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7 February 2005

NGA43240.E

Nigeria: The Ovia cult; its membership, doctrine, rituals, ceremonies and initiation, consequences for refusing to join, and consequences for breaching the oath of secrecy

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board, Ottawa

Among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate, two refer to the Ovia as a religious cult (Edo Nation 27 July 2004; professor 24 Jan. 2004).

In a compilation entitled "Edo Traditional Festivals and Ceremonies," Augustina Omosigho Ede Iyare describes the Eho ceremony as "the principal festival of ancestor's worship," and which he claims is the only religion practised by all members of the Edo ethnic group (Edo Nation 27 July 2004). Iyare asserts "the other native religions which exist in Edo land, like the Okhuaihe, the Ovia, and the Olokun - are mere cults...restricted in spread and acceptance, and practi[s]ed only by their adherents" (ibid).

In correspondence to the Research Directorate, a professor of anthropology at California State University, who is currently researching religious cults in Benin City, said that the "Ovia cult, [which] is located not far from Benin City on the Ovia River...is part of village based organizations and has a strong religious component" (24 Jan. 2004).

Other sources characterize the Ovia as a deity (professor 25 Jan. 2005; ICOMOS 5 Jan. 2005; Dawodu.net 16 Jan. 2005a) and a shrine (Dawodu.net 16 Jan. 2005b; ICOMOS 5 Jan. 2005).

A professor at the Centre for Development Studies, University of Jos, who authored a research report on student-based cults, advised the Research Directorate that the Ovia is a community deity worshipped by people in Delta and Edo states (25 Jan. 2005).

In a presentation detailing the installation ceremonies of a Benin monarch, the director of Monuments, Heritage and Sites, National Commission for Museums and Monuments of Nigeria, explained that the heir apparent visits historic and sacred places including the village of

Ekor, where the Ovia shrine is located (ICOMOS 5 Jan. 2005). The shrine, situated within a traditional forest reserve where hunting and fishing are prohibited, is dedicated to a Benin princess who married a Yoruba king of Oyo (ibid.). As the director explained, "[h]aving been constantly ill-treated, she turned herself into a river and found her way back to Benin where she is deified as Ovia" (ibid). He also noted that the dog that the princess took to Oyo is one of the core components of sacrifice at the Ovia shrine, and that the festival associated with Ovia occurs every thirty years (ibid).

In a compilation on Edo anthropology, Nowamagbe Austin Omoigui claimed that women are not permitted to observe male rituals or engage in certain ceremonies such as the Ovia, although they are expected to clean the shrines (Dawodu.net 16 Jan. 2005b). However, Omoigui added that men must refrain from sex and seclude themselves for a thirty days period during the Ovia ceremonies (ibid).

Additional information on the Ovia cult could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate.

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.

References

Dawodu.net. [Herndon, Va]. 16 January 2005a. Segun Toyin Dawodu. "Edo World/Language-Phonology." <<http://www.dawodu.net/edowords.htm>> [Accessed 17 Jan. 2005]

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Professor of Anthropology. 25 January 2005. University of Jos, Nigeria, Centre for Development Studies. Correspondence.

Professor of Anthropology. 24 January 2005. California State University, Fullerton, Department of Anthropology. Correspondence.

Additional Sources Consulted

Offiong, Daniel A. 2003. *Secret Cults in Nigerian Tertiary Institutions*. Enugu, Nigeria: Fourth Dimension Publishing Co. Ltd.

Internet sites, including: Adherents.com, AllAfrica.com, Ingenta Connect, International Christian Concern, Rick A. Ross Institute, *Vanguard* [Lagos]

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