

# Traditional healer returns to first Ebola-affected village

February 25 2015, by Youssouf Bah

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(AP)—Here at ground zero of West Africa's Ebola outbreak, a local traditional healer returned to complete the removal of a curse residents believe could have been placed on their village in Guinea.

It is the same village where experts believe 2-year-old Emile Ouamouno was the first person to have died from Ebola, on Dec. 28, 2013, in the outbreak that has slowed in recent months but has not been completely stamped out.

When Emile developed a fever, started vomiting, passed blood in his stool and died two days later, nobody knew why. Other villagers began dying. A traditional healer was brought in to perform an exorcism ceremony.

"He took away the witchcraft items that the people had lying around their homes," said Etienne Ouamouno, the father of the 2-year-old. People had blamed those items for the deaths, he recalled.

"Everyone was talking like that," Ouamouno told Associated Press. "But even so, people kept dying."

Hundreds abandoned the village, believing the Ouamouno family or the entire village, was cursed, the village chief Amadou Kamano remembered.

Ouamouno said foreigners then came in and announced that the deaths

were caused by Ebola, which is spread by the bodily fluids of a person showing symptoms of the disease, for which there is no known cure and which is usually fatal.

Meliandou villagers are poor, stigmatized and still deeply suspicious about who or what brought the disease that has devastated their lives. Here, as in many other villages across Ebola country, people still believe that Ebola was spread on purpose by people seeking some type of gain.

Scientists are still trying to find out how the outbreak started, including coming to Meliandou to test great apes and bats as possible sources.

Ouamouno invited traditional healer Kalifa Lengo back to the village to oversee the final stages of the rites, he said. During his first visit, last April, Lengo planted a banana tree in the center of the village and promised to return. The tree has grown rapidly.

The cutting of the plant, the elders say, will bring about the removal of the curse. Singing, dancing and rites were performed near the tree during the ceremony on Feb. 22. A goat, offered to the healer, was cooked over a fire. A village elder threw rice at the tree.

"I didn't die or fall sick and I praise God for that," Ouamouno said.

Ebola has killed nearly 9,200 people across Liberia, Guinea and Sierra Leone.

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