Indian J Physiol Pharmacol 2011; 55(4) : 295–296

# *Guest Editorial*

## DO YORUBAS HAVE AN ORIGIN DIFFERENT FROM OTHER AFRICANS ?

When in 2002 Michael Brunet of the University of Poitiers announced his discovery of *Sahelanthropus tchadensis*, the oldest yet hominid fossil, the conventional theory of evolution was somewhat challenged (1). First of all, this fossil had been unearthed in the West African nation of Chad, not in the East African rift valley where the cradle of mankind had been thought to be (1). Secondly, the 7 million year old fossil showed more modern features than some much younger fossils, suggesting multiple species of hominids had existed, overlapping in time, and so human evolution might not have occurred in neat stages, each stage following the next before it (1).

The idea began to gain ground among some anthropologists that the different species of men evolved independently in strains similar but totally independent of each other (1).

This suggests that there are multiple species of men, just like there are multiple species of apes, penguins, dogs, bees and finches. Man was no exception to Nature's way of creating varieties of each kind of creature (1).

In a sense, this idea is not entirely new. Anthropologists have always divided and subdivided the human race. The white race has subdivisions such as the Nordic and Alpine. Even the first European explorers to Africa could tell there was a difference between the tall Masai of East Africa, the short Pygmy of Central Africa and the Khoisan of Southern Africa, who like the Chinese had an epicanthic fold over his eye.

Do the Yorubas who presently live in Western Nigeria have a different origin from other Negroes ? Certain evolutionary developments have been observed in Yorubas which are not taking place in other black Africans. These developments include mutations in genes controlling mannose, and hair formation and patterning (Keratin cluster near 17q12 and FLD6). Apart from this, it had long been noticed that the Yorubas have the highest incidence of dizygotic twins among all the people of the earth (2). As if these were not enough, Yorubas suffer from a peculiar type of sickle cell trait, different from the type of sickle cell trait that affects other native Africans (3).

If type of abnormal hemoglobin may be regarded as a proof of the diversity of mankind, the following information is revealing :

| *Abnormal hemoglobin* | *Geographic spread* |
|---|---|
| S (sickle cell) | Non-Yoruba native Africans showed three (3) independent mutations as evolved at Senegambia, Cote D'Ivoire and Congo/Cameroon. |
| C | Yoruba Negroes arose in Nigeria |
| O | Arabs arose on Arabian Penninsula |
| D | Indians and Pakistanis arose on Indian subcontinent |
| E | Asians from Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam and Laos. Arose in South East Asia |

There is another striking observation: Apart from the Western parts of Nigeria (where Yorubas now reside) hemoglobin C is also widespread in areas where, according to local legends, Yorubas once visited. The Ga people of Ghana, for example, speak a language which is virtually Yoruba and claim that they and the Ewe people migrated from the Yoruba region of Nigeria in the 13$^{th}$ century (4). Hemoglobin C is very rampant among the Ga and Ewe people of Ghana and Togo, but is absent in other Ghanaians. Hemoglobin C also occurs in Sierra Leone, a place many liberated Yoruba slaves made their home in the 1800s (5).

Yorubas have always been a puzzle among the people of Africa. The first European explorers who encountered the Yoruba were perplexed, most notably the American Baptist Missionary William H. Clarke. Compared to other African natives Yorubas were markedly urban, living in walled cities containing tens of thousands of inhabitants. At the dawn of the 20$^{th}$ century the European archaeologist Leo Frobenius excavated some interesting bronze busts at Ile Ife, the sacred city of the Yorubas.

Are Yorubas indeed a new branch of the Negro evolutionary tree or a totally different species? Undoubtedly, there is a need to study the Yorubas by scientists to resolve a riddle in the evolution of the human race.

SEUN AYOADE

*Department of Geography*
*Faculty of the Social Sciences*
*University of Ibadan*
*Oyo State, Nigeria*

## REFERENCES

1. Lemonick M, Dorfman A. Father of us all? *Time* 2002; 22: 48–55.
2. Akinboro A, Azeez MA, Bakare AA. Frequency of twinning in South West Nigeria. *Indian J Hum Genet* 2008; 14: 41–47
3. Desai D, Dhanani H. Sickle cell disease: History and origin. *Internet J Haematol* 2004; ISSN 1540–2649. Akinyanju OO. A profile of sickle cell disease in Nigeria. *Ann NY Acad Sci* 1989; 565: 126–36.
4. Gates HL. In: Africana, the Encyclopedia of the African and African American Experience. USA, Civitas Books, 1999; p721.
5. Edington GM, Lehmann H. The distribution of haemoglobin C in West Africa. *Man* 1956; 56: 34–36.