

YORUBA BELIEFS REGARDING SMALLPOX PREVENTION AND FOLKLORE

by

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In the Yoruba language, smallpox is called Sopona, or Igbona, or Olode, or Obaluwaiye.

According to Yoruba mythology SOPONA was born in ILE-IFE several centuries before the birth of Christ. SOPONA was a powerful man, a warrior, a hunter, a musician and a philosopher. He waged many wars on towns and villages and captured many slaves and personal effects. His weapons were the cudgel, cutlass, arrows and medicinal brooms. He used medicinal brooms to spread smallpox infection when battles became very severe and the cudgel and arrows could not be effectively used. He was so powerful that he was banished into the bush.

He travelled from ILE-IFE to NUPE in the northern region and from there southward to Dahomey where he became known as SAPATA. He went round the whole world and captured many places; he then became known as OBALUWAIYE i.e. the king and overlord of the whole world. SOPONA is accepted and recognized by his worshippers as one of the messengers of God. The following are some of the paraphernalia of its worshippers:

Arrow

Cudgel

Broom painted in camwood and with cowries strung round its handle.

Traditional Yoruba ways for dealing with smallpox

1. Whistling in the sun is prohibited during an epidemic because it was believed that Sopona was the only god to whom Almighty God gave power to whistle when talking.
2. Oil extracted from the palm kernel must not be kept or used in any household during a smallpox epidemic.
3. When there is an epidemic, incision with a needle is prohibited because the god Sopona uses the needle to attack his victims.
4. Smallpox patient must not be nursed, treated or visited by anyone who has had sexual intercourse but has not cleaned up properly.
5. The god of Sopona is believed to be travelling about in the sun but may sometimes rest in the shade of a tree. That is why people are forbidden to take shelter in the shade of a tree on sunny days.
6. Drumming is prohibited during an epidemic so that people may not congregate and be attacked by the smallpox god who may also come to dance.