

# Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

Home > Research Program > Responses to Information Requests

## Responses to Information Requests

Responses to Information Requests (RIR) respond to focused Requests for Information that are submitted to the Research Directorate in the course of the refugee protection determination process. The database contains a year archive of English and French RIRs. Earlier RIRs may be found on the UNHCR's [Refworld](#) website.

14 Nov

### NGA104213.E

Nigeria: Ogboni society, including its history, structure, rituals and ceremonies; information on membership and the consequences of refusing to join  
Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

#### 1. General Background

The Ogboni society should not be confused with the Reformed Ogboni Society, which was created by Christians in the 1900s (Professor 5 Oct. 2012; Ribeiro Junior May 2008, 20).

Sources indicate that information about the Ogboni society is limited (Professor 5 Oct. 2012; Ribeiro Junior May 2008, 21). Several sources also indicate that they are referred to as a "secret" society or "cult" (Professor 5 Oct. 2012; Norway Aug. 2006, Sec. 4.1). In a chapter on organized crime in Nigeria in a book entitled *Traditional Organized Crime in the Modern World*, Obi N. I. Ebbe catalogues the Ogboni society as an organized crime organization (Ebbe 2012, 178). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate.

#### 1.1 Historical Background

In his masters' thesis for a degree in archaeology at the University of Sao Paulo, Brazil, Aden Ribeiro Junior indicates that it is not known when the Ogboni society was created (Ribeiro Junior May 2008). According to him, the oldest text referencing the Ogboni society is from 1884, where it was described as a secret society (ibid., 23). He indicates that it was an [translation] "assembly of elders" that created a system based on the cosmology of Yorubas (ibid., 20). Sources note that the Ogboni society emerged among the Yorubas (Professor 5 Oct. 2012; Mazama 26 Jan. 2009, 479). The Ogboni performed religious, political and judicial functions (ibid.; Ribeiro Junior May 2008, 20; Professor 5 Oct. 2012).

In an article published in the *Encyclopedia of African Religion*, Ama Mazama, professor of African Studies at Temple University, indicates that the Ogboni considered themselves as the "privileged intermediaries between the living and the ancestors" (Mazama 2009, 479). They venerated mother Earth (ibid.; Ribeiro Junior May 2008, 20) or goddess Earth (Professor 5 Oct. 2012). Sources indicate that the Ogbonis acted as the "check and balance" against the power of the king to the point of having the authority to remove a king if necessary (ibid.; Mazama 2009, 480). George B. N. Ayittey, an economist in residence in the Department of Economics at American University and author among other books of *Indigenous African Institutions* (Independent Institute n.d.), indicates in an article published in the *Social Research* journal that even though the Ogbonis had judicial functions, their primary role was the preservation of the "Ifé oracle" (2010). According to Mazama,

priests of the Obgoni [sic] society are often called on to consult the oracle to determine a number of issues, such as ancestral support for the King. In fact, members of the Obgoni [sic] society are guardians and protectors of the divine oracle and laws. (2009, 479)

In correspondence with the Research Directorate, a professor of law and forensic science at the University of Leicester indicated that during the pre-colonial era, the Ogboni society was the highest in Yorubaland, with the power to judge powerful individuals that did not face justice in the open judiciary (Professor 5 Oct. 2012). He further indicated that during the colonial era and after Nigeria's independence, the Ogboni "had no formal role to play in society" (ibid.).

## 1.2 Current Status

The professor further added that "since the people no longer have any use for them as they do not now protect any of the self-centered interests of their members by blackmail, intimidation, or murder" (ibid.). Corroborating information could not be found by the Research Directorate among the sources consulted within the time constraints of this Response. The professor contends that the Ogboni society

[i]n most Yoruba parts of Nigeria, ... have no real power whatsoever. The only Yoruba parts of Nigeria where they still have some real influence on the traditional administration of the cities are in the Egba, Egba, Abeokuta parts of Nigeria. These would correspond roughly to pockets of areas in Ogun State and Oyo State. Also, in some rural villages and small towns along the borders of Ogun State with Oyo, Ondo, and Ondo States, they might still be able to intimidate pockets of people. (ibid.)

However, according to Mazama, the Ogboni still have "quite significant" influence and power in the affairs of the nation (Mazama 2009, 480). Nevertheless, she also indicates that the political integrity of the Ogboni society and the Reformed Ogboni Fraternity "has been called into question given their association with Freemasonry, the Rotary Club, or the Rosicrucian Brotherhood" (ibid.). Sources indicate that some Ogboni members are from the elite (Norway Aug. 2006, Sec. 4.1; *Nigerian Observer* 19 Feb. 2009); others are in the Police, Judiciary, government establishment and traditional institutions [which] makes membership a cult to be seemingly above the law" (ibid.). Similarly, Ebbe contends that Ogboni members "run all businesses, both legitimate and illegitimate, without any government interference [and] the society produces political candidates who can protect their enterprises" (2012, 178).

## 1.3 Structure

According to Mazama, all Ogbonis are under the authority of the political leader, referred to as the Alafin, who has the authority to convoke the priests into "extraordinary sessions" (2012, 480). However, the professor indicated that the structure of the Ogboni society is a "secret that only an Ogboni member can answer," risking death by poisoning (5 Oct. 2012). Corroborating or additional information on the structure of the Ogboni Society could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

## 1.4 Rituals and Ceremonies

The professor at the University of Leicester indicated that particularities about the rituals and ceremonies of the Ogboni society are a "secret that only an Ogboni member can answer," risking his own death (5 Oct. 2012). Corroborating or additional information on the rituals and ceremonies of the Ogboni Society could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

## 2. Membership

According to Mazama, membership is open to Yorubas and other ethnicities, and that men and women are eligible for initiation within the society, although the "predominance of male elders is undeniable" (2009, 480).



Ribeiro Junior, Ademir. May 2008. *Parafernália das mães-ancestrais : As máscaras gueledé, os eda a construção do imaginário sobre as "sociedades secretas" africanas no Recôncavo Baiano*. Master's Thesis, University of Sao Paulo, Brazil. <<http://www.teses.usp.br/teses/disponiveis/71/711131/tde-220920150603/pt-br.php>> [Accessed 4 Oct. 2012]

## Additional Sources Consulted

**Oral sources:** Attempts to contact researchers from the following organizations were unsuccessful: Divinity School, Harvard University; Instituto do Patrimônio Histórico e Artístico Nacional, Brazil; O Awolowo University, Nigeria.

**Internet sites, including:** AllAfrica.com; Amnesty International; Austrian Centre for Country of Origin Asylum Research and Documentation; Denmark – Danish Immigration Service; ecoi.net; Factiva; Facebook; House; *The Guardian* [Nigeria]; Human Rights Watch; Nigeria – Ministry of Interior, Police Force; *Lambda*; *Tribune*; *The Punch*; The Reformed Ogboni Fraternity; *The Sun News* [Nigeria]; UN – Integrated Regional Information Networks, Refworld, Reliefweb; US – Central Intelligence Agency, Department of State Security Advisory Council.

[Click here for tips on how to use this search engine.](#)

Date modified: 2013-07-17

The attached reproduction is a copy of an official work that is published by the Government of Canada. The reproduction has not been produced in affiliation with, or with the endorsement of the Government of Canada.