



Empire's Colonization in American Plague Era: Colonial Medicine and Native American Medicine in *Shaman*

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Abstract

Noah Gordon, a Jewish American writer, is very popular in the United States for his famous historical novels "The Cole Trilogy". As the second book of "The Cole Trilogy", *Shaman* was declared "Best Historical Novel of 1991" by the Society of American Historians, which awarded Noah Gordon the first James Fenimore Cooper Prize. It talks mainly about the life of Dr. Robert Judson Cole and his son "Shaman" in the 19th century. They help native American Sauks, and absorbed the culture of Sauks, enriching western medical education system by studying indigenous remedies. The Sauks struggled to survive. In a post-colonial context, this paper explores the competition between colonial medicine and native American medicine in American Plague Era, revealing the European powers' ambition of conquering the native Americans through violence and medicine. Native American medicine was finally hybridized with colonial medicine to form a new kind of medicine, folk medicine, to survive itself, overthrowing the absolute authority of colonial medicine.

Keywords

Plague, *Shaman*, colonial medicine, native American medicine, resistance through hybridity

1. Introduction

Through the analysis of American historical novel *Shaman*, this paper explores the early political, cultural, historical, social and other aspects of the United States. Innovatively combined with medical knowledge, it explore how colonial medicine helped Europeans occupy the New World, and how Indian medicine found a new development mode—resistance through hybridity, and eventually subverted the absolute authority of colonial medicine in colonial context. It exposed the colonial ambitions of European powers to conquer Native Americans by violence and medicine, and helped us have a better understanding of "the languages, cultures, history, political system, local economy, human geography hidden and other aspects within other countries" (Xie Tao & Chen Yue, 2022).

2. The American plague: a metaphor for the "Accomplices" of the Colonists

In the process of European colonization overseas, disease has always been closely associated with colonization (Du Xianbing, 2012). Since the 16th century, European immigrants have moved to settle across the Americas, and also brought the Africans as slaves, bringing disastrous effects on the Native Americans. Many diseases of the Old World followed immigrants to the Americas, resulting in mass death of Native Americans. It is estimated that up to

90% of the indigenous population in parts of the Americas perished after Columbus's voyage, and the disease spread rapidly and the death rate was also the most alarming in densely populated areas (Pratik Chakrabarti, 2016). Indigenous peoples were the most immunologically vulnerable of all American populations. Their ancestors had not had the opportunity to evolve resistance to most of the infectious diseases common to European and African peoples, and so they were repeatedly devastated by maladies, like measles and influenza, from which white and black children usually recovered (John C. Waller, 2014). The development of industrial civilization dramatically increased the exposure and susceptibility of all Americans to disease through urbanization. As a country of hamlets and small towns transformed into a highly urbanized nation of overcrowded and unsanitary cities, many more people succumbed to potentially deadly infections like tuberculosis, dysentery and whooping cough (John C. Waller, 2014).

Medical historian David Arnold believes that colonialism gave birth to colonial economies, and the resulting ecological changes had far-reaching and enduring effects on public health (David Arnold, 1946). The warehouses, waterfront businesses, ocean docks, Humphrey Place, the steam locomotive and railway station in this novel are all the products of industrial civilization, undoubtedly accelerated the deterioration of the local public health environment and created a community environment prone to disease transmission: Small shacks without ventilation, few toilets used by too many people, the open gutter filled with the raw wastes of Humphrey Place, streets suffused with stink and miasma. Too many people suffer from diseases in this living environment. Although a colonial regime might provide a health care system that went some way towards meeting the needs of the indigenous population, but this might only partly compensate for the health problems which colonial land and labour policies had themselves helped to create (David Arnold, 1946), just like the unfair health-care plan in District Eight in the novel. The names on the tickets Dr. Cole was given each morning didn't belong to the sickest people in the Fort Hill neighborhood... treatment tickets were divided among the wealthy donors to the charity, who passed them out to whomever they pleased, most of the time to their own servants as rewards (Noah Gordon, 1992). And slum dwellers often have to wait for a tragic fate.

Native Americans have suffered more than slum dwellers in the global movement, however. Far more red men had been wiped out by white man's diseases than by bullets. Smallpox, especially, had laid waste to the woodland and Plains tribes (Noah Gordon, 1992). Native Americans have lived in isolation from other human species for thousands of years, and they have developed a delicate balance with their environment. They lived in small villages near their farmland and moved on when the soil was exhausted or the hunting deteriorated. As a result, sanitary conditions were relatively good. There was never enough time for waste to build up and create conditions conducive to widespread disease (Rebecca Tannenbaum, 2012). The Sauks in the novel often move to the summer camp to lift their spirits and start a new life after surviving the harsh winter. They wrestle, race, play at ball-and-stick, and always maintain a brave and uplifting attitude towards life. But then Europeans occupied the homes of the indigenous people, building magnificent buildings and producing terrifying machines on the land (Noah Gordon, 1992). It has seriously damaged the living mode and disease defense mechanism suitable for the local ecological environment established for thousands of years. And diseases like smallpox, measles and typhus followed. The Indians had little or no resistance to many diseases brought from the Old World, and so first died in great numbers upon first contact with immigrants from Europe and Africa (Crosby, Alfred W. & McNeill J. R., 2003). The changes brought about by the arrival of the Europeans created a crisis from which Native American populations never recovered (Rebecca Tannenbaum, 2012). In the novel, the family of Keyser, a Potawatomi man, all died of fever when he was a child, and he was raised by white people, who did not even speak Indian.

The American plague became the most powerful weapon against the Native Americans, helping to clear the white man's path, brushing aside military resistance and emptying lands suited to white farming and settlement (David Arnold, 1946). It also provided a legal excuse for colonial medicine and culture to enter the American colonies.

3. Country doctors and military doctors: the invasion of colonial medicine

Colonial medicine, also known as imperial medicine, mainly refers to the medical practices of colonists in the colonies and the related medical institutions, systems and medical administrative powers (Fu Wenwen, 2020). The aim of it was to help the colonists overcome the medical and health problems they faced in the colonies (George Basalla, 1976). Colonial medicine is mainly based on western medical knowledge, theories and practices, and is born with the colonial activities of the suzerainty, which determines that colonial medicine has a strong political overtone. In the colonies, it has always been subordinate to the colonial government, starting with the preservation of colonists' interests (Fu Wenwen, 2020).

Dr. Cole in the novel is one of the representatives of colonial medicine. He was once a member of the Edinburgh Medical School, who was forced to flee Britain to the American continent. Along the way from Boston to Illinois, he helped treat white settlers who had migrated west, doctoring lumberjacks in Pennsylvania, then hired as physician to a track-laying crew of the Washington & Ohio Railroad, and finally settling at the Holden's Crossing in Illinois, as a country doctor. As Nick Holden, the earliest settler of the Holden Crossing in the novel, says, "Settlers flock to a place where there's a doctor." (Noah Gordon, 1992). So he paid high prices to have Dr. Cole living in Holden's Crossing. Seasonal epidemics became the biggest obstacle to white migration to the West. "This became unmanageable only in the springtime, when the annual epidemics struck, with fevers along the rivers... communicable illnesses everywhere." (Noah Gordon, 1992). These epidemics hit the settlers of whites. More and more colonial doctors migrated west. Dr. Cole, Dr. Barr, Dr. Beckermann, and four other doctors gathered in Illinois to form the Rock Island County Medical Society. So they could meet regularly to share recent treatments and ideas, exchange the latest medical developments, which helped clear the way for colonists to move west.

In addition to helping whites settle in the Americas, colonial medicine also played a vital role in military advancement. Medical measures in the 18th century successfully shaped the modern navy and army. Medicine became the core of military modernization, helping to form a sense of order and discipline in soldiers on military ships and camps, and improve morale (Pratik Chakrabarti, 2016). The famous American historian, Philip D. Curtin, noted that these simple and effective medical measures include emphasizing the design, location, ventilation and drainage of military barracks and hospitals, drinking clean water and attention to various sanitary conditions (David Arnold, 2020). During the American Civil War, when there was a shortage of medics, Dr. Cole applied to be an assistant surgeon in the 106th Kansas and then in the 131st Indiana, caring for patients in the army, all of whom were in extremely poor condition: the most prevalent complaints were of diarrhea and dysentery, a variety of fevers, heavy colds, syphilis and gonorrhea, delirium tremens and other signs of alcoholism, hernias, and lots of scurvy (Noah Gordon, 1992). Dr. Cole later realized that it was food and hygiene that had harmed the health of soldiers heavily. So he determined to take steps to improve the sanitation in the barracks, find clean water for the army, lead soldiers in digging sinks as toilets, and ordered that soldiers must defecate or urinate in the designated sinks (Noah Gordon, 1992). He explained the dietary causes of scurvy to his officer and ordered to buy barrels of cabbages and carrots as part of the ration (Noah Gordon, 1992). Under these medical measures, Acting Assistant Surgeon Cole had gotten soldiers through the winter fit for duty. Out of six hundred men in the regiment, seven had died during the winter, a mortality rate of twelve per thousand. The mortality rate of soldiers has been effectively controlled. In comparison, fifty-eight men per thousand had died in the other three regiments (Noah Gordon, 1992).

The emphasis on medicine made military operations more efficient. Once basic medical practices took root in military and civilian life, the colonial size and wealth of European powers would increase dramatically (Pratik Chakrabarti, 2016). The major European powers succeeded in expanding their colonies in the Americas, India, and Africa.

4. Shaman, seven "Tents of Wisdom": the traditional Indian medicine

Medicine is an important part of traditional Indian culture. To most Indians, medicine signified an array of ideas and concepts rather than remedies and treatment alone (Virgil J. Vogel, 1970). They see the power of healing as an expression of spiritual power, referring to various supernatural powers including "clairvoyance, ecstasism, spiritism, divination, demonology, prophesy, necromancy, and all things incomprehensible" (Virgil J. Vogel, 1970). Among the primitive religions practiced by the Indians, Shamanism was the main religion. Shamans are mediators between men and the supernatural powers. They need special training to exorcise demons, to heal diseases and even to prophesy (Liu Dan, 2016). The seven "Tents of Wisdom" is the knowledge shamans must learn.

Different Indian tribes have different requirements for training a shaman. In many tribes, the older shamans select those youths whom they regard as most likely to make good successors to themselves, and teach them seven Tents of Wisdom, or train them to be their assistants. In such cases often the selection is made because of certain psychic qualities which the youth is thought to possess, such as a tendency to epileptic attacks. Where the future shaman is designated, either by heredity or by the spirits, indications are usually early apparent. These signs take the form of dreams, visions, or extraordinary experiences (Roland B. Dixon, 1908). Makwa-ikwa in the novel is a shaman of Sauks, who had been severely trained by the older shaman Wabokieshiek. The healing capacity of shamans is divided into seven stages, corresponding to seven "Tents of Wisdom". In the first year, Wabokieshiek showed Makwa leaves and roots and bark and told her which of them could lift the spirit out of the body and allow it to converse with manitous, which could dye deerskins and which make war paints... and which could kill (Noah Gordon, 1992).

At the end of the first year, Makwa successfully passed the first Tent of wisdom. Over the next four years, she learned how to summon the manitous with songs and drums, how to... how to chant the spirit of the dying on to the next world. In some Indian tribes of the Great Plains, all young braves, who are ambitious to become great or medicine men, assemble and go through the horrible ordeal which is to render them immortal, pinching up an inch or two of the integument and pectoralis major muscle on each side, and thrusting a ragged knife through the flesh beneath the fingers; after which skewers are passed through the wounds thus made. To these skewers or sticks, passed beneath the integument and through the muscles, cords are attached, by means of which the candidates are raised clear of the ground, and left dangling until apparently dead, having fainted repeatedly (David Dary, 2008). As the successor to shaman Wabokieshiek, Makwa was taken to a the sacred clearing on the hilltop in the fifth Tent of Wisdom. The older shaman, with his British knife, slashed double slits on each of her shoulders, then carefully cut her to fashion straps of skin like the epaulets worn by white army officers. He passed a rope through these bloody slits and knotted a loop, and he threw the rope over a tree branch and hauled her up until she hung just off the ground, suspended by her own bleeding flesh (Noah Gordon, 1992). For the next two years, Makwa passed the final two Tents of Wisdom, which dealt with blighting magic, namely, how to make a healthy man sick by casting, and how to summon and direct ill fortune.

Unlike European cultures, White men's medicine is more concerned with symptomatic relief and focuses only on affected body parts, while Indian diagnostic and curing procedures aim at curing the ultimate cause of ill health and try to restore the whole person and his harmony with the human, natural, and supernatural environment (Wolfgang Jilek, 1978). Indigenous American healing practices or "medicine" were only one part of a complex of spiritual beliefs. Most indigenous peoples did not distinguish between medical practice, religious ritual, and magic. Herbs, music, and ritual were involved in all three (Rebecca Tannenbaum, 2012). They stressed spirituality in their healing practices, and had a long heritage of medical techniques that had been passed down through the generations (John C. Waller, 2014). They believe that the natural world was imbued with spiritual power. Animals, plants, and the earth itself had agency and volition, and could be offended by bad behavior. It was crucial for human beings to have peaceful relationships with all (Rebecca Tannenbaum, 2012).

Indians like Little Horn and Stone Dog in the novel knew secrets about slicing the plains and turning it over to expose its flesh and blood, the blackearth. As they worked they apologized to the earth for cutting it, and they sang songs in order to imprecate the proper ghosts. Compared with them, the white men plowed too deep, reclaimed the land unscrupulously, only to make themselves catch the mange, and then die of fever. Indian society emphasized the well-being of the whole rather than the individual, believing that being too greedy or ambitious could upset the balance of the family, tribe, or village and have serious consequences in both physical and spiritual worlds (Rebecca Tannenbaum, 2012), just as whites' occupation and over-cultivation of land could eventually lead to mange and death.

In some Indian social organizations, singing and dancing to the deity has been also used to treat those psychological illnesses that cannot be treated by Western medicine so far (Gao Xiaogang, 1997). "Sings" are traditionally categorized as chants of the "Blessing Way" for prevention of illness and misfortune (Wolfgang Jilek, 1978). Dancing movements with significant therapeutic effect like Gourd Dance and Sun Dance among the Indians of the Plains and Western Prairie, and the Winter Spirit Dance on the Northwest Pacific Coast, have been used to increase individual strength and group cohesion, helping those attending movements to overcome their abnormal despondence. This despondence was an unhealthy state the North American Indian youth often encounter: feeling frustrated, discouraged, inferior, sometimes confused. It was a state that occurs in a context of cultural chaos, relative poverty and social chaos, manifesting as a variety of physical, psycho-physiological and behavioral symptoms, often associated with alcohol and drug abuse (Wolfgang Jilek, 1978). White settlers in America uprooted indigenous people from their lands, causing untold environmental and cultural destruction (Judith Shapiro, 2010). In the novel, Sauks were expelled from their homeland by whites and settled on a harsh reservation in Kansas. Makhwa returned to the Sauk Tribe after passing through the seven "Tents of Wisdom". Makwa-ikwa declared a Buffalo Dance and instructed the hummers and singers in a spring. People danced in the old way, and in some of their eyes she saw a light she hadn't seen in a long time. After the dance movement, some of the People found the hope of life, being eager to leave the reservation and live as their fathers had lived (Noah Gordon, 1992). Thus, Makwa led the youngest and strongest people out of the reservation, to pursue their paternal life. Through another harsh winter, Makwa-ikwa held a festival of the Crane Dance for the people to lift their spirits, the youth wrestling, racing or playing ball-and-stick between the mountains and rivers.

Almost all shamans are the keepers and preservers of myth and tradition, and of such arts as writing and divination, they either passively or actively taught their knowledge, which was the tribal wisdom, to the younger generation (Roland B. Dixon, 1908). They are the core leaders of the Indian tribes and the most important roles stabilizing tribes. Western academic exploration of Indian shamanic culture began with the discovery of the Americas by Europeans in the 16th century, and the shaman culture was depicted as the “uncivilized” or “savage” culture, which was the opposite of European Christian “civilization”. The colonial government took certain legal measures to prohibit shamanistic religious rituals, resulting in a heavy blow to the shamanic culture of Indian tribes. In the 19th to mid-20th centuries, large numbers of colonists and Christian missionaries came to America to weaken and even break off traditional Indian culture by implementing dual policies of cultural assimilation and genocide against Native Indian people, forcing them into reservations and forcing young Indian children to learn English. At the end of the novel, Shaman-Makwa-ikwa was raped and killed by three white men, and the last old shaman in Missouri died from hot pox. The Indian traditional medicine seven “Tents of Wisdom” was gone.

5. The white “Indian doctor” and American folk medicine: a hybrid resistance of Indian traditional medicine

Colonial societies did not just passively accept western modern medicine. The indigenous doctors, medical assistants and patients in Asia, South America, and Africa responded to western modern medicine in creative ways, often defining its application in unique ways, and changing their indigenous therapies in the process. The traditional medicine and modern medicine in colonies were combined in the competition, and appeared as alternative medicine in the 20th century (Pratik Chakrabarti, 2016). After some years of this exchange, European and indigenous practices merged into a new, synthesized folk medicine. Native peoples retained their own traditions but incorporated European drugs and western techniques into them (Rebecca Tannenbaum, 2012). This hybridization of medicine opens up a space for identity negotiation, so that the representation and construction of cultural identity is a process of negotiation, competition and resistance, shaking the absolute division between colonizers and the colonized, masters and slaves (He Yugao, 2012). Disease and medicine become a site of contact, conflict and possible eventual convergence between western rulers and indigenous peoples (David Arnold, 1946).

A unique phenomenon of the American frontier was the white “Indian doctor” (Virgil J. Vogel, 1970), was the best proof of the negotiation and integration of colonial medicine and Indian traditional medicine. These white “Indian doctors” claimed to have been tutored by the red men, and incorporated aboriginal herbals into their own medical system. These aboriginal herbals were often long used as folk remedies before they were accepted by official medicine (Virgil J. Vogel, 1970). In the novel, Dr. Cole is the western doctor who has the most contact with shaman Makwa-ikwa. In the process of mutual communication, he gained a deep understanding of Indian traditional medicine and also developed an affection for Makwa. In his later medical career, Dr. Cole invited Makwa to work together, giving patients some “green tonic”, a kind of herbal tonic made by Makwa. After Makwa’s death, Dr. Cole had to start trying to make the tonic by his own. He also cherished the medicine bundle the Sauks gave him. It’s a collection of sacred personal articles called a *Mee-shome*, from which every Sauk draws strength and power. It protected people from bullets, helped crops and cured patients (Noah Gordon, 1992). Dr. Cole put his most important medical items into the *Mee-shome*. Robert Jefferson Cole, the child of Dr. Cole and a white woman Sarah, was being nursed by Makwa-ikwa in his childhood, more attached to Makwa-ikwa than to his white mother. Before learning to walk upright, Robert Jefferson Cole once time crawled into Makwa-ikwa’s store of herbs and stopped gravely before each pile, examining them with deep interest. So Makwa-ikwa smiled and called him *uibenu migegee-ieh*, a little shaman. Thereafter, Shaman was what she called him. Shaman eventually attended Cincinnati Polyclinic Medical School. After graduation, he returned to Holden’s Crossing to replace his dead father and the killed Makwa-ikwa to be a country doctor, using both Western medicine and Indian traditional medicine to treat patients.

At the same time, the revival of Indian dance was also a rebellion against western culture. In the 1950s, the Indians of Lakota and other areas revived the Sun Dance in a collective shamanic ceremony, which was prepared and hosted by two famous shamans. Then the Sun Dance was truly revived and gradually became an important public and collective ritual used by Indians to solve the social, political and psychological problems caused by the colonial government (Yuan Jie, 2013). The Buffalo Dance and Crane Dance declared by Makwa-ikwa in the novel are also a revival of the traditional Indian culture. In these dancing movements, the oppressed Sauks found the hope of survival, and aroused the inner desire to pursue their parents’ spirit. The youngest and strongest departed the reservation resolutely.

Though colonial medicine prevailed among the colonies, Indian medicine laid a solid foundation in the Americas by negotiating and integrating with colonial medicine, forming American folk medicine. It's a resistance to Western colonial discourse, which is achieved by dismantling the stable binary opposition mode between the colonizer and the colonized identity. The resistance through hybridity is reflected in the colonized person's modification and challenge of the identity boundary between self and other (He Yugao, 2012).

6. Conclusions

Medicine, health, and disease are important parts of human life in any historical era or culture, and the colonial period in American history is no exception. European epidemics accompanied colonists to the American continent, causing a large number of death of Native Americans when they could not resist foreign diseases. Colonial medicine represented by Dr. Cole helped clear the way for colonists to move west, and was even used by colonists as a weapon to seize land. So that colonists successfully attacked and occupied the fertile vast land of the Americas. The government's official policy of cultural assimilation and even genocide against Indians gradually weakened and destroyed traditional Indian culture and traditional medicine, thus promoting Western civilization and medicine to a sacred status.

In this context, the author Noah Gordon shows the difficult survival of Indians such as Makwa and Wabokieshiek in western culture by describing the Indian culture and traditional medicine in the novel *Shaman*. But the author further adopts the narrative of hybrid resistance, depicting the difficult reconstruction of Indian traditional medicine represented by Makwa under the colonial system. Indian traditional medicine created a new form of medicine, namely American folk medicine, in the devastating suppression of colonial medicine, thereby breaking the binary opposition model between colonial medicine and Indian medicine emphasized by the colonists, and realizing the modification of the identity boundary between self and other and challenging the colonial medicine discourse. The reshaping and revival of Indian traditional medicine not only solved personal health problems, but also became an important means to solve collective psychological problems and even social disorder. It became an important means for indigenous Indians to inherit traditional culture and build a spiritual home. More importantly, it became a political expression by which the Indians expressed their resistance to the assimilation of national culture, the plundering of subsistence resources, and the neglect of social status (Yuan Jie, 2013).

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