

## Perspective

# Small Pox Eradication and Cultural Evolution among the Yoruba Race

**Oripelaye MM\*, Olasode OA and Onayemi O**

Department of Dermatology, Obafemi Awolowo University, Nigeria

**\*Corresponding author:** Oripelaye MM, Department of Dermatology, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Osun state, Nigeria**Received:** December 16, 2016; **Accepted:** December 26, 2016; **Published:** December 27, 2016**Abstract**

Smallpox a disease caused by variola virus has plagued mankind for centuries. The periodic epidemic led to the creation of 'sopona' deity among the Yoruba race. The adornment and worship of this deity have strongly been ingrained in Yoruba culture, beliefs and lifestyles. Various historic attempts were made at getting a cure until Edward Jenner eventually discover an effective vaccine for smallpox. The World Health Organization (WHO) championed a campaign which led to eradication of smallpox in 1980. Cultural and worship activities associated with sopona deity among the Yoruba people has gradually witness a decline following the successful eradication of the disease. Practices, beliefs and lifestyles patterned by the adoration of sopona have similarly been altered.

**Keywords:** Sopona; Smallpox; Vaccine; Yoruba**Introduction**

Smallpox a disease cause by variola virus has plagued the human race for centuries. And various generations of human race based on prevailing technology and belief made attempt at getting a cure. The Yoruba people over these periods adopted the sopona deity (god of smallpox) to help relieve the epidemics. Despite these adoptions, they continue to suffer mortality from periodic epidemics of smallpox until the advent of smallpox vaccine. A universal vaccination championed by World Health Organization (WHO) finally led to the eradication of smallpox in 1980.

**The sopona deity and the yoruba race**

The Yoruba race, like many of its African counterpart has a rich culture which is strongly interwoven with its worships and beliefs. Several deities are worshiped among the Yorubas and these tend to form the basis of several festivals that are held at various times of the year and in various communities. Among the deities are: Sango, Oya, Obatala, Sopona, Osun etc. In a bids to avoid incurring the wroth of these deities, rituals and sacrifices are offered at intervals by priests on behalf of kings and communities to appease the gods and the communities are also conscious of the fact that they do not contravene the codes and rules that may offends the gods. Music, food, dressing and occupation has been largely influenced by belief and worship of these deities. "Sopona" is believed by the Yoruba race to be the god of small pox [1]. The deity is carefully adorn, and called by alternate names so as to avert his anger which could lead to epidemic of small pox [2].

The origin of small pox among the Yoruba race is not clearly define since history is handed down across generation by verbal communication with no clear documentation. However the earliest evidence obtained from Egypt suggest that small pox may have dated back to about 3000 years ago [3]. Although, it is suspected to have been with humans for about 12,000 years (1; 000BC) [4].

It presence with the human race have been very devastating with

high transmissibility and 20-60% mortality [5]. Histories have also had to attest to the devastating effects of smallpox by documenting some of the most important epidemics in human history. The plaque of arthens, antonine plaque and the plaque of cypriion are all historical testament of small pox epidemic. While no continent was spared of the horrors associated with small pox epidemic, Africa will however remember among many epidemics the death of 25,000 individuals in Cape Town in 1840. Another epidemic which occurred in 1864 in Angola similarly claimed the lives of 25,000 patients [3]. In Nigeria, an estimated 10,438 patients of the 45,386 patients infected succumb to the small pox infection during the 1930-1935 epidemic [6]. Outbreak was reported in Abakaliki, a town in South Eastern Nigeria among a faith group that rejected small pox vaccines [7]. The total number of reported cases in this outbreak was 32 out of which 30 was from the religious sect [7].

The burden and plight associated with small pox are not quantified in terms of mortality alone which consumes 30% of infection patients. A small percentage of small pox patients will present with limb deformity, osteomyelitis and blindness.

**The sopona deity and the vaccine**

The eradication of small pox with the aid of vaccine is one of the greatest successes of preventive medicine in modern day. It has stand as the major motivation or thrust in effort to eradicate other diseases such as polio. Chinese physicians made the first attempt at prevention of small pox by inoculation of substances obtained from lesions of small pox patients as far back as 10th century [8]. Several other attempts using his form of live, attenuated vaccines were practice at various times in different countries [9]. While some level of immunity was developed following this process which was also known as Variolation. The attendant risk of inoculating live small pox virus resulting in small pox infection and outbreak of small pox epidemic was not uncommon. This was however improved by Edward Jenner when he introduced inoculation of substance obtained from lesion of cowpox rather than lesion of smallpox, and observed the development

of immunity to smallpox [10,11]. This finding gave rise to the concept of vaccine and vaccination.

The World Health Organization (WHO) adopting strategy of mass vaccination and modalities to curtail outbreak of smallpox successfully brought an end to the plaque inflicted on man by the smallpox virus. The last known case of small pox occurred in 1977 and the world was declared free of the disease in 1980. Following the eradication of smallpox, vaccination was no longer considered necessary [9,12]. However in US, military personnel who may be at risk of involvement in biological warfare as well as health official who will be first responded in case of outbreaks may still be vaccinated.

Although, the successful eradication has been applauded, the process of mass vaccination which led the eradication was confronted with a handful of resistance. In the US, and England, anti-vaccination league were formed in 1885 and 1882 respectively [13]. Other opposition on religion ground was recorded in Europe. In Nigeria, the Abakaliki faith terbanacle recorded an epidemic following refusal to be vaccinated. The belief in the sopona (smallpox deity) was strongly enshrined among the Yoruba people. This gave the sopona priests a lot of influence and they often claim to have the ability to treat smallpox and appease the deity. Threatened by the imminent loss of benefits derived this influence, they were said to have vehemently oppose the mass vaccination programme of the WHO [14].

Globally legislations were passed to ensure compulsory vaccination of everyone. In Nigeria, the sopona cults (priests) were also banned and outlawed in other to facilitate small pox immunization [14]. Although, the activities of the sopona priest were ban by law, the influence of the deity and the priest would have been retained if smallpox had not been eradicated. As a result of the success of the smallpox vaccine, the practice, awareness, beliefs and worship of the sopona deity have decline among the Yoruba race.

If it is not a myth that smallpox epidemics arise as a result of expression of displeasure by sopona deity, then smallpox vaccine must have appeased the deity for past 40 years that the last case of smallpox was reported. Since the small pox vaccine eventually eradicates small pox, it must be that the vaccine is the long awaited appeasement of the sopona deity.

## Conclusion

The culture, belief and practice of the Yoruba people have essentially been preserved as it in handed down from one generation

to another. This has formed the unique identity of the Yoruba race which pride herself in her historic and ancestral heritage as reflected in religion, dressing and other aspect of her life style.

Interestingly, one of the highly revered deity sopona which until the advent of small pox vaccine was periodically offered appeasement sacrifice to prevent smallpox epidemic. The advent of small pox vaccine and subsequent eradication of small pox has oblivate the need to revere the sopona deity thereby influence an aspect of the Yoruba culture.

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