priest (3 June 2010). The SIU Professor further said people would believe that the individual was inviting "divine wrath" on themselves, as well as on the local community (3 June 2010).

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

African Studies Centre (ASC) (Leiden University, Netherlands). 11 June 2010. Telephone interview with a professor of History.

Denmark. April 2008. Danish Immigration Service. *Protection of Victims of Trafficking in Nigeria: Report from Danish Immigration Service's Fact-Finding Mission to Lagos, Benin City and Abuja, Nigeria*. <<http://www.nyidanmark.dk/NR/rdonlyres/BAD16BF3-A7C8-4D62-8334-DC5717591314/0/Nigeriatrafficking2007FINALpdf.pdf>> [Accessed 22 June 2010]

Franklin & Marshall (F&M) College, Pennsylvania. 22 May 2010. Correspondence with a professor of Anthropology,.

Southern Illinois University (SIU). 3 June 2010. Correspondence with a professor of Anthropology.

University of London. 10 May 2010. Telephone interview with a professor of Sociology and Anthropology.

## Additional Sources Consulted

**Oral sources:** Researchers with relevant expertise from Arizona State University, Arts & Humanities Research Council (United Kingdom), University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), University of Toronto, and Warren-Wilson College were unable to provide information.

**Publications:** *Journal of African History*, *Journal of Management and Social Studies*.

**Internet sites, including:** Amnesty International (AI), British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), Human Rights Watch, International Crisis Group, Washington College of Law.

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