



COI QUERY

Country of Origin	Sierra Leone
Main subject	The Ojeh/Oje society
Question(s)	<p>Information on the Ojeh (or Oje) secret society. In particular:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Origin, purpose, structure, membership, recruitment methods, activities and areas of operation• Rituals and main celebrations• State response/ protection for members who break the rules of the society
Date of completion	29 October 2018
Query Code	Q123
Contributing EU+ COI units (if applicable)	

Disclaimer

This response to a COI query has been elaborated according to the [Common EU Guidelines for Processing COI](#) and [EASO COI Report Methodology](#).

The information provided in this response has been researched, evaluated and processed with utmost care within a limited time frame. All sources used are referenced. A quality review has been performed in line with the above mentioned methodology. This document does not claim to be exhaustive neither conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to international protection. If a certain event, person or organisation is not mentioned in the report, this does not mean that the event has not taken place or that the person or organisation does not exist. Terminology used should not be regarded as indicative of a particular legal position.

The information in the response does not necessarily reflect the opinion of EASO and makes no political statement whatsoever.

The target audience is caseworkers, COI researchers, policy makers, and decision making authorities. The answer was finalised on the 29 October 2018. Any event taking place after this date is not included in this answer.



COI QUERY RESPONSE

Origin, purpose, structure, membership, recruitment methods, activities and areas of operation of the Ojeh (or Oje)

According to Fanthorpe, 'Secret societies are ancient cultural institutions in the Upper Guinea Coast of West Africa. Their primary purpose is to canalize and control powers of the spirit world, many of which are captured in masks and other special artefacts ("medicines", also known as "fetishes" in the early literature)¹. In Sierra Leone the Ojeh or Oje is the name of a secret society of Yoruba origin².

In his book 'The Krio of West Africa: Islam, Culture, Creolization, and Colonialism in the Nineteenth Century, Gibril Cole wrote the following about the foundation of the Ojeh society:

'Among the earliest Egugu societies in Freetown were the Oke Mauri and the Aswodie at Fula Town and Foutah Bay, respectively. While both of these groups may have been in existence by the mid-nineteenth century, albeit as subsidiaries of the Hasting and Waterloo Ojeh, they emerged into the open in Freetown by the 1880s, but only when their leaders felt sufficiently confident that their activities would not be interfered with by the local authorities'³.

Also Wyse stated that the first Ojeh society was founded around Oke Maure Lodge in the southern part of Freetown around 1880⁴. In a video about the Ojeh, published on the website of SierraLeoneHeritage.org, it is mentioned that 'The Hastings Ojeh society was the first in Sierra Leone and had been in existence for about a hundred and sixty years'⁵. With reference to the book 'Moving with the Face of the Devil' of art historian John Nunely, on the same website it is also mentioned that the Yoruba name 'Egungun' of the Ojeh Society was 'corrupted by missionary writers to egugu or agoogo'⁶. Several sources reported that the Ojeh society has been imported by liberated slaves of Yoruba descent who resettled in Freetown⁷. According to Menard, 'the Ojeh is a branch of the Agugu, a secret society that is based on a Yoruba heritage that appeared among the population of Freetown around 1850'⁸, while Davies stated that the Ojeh Society is considered 'as the smaller brother of the

¹ Fanthorpe, R., *Sierra Leone: The Influence of the Secret Societies*, with special reference to female Genital Mutilation, Writenet, August 2007, ([url](#)), p. 1

² SierraLeoneHeritage.org, *Ojeh Society*, n.d., ([url](#))

³ Cole, G.R., *The Krio of West Africa: Islam, Culture, Creolization, and Colonialism in the Nineteenth Century*, Ohio University Press, Athens, Ohio: 2013, pp. 42-43

⁴ Wyse, A.G.J., *The Krio of Sierra Leone: An Interpretive History*, C. Hurst & Co (Publishers), London: 1989, p. 53

⁵ SierraLeoneHeritage.org, *Video Gallery – Ojeh*, n.d., ([url](#))

⁶ SierraLeoneHeritage.org, *Ojeh Society*, n.d., ([url](#))

⁷ Abdullah, I., 'History and Memory in Contemporary Sierra Leone: Re-inscribing Fragments from an Atlantic Past in: The Paradoxes of History and Memory in Post-Colonial Sierra Leone, Ojukutu-Macauley, S. and Rashid, I. (eds.), Lexington Books, Maryland: 2013, p. 222; Cole, G.R., *The Krio of West Africa: Islam, Culture, Creolization, and Colonialism in the Nineteenth Century*, Ohio University Press, Athens, Ohio: 2013, p. 43; Wyse, A.G.J., *The Krio of Sierra Leone: An Interpretive History*, C. Hurst & Co (Publishers), London: 1989, p.53

⁸ Menard, A., 'Poro Society, Migration and Political Incorporation on the Freetown Peninsula, Sierra Leone', in: *Politics and Policies in Upper Guinea Coast Societies: Change and Continuity*, Højbjerg, K. et al (eds.), Palgrave Macmillan, New York: 2017, p. 47



hunting society' due to the fact that 'both make use of similar symbols and language and exhibit similar air of mystery'⁹.

The purpose of the Ojeh society is divergent and not always obvious. Initially, 'The Ojeh developed a reputation for their capacity to heal the sick and afflicted, but especially for the malevolent powers of the resident "merecin man"¹⁰' in the respective societies'¹¹. Also King noted that 'all members of Yoruba-based urban secret societies publicize their masquerades as embodying the medicine mystique'¹². According to Thompson, the Ojeh secret society is 'a cult that associates with the spirit world of the dead'¹³.

Nowadays, the Ojeh societies operate in some areas as elite social clubs, while 'versions of these societies were also developed by underemployed urban youths for their own entertainment and political expression'¹⁴. In relation to the latter, Fanthorpe stated that leader figures of the All People's Congress (APC) were members of the Ojeh Society and 'that both the Poro and Ojeh societies had been carrying out masquerades in some wards in an attempt to "cancel" the [local government 2014] elections'¹⁵.

When it comes to ethnicity, the Ojeh was one of the most important secret societies among the Krio¹⁶. According to Thompson, the Ojeh societies 'are exclusively Krio- based secret organizations'¹⁷, but on the other hand Wyse stated already in 1979 that 'the Ojeh Society is no longer exclusively Krio. Possibly because the main initiates of this society were Muslim Aku, or Muslim Krio, the Society has been extended to include non-Krio peoples from the same religious persuasion'¹⁸. Also Fanthorpe writes that Ojeh Societies 'count members from all of the major ethnic groups'¹⁹. In relation to religion Menard wrote that the Ojeh Society of Freetown Peninsula 'is still considered be predominately Muslim'²⁰.

⁹ Davies, J.E., *The Church and the Secret Society Syndrome in Sierra Leone*, 2009, ([url](#)), p. 40

¹⁰ A "merecin man" or just merecin is a traditional healer, see SLRC, *Understanding malnutrition and health choices at the community level in Sierra Leone*, Report 4, August 2014, ([url](#)), p. 20

¹¹ Cole, G.R., *The Krio of West Africa: Islam, Culture, Creolization, and Colonialism in the Nineteenth Century*, Ohio University Press, Athens, Ohio: 2013, p. 44

¹² King, N., 'Freetown's Yoruba-modelled secret societies as transnational and transethnic mechanisms for social integration', in: *The Upper Guinea Coast in global perspective*, Knörr, J. and Kohl (Eds.), Berghahn, New York; Oxford: 2016, ([url](#))

¹³ Thompson, V.A.D., *The transformation of Freetown Christianity, 1960-2000*, PhD Thesis, SOAS, University of London, 2013, ([url](#)), p. 63

¹⁴ Fanthorpe, R., *Sierra Leone: The Influence of the Secret Societies, with special reference to female Genital Mutilation*, Writenet, August 2007, ([url](#)), p. 9

¹⁵ Fanthorpe, R., *Sierra Leone: The Influence of the Secret Societies, with special reference to female Genital Mutilation*, Writenet, August 2007, ([url](#)), pp. 10, 11 and 13

¹⁶ Wyse, A.G.J., *The Krio of Sierra Leone: An Interpretive History*, C. Hurst & Co (Publishers), London: 1989, p.53

¹⁷ Thompson, V.A.D., *The transformation of Freetown Christianity, 1960-2000*, PhD Thesis, SOAS, University of London, 2013, ([url](#)), p. 63

¹⁸ Wyse, A.G.J., 'On Misunderstandings Arising from the Use of the Term 'Creole' in the Literature on Sierra Leone: A Rejoinder' in: *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, Vol. 49, No. 4, 1979, ([url](#)), p.412

¹⁹ Fanthorpe, R., *Sierra Leone: The Influence of the Secret Societies, with special reference to female Genital Mutilation*, Writenet, August 2007, ([url](#)), p. 9

²⁰ Menard, A., 'Poro Society, Migration and Political Incorporation on the Freetown Peninsula, Sierra Leone', in: *Politics and Policies in Upper Guinea Coast Societies: Change and Continuity*, Højbjerg, K. et al (eds.), Palgrave Macmillan, New York: 2017, p. 47



The Ojeh is predominately a male society. According to Davies, the role of females is restricted to contribute to the music and preparing food on special occasions, but they 'are not entitled to enter the shrine of Ogun for fear they might cause contamination of the 'deity''²¹. Also Cole emphasizes that the Ojeh is an exclusively male secret society and that women only contribute by singing during public performances²². Also other sources confirm that the Ojeh is a male society²³.

Not much information could be gathered about the recruitment, initiation and structure of the Ojeh society. According to Frost, these initiations are carried out in secret²⁴. Fanthorpe states that Ojeh societies 'admit adults on application and initiation does not involve any form of genital cutting'²⁵. For her Master Thesis Marfurt did some fieldwork in a small community in whereby she noticed that men can be both initiated into the 'Poro' as into the 'Oujeh'. Furthermore, she reported that:

'Although it is publicly known who belongs to which society, the members swear an oath not to talk about the laws and the rituals taking place within the society to non-initiates. If they do so, the social order is disrupted and they will die (Pers. Comm. 16.10.13). Non-initiates must not witness society rituals taking place in secluded patches of forests and are also warned by loud drumming and singing'²⁶.

In article published by The Patriotic Vanguard regarding secret societies it was also mentioned that non-initiates should not see any secret society rituals or even talk about it in public. In most extreme cases this can lead to death²⁷.

According to Thompson, The Ojeh 'patterned on a hierarchical structure and their beliefs, practices and rituals are based on Yoruba social and religious organization'²⁸. King noted that 'While membership of traditional secret societies in the hinterland is compulsory, membership of Freetown's old and new urban secret societies is not compulsory; rather, it is a matter of strategic or tactical

²¹ Davies, J.E., *The Church and the Secret Society Syndrome in Sierra Leone*, 2009, ([url](#))

²² Cole, G.R., *The Krio of West Africa: Islam, Culture, Creolization, and Colonialism in the Nineteenth Century*, Ohio University Press, Athens, Ohio: 2013, p. 41

²³ SierraLeoneHeritage.org, *Video Gallery – Ojeh*, n.d., ([url](#)) Vincent, J.B.M., *A Village-Up View of Sierra Leone's Civil War and Reconstruction: Multilayered and Networked Governance*, Research Report Vol. 2012, No. 75, Institute of Development Studies, May 2012, ([url](#)), p. 13

²⁴ Frost, D., *Work and Community Among West African Migrant Workers Since the Nineteenth Century*, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool: 1999, p. 182

²⁵ Fanthorpe, R., *Sierra Leone: The Influence of the Secret Societies, with special reference to female Genital Mutilation*, Writenet, August 2007, ([url](#)), p. 9

²⁶ Marfurt, F., *Local Perceptions of a Bioenergy Project in Sierra Leone: Expectations of Modernity, Gendered Impacts and Coping Strategies*, Master thesis, University of Bern, 21 January 2016, ([url](#)), p.67

²⁷ Patriotic Vanguard (The), *Secret societies in Sierra Leone*, 14 August 2010, (<http://www.thepatrioticvanguard.com/secret-societies-in-sierra-leone>)

²⁸ Thompson, V.A.D., *The transformation of Freetown Christianity, 1960-2000*, PhD Thesis, SOAS, University of London, 2013, ([url](#)), p. 68



choice²⁹. Carey reported that in the Bombali Seborá Chiefdom in northern Sierra Leone almost all villagers are member of secret sacred societies, among which the Ojeh society³⁰.

As already mentioned above the Ojeh Societies found their origin in Freetown, but 'Ojeh societies have spread to urban, mining and river/sea port areas throughout Sierra Leone'³¹. According to the former County Director of Plan International Sierra Leone, Casely Ato Coleman, there are in general 'four dominant secret societies; one for each of the four regions. The Western Area is dominated by Ojeh Society; North and East by Sande/Bondo; and the South by Poro'³².

Nowadays there are many Ojeh societies. The Critique Echo Newspaper gives a short summary of the societies in Freetown only: 'Awodi Ojeh Society, Tourist Ojeh Society, Agba Kolleh Ojeh Society, Seaside Ojeh Society, Independent Ojeh Society, Okaymorie Ojeh Society, Big Oba Sai Ojeh Society, Navy Ojeh Society, Republic Ojeh Society, Limba Ojeh 1, Limba Ojeh 2, etc.'³³.

Rituals and main celebrations

Fanthorpe stated that unlike the Odelay³⁴ society who 'frequently stages public masquerades during national holidays', the 'Ojeh is considered "deeper" and seeks to inculcate in its members both moral discipline and powers to detect and punish criminals'³⁵. Also Frost stated that organisations such as the Orjeh, do not usually perform or parade in public, but some do during public holidays³⁶.

According to King:

'All Freetown-based secret societies with historical links to Yorubaland in Nigeria, notwithstanding their secrets-embedded core, have a public side in the form of their public masquerade performances. In this context, a 'masquerade' is a mask-wearing figure that symbolizes the spirit and essence of a secret society and leads its public performance. That masked figure is normally called a 'devil'³⁷.

²⁹ King, N., 'Freetown's Yoruba-modelled secret societies as transnational and transethnic mechanisms for social integration', in: *The Upper Guinea Coast in global perspective*, Knörr, J. and Kohl (Eds.), Berghahn, New York; Oxford: Ebola and Poro: Plague, Ancient Art, and the New Ritual of Death 2016, ([url](#))

³⁰ Carey, N., *Ebola and Poro: Plague, Ancient Art, and the New Ritual of Death*, Ebola and Secret Societies - Poro Studies Association, 1 September 2014, ([url](#))

³¹ Fanthorpe, R., *Sierra Leone: The Influence of the Secret Societies, with special reference to female Genital Mutilation*, Writenet, August 2007, ([url](#)), p. 9

³² Coleman, C.A., 'The Role of Secret Societies in Defeating Ebola in Sierra Leone', in: *Africa Update*, Vol. XXIII, Issue 2, Spring 2016, ([url](#)),

³³ Critique Echo Newspaper (The), *Are we Serious about National Prayers and Fasting?*, n.d., ([url](#))

³⁴ Like the Ojeh the Odelay is a men's society of Yoruba origin. See [SierraLeoneHeritage.org](#), *Odelay Society*, n.d., ([url](#))

³⁵ Fanthorpe, R., *Sierra Leone: The Influence of the Secret Societies, with special reference to female Genital Mutilation*, Writenet, August 2007, ([url](#))

³⁶ Frost, D., *Work and Community Among West African Migrant Workers Since the Nineteenth Century*, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool: 1999, p. 182

³⁷ King, N., 'Freetown's Yoruba-modelled secret societies as transnational and transethnic mechanisms for social integration', in: *The Upper Guinea Coast in global perspective*, Knörr, J. and Kohl (Eds.), Berghahn, New York; Oxford: 2016, ([url](#)), p. 60



The aforementioned video regarding the Ojeh society shows a public masquerade which is the 'only process in the streets ceremoniously'. During the masquerade the 'mask devils' wear expensive clothes and also the members wear special clothes and have a walking stick. Furthermore, it is stated that during all performances the Ojeh society only use three drums and have several masks; the 'Aegus' with red colours on their back, the 'Arede' with cowries on his face, the 'Kokos' who always come out first like a messenger, and the 'Agbada-Ogbodo'³⁸.

Among all sources consulted and within the timeframe allocated to respond to this Query, no other information could be traced concerning rituals and main celebrations.

State protection/protection for members who break the rules of the society

One well respected member of Sierra Leone's leading Ojeh Society explained about the success of a cultural event in the United States. The man 'asked not to be identified in fear [of] backlash'³⁹. Also King noticed this during his research that revealing information about a secret society. Although his example is not concerning the Ojeh but an Odelay society in which an elderly member was 'organized isolated' due to the fact that he 'was deemed to have been too cooperative with a foreign researcher'. The status of the man:

'had been significantly reduced because he had given information and pictures to the researcher, who went on to publish a book containing the disclosed information and images. Other older members, he said, had accused him of speaking and showing too much, especially to a white man: 'They said that I had brought the inside to the outside; but I know I did not say or give anything to the researcher which would have made our society less-respected or less-feared. God forbid', he concluded. Yet his relative isolation, based on that perceived indiscretion from about thirty years ago, persists unto the present'⁴⁰.

Among all sources consulted and within the timeframe allocated to respond to this Query, no other specific information could be traced in which a member of an Ojeh society needed state protection after breaking the rules of the society.

Nonetheless, the below information could be of relevance.

In May 2008, the news medium Awoko reported about a case in which the eldest son of a deceased leader of the Gbagbani society, a male secret society in northern Sierra Leone, refused to replace his father. According to the uncle of the man, the police was not able to protect man against the intentions of the society to install the man as the new leader⁴¹.

³⁸ SierraLeoneHeritage.org, *Video Gallery – Ojeh*, n.d., ([url](#))

³⁹ New Rising Sun (The), *The Adaba Awoo Hunting Society Euphoria Spreads to Beltsville*, Maryland – USA, 7 June 2014, ([url](#))

⁴⁰ Menard, A., 'Poro Society, Migration and Political Incorporation on the Freetown Peninsula, Sierra Leone, in: Politics and Policies in Upper Guinea Coast Societies: Change and Continuity, Højbjerg, K. et al (eds.), Palgrave Macmillan, New York: 2017, p. 71

⁴¹ Awoko, *as police cannot protect... Secret society hounds another victim*, 26 May 2008, ([url](#))



In August 2010, The Patriotic Vanguard reported about a case in the northern part of the country. A woman was butchered with machetes by members of the Gbangbani secret society, after she unexpectedly met members of the aforementioned society in a bush path 'surrounding the masked spirit'. Although her husband reported the case to the police, nothing came out of it⁴².

The Patriotic Vanguard reported in the same article about another case in Fullahtown in the east of Freetown. Although, there was 'a court order to evict an Ojeh society from the premises of a landlady', no bailiff has ever gone there to execute the order 'out of fear or for some other reasons'. According to the report also the landlady herself was 'in perpetual fear of what might befall her especially when secret societies are notorious for casting evil spells and incurable diseases on people'⁴³.

In July 2016, the Concord Times reported that 12 people of a Poro society, including the leader, were arrested after a Maritime Wing Base in the coastal town Bonthe was attacked⁴⁴.

On 16 April 2018, the High Court of Sierra Leone convicted a supporter of the ruling Sierra Leone Peoples Party (SLPP) after the extra-judicial slaughtering of a youth activist of the opposition All Peoples Congress (APC). The man was given a 40 years' jail sentence. The youth activist was killed due to the fact that he refused to join the Poro in Kenema, the second largest town of the country, as it was SLPP dominated. He preferred to join the Poro in the Northern Province⁴⁵.

⁴² Patriotic Vanguard (The), Secret societies in Sierra Leone, 14 August 2010, (<http://www.thepatrioticvanguard.com/secret-societies-in-sierra-leone>)

⁴³ Patriotic Vanguard (The), *Secret societies in Sierra Leone*, 14 August 2010, ([url](#))

⁴⁴ Concord Times, *In Bonthe: 12 Poro society members arrested*, 20 July 2016, ([url](#))

⁴⁵ Organiser (The), *SLPP Murderer Gets 40 Years Sentence in Kenema for Killing an APC Supporter!*, 8 June 2018, ([url](#))



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