

Nigeria (37)

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NGA34255.E 14 April 2000

Subject: »Nigeria«: An »Ogboni« ritual in which the first-born male child is ritualistically cut on the face; whether adult men who have not undergone the ritual can be required to submit; whether someone raised outside of the »Ogboni« tradition would be sought out by »Ogboni« leaders so they could perform the ritual

Regional Office: 2

From: Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board, Ottawa

No information on an »Ogboni« ritual in which the first born male child is ritualistically cut on the face could be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate. However, for other information on »Ogboni« rituals please consult NGA8434 of 7 May 1991. For information on the »Ogboni« and initiation rites please consult NGA9873 of 18 December 1991.

Two scholars did provide information about the »Ogboni« "secret society" (13 Apr. 2000; 14 Apr. 2000). One is a Professor of Political Science and Chair of the Department of African American Studies at the State University of New York at Buffalo, who was Chair of Political Science at the University of Ibadan from 1978 to 1983 and whose research interests include ancient African civilizations and kinship and state in Africa. He is an ethnic Nigerian and had friends who were »Ogboni« members. The other scholar is an Associate Professor of Anthropology at Franklin & Marshall College in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Her research interests are: "symbolic and historical anthropology; cosmology, gender, and space; Igbo ethnography; West Africa." She stated that she lived in »Nigeria« in the late 1980s and that her roommates included »Ogboni« members and that her information on the »Ogboni« is based upon her general and anthropological knowledge of »Nigeria« (14 Apr. 2000).

Both 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).

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 that helps 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 origins of the current »Ogboni« society were in the 1930s when a group of senior Nigerian civil servants formed it in reaction to the existing European social clubs which 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

148 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).

The 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 their interest in joining to someone they 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 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.).

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 such 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.).

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 if a person's parents were members there could be an expectation that their progeny 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 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 they had children, as these are indicators of an individual becoming a "complete person" (ibid.).

The anthropology professor also described the only instance she could think of where 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 they were born, then the society could go after the person and force them to join to ensure the fulfilment of the parent's 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. This 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.

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 to refugee status or asylum. Please find below the list of additional sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

References

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