

Sarah Pantuvo, General Gowon's Guinea-worm eradication director, said the women shouted: "This disease is a curse from our ancestors; it has nothing to do with the pond water! If we let you touch anything, the ancestors will deal with us. We heard them crying all night!"

"I was very angry," Ms. Pantuvo said.

But General Gowon tried to defuse the situation, telling the women: "You, the women who fetch water from this pond, were not consulted about treating it? You should have been."

He assured them that the Abate would not harm the fish, and he told them that if their ancestors were benign, they would not want their children to be sick, and would like the pond treated.

But the women would have none of it. "Why don't you go treat AIDS instead?" they shouted.

Finally, he backed down, saying he would return when the women were ready.

That evening, he visited Matthew Ogbu Egede, the paramount chief of the area around Ogi. Chief Egede was mortified.

"I am a Christian," he said in an interview. "I don't believe in anything about juju. These people objected out of ignorance. The devil made them object."

He convened a meeting of "the elites," a local chiefs council. Furious, they ordered the village to accept the pesticide treatment and pay a fine of "one very mighty native cow, plus goats, yams and kegs of palm wine," Chief Egede said. The council sent the general an effusive letter of apology.

"As Socrates of the old Greek people took a cup of hemlock poison from his people for the love of his state, so have you borne our people's churlish misbehaviour," it said, further comparing him to William Tyndale, who translated the Bible into English and was martyred for heresy, and to St. Polycarp, who smiled as he was burned at the stake.

Mr. Ogebe was allowed to treat the pond. Slowly, cases of Guinea worm disease died out in the area.

The mud hut in Ogi called the Guinea Worm Containment Center recently housed four patients, including Mr. Igelle, the farmer. There they are given buckets of water to cool their burning limbs, and three simple meals a day to keep them from working in the fields, where they might be tempted to soak a painful blister in a drinking pond.

Each sufferer had at least one yardlong worm painfully emerging, a few agonizing inches a day, carefully wound around a twig or bit of gauze.

"I blame myself, because I drank that water," said Mr. Igelle, 55, admitting that he had drunk from a stagnant pond when the water his wife had carefully filtered had run out as he worked in his far-off yam field. "Now my children go to the field to fetch food, and I tell them not to drink."

Though Mr. Igelle may be one of Ogi's last cases, migrant herders and farm laborers still pass through, and any one of them could have picked up a worm in the last year. It could come back.

A Cause in Need of a Leader

That such a mighty struggle would erupt over one pond gives a sense of how daunting a disease eradication campaign can be. Without a relentless leader, it will go nowhere. In the case of Guinea worm, that role is played by Mr. Carter, who in 1986 was hunting for projects for his new foundation.