



Refugee Documentation Centre (Ireland)
LEGAL AID BOARD

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Information on the Ogboni Cult in Nigeria.

A report by *the Home Office UK Border Agency* under the heading 'Fear of secret cults, juju or student confraternities' states:

"Treatment. Secret societies or cults exist in Nigeria but, by their nature, very little is known about them. The most widely reported and studied is the Ogboni cult, though many Ogboni members reportedly self-identify the group as a social club rather than a cult or a secret society. Ordinary Nigerians are reportedly afraid of the society, believing that its members are capable of using sorcery in order to get their way. However, there is no corroborated evidence of the society using violence or recent examples of persons being forced to join." (Home Office UK Border Agency (14th April 2009) *Operational Guidance Note Nigeria* pg.10-par.3.11.2)

It also states:

"Internal relocation. The constitution provides for the right to travel within the country and the Federal Government generally respects this right in practice. Internal relocation to escape ill-treatment from non-state agents is almost always an option ..." (ibid)

A report by the *United Kingdom Home Office* under the heading 'The Ogboni Society' states:

"Information obtained from a letter written by Mr B Akintunde Oyetade (School of Oriental and African Studies) dated 12 March 1998, indicates that the title Ogboni is only conferred on the elders, i.e. senior members of the society. These are usually men but women, usually six in number, were traditionally included to represent the interests of women in the community. Membership of the society is usually, but not always, passed through patrilineal descent. The Ogboni traditionally played a significant role in Yoruba religion and society, and were involved in the installation of new kings. Historically, an Ogboni could be said to have combined the powers of a local magistrate, with those of a member of the local government and a religious leader. The Ogboni have engaged in animal sacrifice. There is no firm evidence to suggest that they engaged in human sacrifice. In the event that a king abused his power, however, they could compel him to commit suicide. They could also impose sanctions against other members of the community if they believed that these were justified. The Ogboni are reputed to threaten its members with death should they break their oath of secrecy regarding its rituals and beliefs. It is still regarded as being a powerful organisation throughout Nigeria. The Ogboni is believed to be a purely Yoruba cult, but there are a number of Yoruba sub tribes who also may be involved [4]."

(United Kingdom Home Office (1 April 2005) *UK Home Office Immigration and Nationality Directorate Country Report – Nigeria - par. 6.118*)

A response by the *Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada* under the heading 'History and Structure' states:

"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)." (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (12 July 2005) *Nigeria: Ogboni society including history, structure, rituals and ceremonies; membership and consequences for refusing to join (April 2000-July 2005)* NGA100180.E)

It also states:

"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)." (ibid)

It also states under the heading '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)." (ibid)

It also states under the heading '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.)." (ibid)

It also states under the heading '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.)." (ibid)

It also states under the heading '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.)." (ibid)

It also states:

"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." (ibid)

A response by *the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada* under the heading 'Nigeria: Whether there was a chief called Nwojo Chukwu in or around Aba; was he involved in the Ogboni Society; whether he could commit his son to join the Ogboni Society at birth; whether his son would be in danger if he did not join the society; whether the commitment survives after the father has died' states:

“According to a professor of anthropology at Franklin and Marshall College in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, an individual whose father is a member of the Ogboni Society would be expected to join the group regardless if the parent was alive or deceased (9 July 2002). She indicated that this commitment to join is automatic and that the pressure to join would come not only from the family but also from within the organization itself (ibid.). She did state, however, that she has met at least one person who expressed their intention to discourage their son from joining the Ogboni Society (ibid.).

When asked whether pressure to join would involve danger to the life of the individual if that individual did not want to join, she indicated that the reports are mixed (ibid.). She indicated that those who are not members of the organization would claim that it would be "life threatening" not to join the organization, however, those who are members would argue that such pressure to join is fictional (ibid.).” (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (12 July 2002).E *Nigeria: Whether there was a chief called Nwojo Chukwu in or around Aba; was he involved in the Ogboni Society; whether he could commit his son to join the Ogboni Society at birth; whether his son would be in danger if he did not join the society; whether the commitment survives after the father has died-* NGA39330)

No further information on the above query could be found among sources consulted by the Refugee Documentation Centre.

References:

Home Office UK Border Agency (14th April 2009) *Operational Guidance Note Nigeria*

<http://ukba.homeoffice.gov.uk/sitecontent/documents/policyandlaw/countryspecific/casylumpolicyogns/>

(Accessed 8th June 2010)

Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (12 July 2005) *Nigeria: Ogboni society including history, structure, rituals and ceremonies; membership and consequences for refusing to join (April 2000-July 2005)* NGA100180.E)

<http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/refworld/rwmain?page=printdoc&docid=440ed73711>

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Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (12 July 2002).E *Nigeria: Whether there was a chief called Nwojo Chukwu in or around Aba; was he involved in the Ogboni Society; whether he could commit his son to join the Ogboni Society at birth; whether his son would be in danger if he did not join the society; whether the commitment survives after the father has died-* NGA39330

<http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/refworld/rwmain?page=printdoc&docid=3df4be8410>

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United Kingdom Home Office (1 April 2005) *UK Home Office Immigration and Nationality Directorate Country Report – Nigeria*
<http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/pdfid/429f0bf24.pdf>
(Accessed 8th June 2010)

This response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Refugee Documentation Centre within time constraints. This response is not and does not purport to be conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum. Please read in full all documents referred to.

Sources Consulted:

All Africa
Amnesty International
BBC Monitoring
Electronic Immigration Network (EIN)
European Country of Origin Information Network (ECOI)
Human Rights Watch
Integrated Regional Information Network (IRIN)
Lexis Nexis
UNHCR Refworld
US Department of State