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Extreme

FELENZA
Buchi Emecheta, The Slave Girl, Chapter Two

Background

Textbooks often note that until Europeans discovered the cure for diseases, such as malaria and yellow fever, they were restricted in their conquest of Africa. Few describe the impact of European diseases on the Africans. The coming of "felenza" (influenza) was the first sign in the village Ibuza that the villager's world had changed. This is an example of the limited influence of the British over daily life. The "potokis" are Portuguese who came to the Benin Empire before the British (16th century). Vocabulary words found in the glossary include: Benin Empire, Portuguese, and Germans.

"Pom! Pom! Pom! The rumours that have been going round are true. Pom! There is a kind of death coming from across the salty waters. It has killed many people in Isele Azagba, it is creeping to Ogwashi, it is now coming to us. They call it Felenza. It is white man's death. They shoot it into the air, and we breathe it in and die. Pom! Pom...."

People, some on the verge of eating their evening meal, some still thudding their yam for their meal in their wooden mortars, listened helplessly as the gongman went round Ibuza with his unwelcome news. The town's runner must have returned. He must have told his tale of woe to the diokpa, the oldest man, then there must have been consultation among the elders and it must have been decided that the whole town should be warned. Everybody felt a kind of chill; not that an epidemic was anything new to the people of Ibuza, but at least previously they had always known what measures to take to avert mass disaster. They had experienced diseases like smallpox, which was so feared that they gave it the name "Nna ayin" -- "Our

Father" -- for at that time smallpox meant death; they knew that to stop it spreading throughout the villages any victim had to be isolated, so when somebody was attacked he would be taken into the bush and left there to die. All his worldly possessions would be burned, and no one would be allowed to mourn for him. So much feared was smallpox.

But this felenza was a new thing that the "Potokis" had shot into the air, though everyone wondered why.

"We have done them no wrong," people said. "They came to places like Benin and Bonny, bought healthy slaves from our people and paid us well. And this is how they thank us."

Rumor had it that some Europeans had been killed in Benin (Okwuekwu was one of those who carried the rumour when he returned from Idu with the copper charms for his daughter); but they had had their revenge at the time by killing many of the people there and exiling the rightful king of Idu. Why send them this kind of death now? The

1. What similarities did the people of Ibuza see in the Potokis and Germans? Why would the Germans be mistaken for the Potokis?
2. Diseases for which no cure is known frighten people. List some examples of diseases today for which there is not cure? (Cancer, AIDS, arthritis)
3. The people of Ibuza asked the diokpa what to do about the disease. Who do people consult in the U.S. today?
4. What peoples in other parts of the world were equally devastated by the introduction of foreign diseases?
5. What do you think the people of Ibuza thought of the Potokis, Germans and British?

Questions:

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people of Ibuza pondered, speculated and hoped that it would never come to them, for where were they to run to?

But soon it came to Owasshi, and within days men started dropping dead on their farms. Death was always so sudden that the relatives were too shocked to cry....

This speculation was buttressed by the fact that after a month the crisis seemed to have passed. It was then that Ibuza began to hear explanations of what had caused the disease. Before that time most people living in the interior of Nigeria did not know that the whole country now belonged to the people

called the British who were ruling them indirectly through the local chiefs and elders. Now, in the year 1916, the rumors said that the new colonial masters were at war with their neighbors "the Germans"; and the latter fought the British by blowing poisonous gas into the air. When you breathed it, you died. Many inside Ibuza were asking themselves what they had to do with the Germans, and the Germans with them. There was no one to answer their questions; even the diokpas did not know the answers. They consoled themselves by making innumerable offerings of goats and chickens in the hope that their god Olisa would be well pleased and would protect them.