Sorcery, Stigma, and Conspiracy Theories: Accusations of AIDS in Haiti and the U.S.

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The AIDS epidemic that hit the world in the 1970s and 80s caused fear and panic in those whose lives were affected. In relation to the epidemic in North America and Haiti, this fear brought about a culture of blame. One of the dominant themes displayed in this relationship through accusations was the belief that human agency had a major role in the etiology of AIDS (Farmer, 2006: 192). In his book, *AIDS & Accusation: Haiti and the Geography of Blame*, Paul Farmer analyzes three different levels of accusation: the Village, the Central, and the Periphery. While all three levels of accusation were significantly harmful to those involved, the Central level was by far the most damaging due to the physical harm and discrimination it caused.

The first level analyzed is the accusations in the village of Do Kay. This is done through the examination of the responses to three of the villagers contracting and dying of AIDS. Many people in Haiti practice the religion of vodou, which helped to contribute to the responses of the villagers towards AIDS. A piece of this religion, called maji, refers to the use of sorcery to send illness on another person (Farmer, 2006: 67).

Manno, the first villager to fall ill with AIDS, was considered to be a victim of “sent sida,” or AIDS sent to him through sorcery. This was because sorcery was seen as a way to keep one person from having more than others. Manno was not from Do Kay; he had moved there to be a teacher in the new school. Once there, he was also given the responsibilities of taking care of the water pump and the village’s communal pigs. Other villagers who had lived in Do Kay their whole lives didn’t think that Manno, as an outsider, deserved so many jobs when they were struggling to get one. This implies that AIDS was sent to Manno out of jealousy (Farmer, 2006: 61-79).
Anita, the second villager to get AIDS, was a victim of poverty rather than sorcery. Unable to make a living in Do Kay, Anita moved to the city of Port au Prince to work as a maid. She was forced to live and have sexual relations with a man in the city out of her dependency and need of financial support. Anita caught AIDS from him, and when he got sick and died she moved back home. She was seen as an innocent victim of the lifestyle of rural Haiti (Farmer, 2006: 80-94).

Dieudonné, the third villager in Do Kay to become ill with AIDS, had similar responses as Manno, but for slightly different reasons. It was believed that while Dieudonné was working in Port au Prince, he sent an illness on a fellow worker in an attempt to get his job. In response, it was said that the worker then sent AIDS on Dieudonné (Farmer, 2006: 95-109). Dieudonné himself observed AIDs as a “jealousy sickness” of the poor. He describes it to be “like the army: brothers shooting brothers” (Farmer, 2006: 106).

The observation of AIDS being a jealousy sickness sent on people through sorcery had adverse effects on the village of Do Kay and similar villages in Haiti. In believing that AIDS was a sent sickness, Haitians could go to a vodou priest to derive who had sent it (Farmer, 2006: 45). These kinds of accusations of who sent it to who created hatred and division within the village at a crucial time (Farmer, 2006: 67). It also undermined the true etiology of AIDS, preventing some from going to the medical clinics to get proper treatment.

The second level of accusation analyzed by Farmer is the central level – the accusations made by North America, especially the United States, towards Haiti. These accusations were particularly damaging. The United States sourced Haiti as the origin of
the AIDS epidemic and the cause of it spreading to North America. The remarkably disturbing part of this claim is that there was research proving that this was false, and that it was likely the exact opposite of what the American scientific community was claiming (Farmer, 2006: 129).

The CDC placed Haitians as a risk group, including them with the 4H’s: Homosexuals, Hemophiliacs, Heroin Users, and Haitians. The major differential piece of this categorization is the fact that Haitians are labeled based on their nationality, where the three other categorized risk groups are based on behavior or conditions. This caused a great number of Haitians in the United States to avoid identification with their nationality and try to pass off as Jamaicans (Van Hollen Lecture: 10/16/13).

The fear and stigma that came with the label of “AIDS Carrier” was damning. Haitians living in the United States and other parts of North America faced extreme discrimination. They lost their jobs and were refused work. Those who owned their own businesses saw them collapse. Haitian children were harassed and beaten in schools. The FDA even banned Haitians from being able to donate blood (Van Hollen Lecture: 10/16/13).

Haitians who practiced vodou were forced to bring their religion “underground.” The stereotype of vodou practices in the United States provided a picture of exoticism and barbarism, with few Americans understanding the religion outside of sorcery and the imagined “voodoo dolls” (Kramer, 1985).

This categorization and blame also harmed Haiti itself. A large part of the Haitian economy had come from the tourist industry. After Haiti was labeled as the origin of AIDS, tourism collapsed in the country. They also saw an immense reduction in
remittances sent from family members living and working in the United States because a large majority of them could no longer find work (Van Hollen Lecture: 10/16/13).

The economic isolation from the rest of the world due to the stigma of AIDS sent Haiti soaring further down into poverty. Orphans of parents who had died from AIDS were left to live on their own, often under the responsibility of the oldest sibling. Lucky ones might get taken in by a relative or other member of the village, who themselves could hardly support them. Haiti was not getting the humanitarian AID that it needed because of an inaccurate accusation (Bilheimer, 2003).

The economic effects that these accusations had on Haitians living in the U.S. and in Haiti made a large proportion of their lives unbearable. It caused physical abuse, racial and ethnic discrimination, and helped to spiral Haitians even further into poverty, increasing their vulnerability to the disease through the necessity of risky behaviors to make a living and a lack of proper medical prevention and treatment (Van Hollen Lecture: 10/16/13).

The third level that Farmer analyzes is the periphery – the responses of Haitians and Haiti to the accusations of North America. These responses manifested themselves mostly in conspiracy theories. Haitians thought the reason that the U.S. had blamed Haiti for AIDS was based on political and economic reasons. These theories ranged from reasons for the U.S. to blame Haiti to Haitians believing that Americans planted AIDS in Haiti to kill them off and/or enslave them. They thought that they had been intentionally targeted (Farmer, 2006: 230). This kind of response can be traced back through Haiti’s history of exploitation and domination by Western countries (Van Hollen Lecture: 10/16/13).
The effects of this response of accusation are not extraordinarily damaging compared to the others. It helped to enforce an already established mentality and distrust of the developed West that had been in place in Haiti for centuries.

Through these analyses it is easy to see that the overwhelming amount of damage comes from the accusations at the center. The responses of the village through accusations of sorcery cause hatred and division within the village, but that is an extremely small scale compared to that of the center. The conspiracy theories of accusation in the periphery towards the United States only reinforced ideologies that the Haitian people have shared throughout their history. The Haitians history of domination and rebellion, as well as misconceptions of their religion, led to pre-conceived, racial stereotypes of the exotic “other” in the United States, making them an easy target of the false conclusions that placed the blame of AIDS on Haiti (Van Hollen Lecture: 10/16/13). The misplaced blame led to incomprehensible social, political, and economic discrimination and abuses that set Haiti back on the world scale, and continued to make them more vulnerable for the very disease that started the accusations.
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