

ENGLISH TRANSLATION (Sheila Das, Jean-Marie Bourjolly)

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An Assessment of the Many Facets of Cholera in Haiti

A Review of Ralph R. Frerichs' *Deadly River*

Part V (End)

By Jean-Marie Bourjolly



The worst enemies of the struggle to eliminate cholera were carelessness and conviction, influenced or not by the environmental theory, that cholera was here to stay and one could not do better than manage it.

In the meetings Piarroux held with the Health Minister Florence Guillaume and Donald François, the new coordinator for the national fight against cholera, he faced skepticism. The minister's skepticism was fueled by her expectations toward the ten-year plan. Frerichs reports her conviction that the plan "would enable the country to build treatment centers, integrate management of cholera cases into routine hospital activity, and organize vaccination campaigns" (p. 234). The Minister "believed cholera would remain endemic in Haiti"; and "with the case-fatality then around 1 percent, François was comfortable that cholera was being adequately addressed in local treatment centers. He shared Guillaume's view that its immediate elimination was not an achievable objective, basing his views on the opinion that *Vibrio cholerae* were present in the Haitian aquatic environment. Piarroux's elimination plans made no sense to him" (p. 234).

As to carelessness, it manifested itself in various ways. An egregious example was the absence of a departmental epidemiologist from a field survey, who preferred to attend a training session in a coastal hotel for which he received a cash allowance. Or the way NGOs asked poor villagers to treat their water without providing the chlorine tablets they did not have the means to buy. A troubling paradox: "billions for a national plan to eliminate cholera over ten years... but no one could find the few dollars needed to provide chlorine tablets and repair the PVC pipe to stop cholera immediately?! Médecins Sans Frontières made the same point... Unfortunately, the experiences of these villagers were the rule, not the exception" (p. 236).

Reconciliation?

Frerichs' book closes with a chapter entitled *Rapprochement* [or reconciliation]. He writes that "despite all that has been discovered, Piarroux remains doubtful that the United Nations will ever fully acknowledge that Nepalese peacekeeping troops brought cholera to Haiti. Behind the scenes, however, a new narrative has unfolded, a more complex one revealed by the UN's own actions. Perhaps the French word *rapprocher* – bring closer – describes the appearance of new understanding, guidelines and funding initiatives" (p 243). The author sees a "changing attitude" in the "necessary pilgrimage"

made by Ban Ki-moon in the Centre *département*, where he spoke of "a moral duty" to help stop the spread further cholera (p. 244). "To Piarroux, the evocation of a 'moral duty' by Ban Ki-moon during his July 2014 necessary pilgrimage to Haiti was a rapprochement of sorts.... If this book in some way helps stimulate the UN, other international agencies, and local programs to move in a concerted direction, rapprochement may well lead to an opening of hearts, purses, and hands and thus genuinely rid Haiti of the scourge of cholera" (p. 247).

Any initiative contributing to the elimination of cholera in Haiti would be welcome. But it is difficult for a Haitian to be satisfied with "a rapprochement of sorts." For in their relations with external powers, Haitians were too often ignored in their very existence, and this, throughout their history. This is a kind of ontological negation that is repeated time after time and pierces them to the depths of their being. That their own political leaders have often facilitated or made possible such denial – as Frerichs' book shows in their actions and impudent words – does not lessen the pain. Hundreds of thousands of people became ill, thousands of them died, unnecessarily. No *reason* surfaces other than their use as pawns, stripped of their humanity, in games of postures and institutional ambitions directed towards strengthening the dynamic of the authority of aid agencies toward a poor and vulnerable people. The disease introduced due to the United Nations' gross negligence, who had officially come to help, taxed the country's meager resources and made the existence of its inhabitants more trying. If the introduction of cholera in Haiti is the result of serious but unintentional errors – the available information does not suggest a deliberate intention to harm – systematic obstruction by the United Nations and its various agencies is akin to a premeditated crime. Thousands of people who could have been saved were sacrificed to preserve the image and interests of the United Nations. People continued to get sick and die while the evidence was denied, clues linking the introduction of cholera to MINUSTAH were eliminated, and research was directed toward false trails. They tampered with the truth, wasting valuable time, which has made it more difficult if not impossible to eliminate this disease. They lied shamelessly to Haitians who were treated as if they were not thinking people. (Is it not the same treatment, by the way, inflicted on them today when the European Union claims that the massive fraud that marked the 2015 elections does not exist or is not of great concern?) As Piarroux and his colleague B. Faucher wrote, "nobody would dare to claim the uselessness of the determination of the source of the outbreak if its location was Europe or the United States. Haitians deserve as well to know why, and how, thousands of them died." Haitians merit the same treatment that Europeans and Americans demand for themselves; they deserve the treatment due the population of any State, be it powerful or weak. The wrongs caused by the UN must be acknowledged and a full apology made. That's the least it can do.

I pay tribute here to two friends of the truth that people everywhere, not just Haitians, are indebted to, simply because they did their job conscientiously and dared to oppose the logic of power with truth: Jonathan M. Katz and Renaud Piarroux.

The End