

Coloniality of Knowledge – A case of distortions and omissions.

Onesimus, the enslaved African who gave the basic idea for today's known Vaccination

1. Prelude

Back in 1706 an enslaved African man was presented to Cotton Mather, a Puritan minister in Boston, as a gift from his church congregation. The man's birthname and birthplace are not known, but his new master renamed him Onesimus after a biblical slave. The name comes from the Greek word meaning "useful, helpful or profitable". Little did Minister Cotton Mather know how suitable this name would turn out to be.

Origin Story

If we read between the lines of written history, we can piece together a bit more about where Onesimus came from, what he believed about the world, how much he knew about smallpox inoculation, and perhaps even what he was like as a person.

Mather mentions that Onesimus came from "Guaramantee," which is probably Mather's attempt to spell the name of a town called Kormantse, in what is now Ghana. That doesn't mean Onesimus once lived in Kormontse, though; English people often referred to anyone from the Akan group of people who lived in what's now southern Ghana and the Ivory Coast, as "Coromantee," or people from around Kormantse, because the town was a place where European slave-traders bought captive people. It does strongly suggest that Onesimus was a member of the Akan group of people from modern-day Ghana and the Ivory Coast.

Since the 1400s, the Asante Empire had been the dominant power in the region, growing dazzlingly wealthy on gold mines and, eventually, slave trading with European merchants. The people known to their enslavers as Coromantee were often taken prisoner during a series of wars between the Fante and Asante (also known as Ashanti) states. That meant that many of the so-called Coromantee were military captives with military training and experience, and several of them used their leadership and tactical skills to organize revolts against their enslavers.

So what does this tell us about Onesimus? There's a better-than-average chance that he was a veteran of war, although he could also have been a civilian captive. In either scenario, this was a man who had already seen and survived horrific things. He may have been either Fante or Asante; both groups are part of the wider Akan group of people, and the Europeans made no distinction.

Onesimus describes smallpox inoculation

Smallpox was one of the most devastating diseases known to humanity and caused millions of deaths before it was eliminated. Early treatments included herbal remedies, bloodletting, and even drinking large quantities of beer!

In 1716 Onesimus described to Mather a process of inoculation that he and others from his society had undergone in Africa. He explained that to help prevent a person from getting smallpox, you should rub the pus of an infected person into an open wound on the arm.

This wasn't a vaccination where a less dangerous virus is exposed to create immunity, but it did activate an immune response and protect against the disease most of the time. This process is also known as variolation.

Mather was fascinated. He researched the method and discovered that it had long been practised in China, Turkey, and in Africa among sub-Saharan people. He became a convert and spread the word across Massachusetts with the hope that smallpox could be prevented.

However, Mather's fellow white Bostonians were not as enthusiastic as he was. They ridiculed this method because they were suspicious of African medicine and of Onesimus' motives.

Religious leaders also felt that inoculation was an affront to God because it interfered with divine providence. Mather's reputation was seriously tarnished as a result and his home was even attacked with an explosive device!

Smallpox hits Boston

A few years later, Mather got a chance to redeem himself. When an outbreak of smallpox struck Boston in 1721, he promoted Onesimus' inoculation procedure and, along with physician Zabdiel Boylston, began to implement it.

Zabdiel Boylston first inoculated his 6-year-old son and two of his slaves. He then went on to help inoculate a total of 280 people during the Boston smallpox epidemic.

Among those inoculated, only 6 patients died (2.2%). Compared to 844 deaths among 5,889 non-inoculated smallpox patients (14.3%), the overall success of the inoculation process was clear.

The legacy of Onesimus and smallpox

The medical breakthrough seen during the 1721–22 smallpox outbreak in Boston helped set the stage for vaccination. In 1796, Edward Jenner developed a smallpox vaccine that would later become compulsory in Massachusetts.

Without Onesimus' knowledge and willingness to share it, hundreds more lives could have been lost to smallpox.

Did Onesimus live to see the success of the technique he introduced to Mather? It isn't clear. Nothing is known of his later life other than that he partially purchased his freedom but little is known about that also. What is clear is that the knowledge he passed on saved hundreds of lives and led to the eventual eradication of smallpox.

In a 2016 Boston Magazine poll, Onesimus was listed among the top 100 Bostonians of all time.

In 1980, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared smallpox entirely eradicated due to worldwide immunisation efforts. Smallpox remains the only infectious disease to have been entirely wiped out.

2. What is the problem?

The problem here is that of distortions and omissions in the coverage of the story of the origin(s) of vaccination. I hereby quote the World Health Organisation (WHO) three times from its own website:

“From at least the 15th century, people in different parts of the world have attempted to prevent illness by intentionally exposing healthy people to smallpox – a practice known as variolation (after a name for smallpox, ‘la variole’). Some sources suggest these practices were taking place as early as 200 BCE.”

“In 1721, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu brought smallpox inoculation to Europe, by asking that her two daughters be inoculated against smallpox as she had observed practice in Turkey. In 1774, Benjamin Jesty makes a breakthrough. Testing his hypothesis that infection with cowpox – a bovine virus which can spread to humans – could protect a person from smallpox.”

“In May 1796, English physician Edward Jenner expands on this discovery and inoculates 8-year-old James Phipps with matter collected from a cowpox sore on the hand of a milkmaid. Despite suffering a local reaction and feeling unwell for several days, Phipps made a full recovery. Dr. Edward Jenner created the world’s first successful vaccine. He found out that people infected with cowpox were immune to smallpox.”

In the first quote it is noticeable that there is the mention of people from different parts of the world attempting to prevent illness by variolation even before the 15th century without mentioning how successful those attempts were. This formulation leaves the impression that these were mere attempts that did not yield any positive results, even though these practices actually helped in preventing illnesses and saving lives for several centuries. This omission is crucial in the narrative of white supremacy. Also the use of the expression “people from different parts of the world” makes it clear that these were Black, Indigenous and People of Color from across the globe and thus not white. This is why there is neither the mention of any specific kingdoms or states or of any specific persons, a point of homogenization (a process of putting people from different parts of the world in one box) and namelessness. On the other hand there are specific mentionings of the names of the white people involved in the second and third quotes.

In the second quote even though Lady Mary Wortley Montagu is mentioned to have brought the knowledge of the practice of inoculation from Turkey to Europe, Benjamin Jesty is the person mentioned to have made a breakthrough with the practice, a typical omission of the originators.

In the third quote the physician Edward Jenner is mentioned to have expanded on Benjamin Jesty's discovery without any reference to the Turks who had been practicing it for centuries. It goes on to say that Edward Jenner created the world's first vaccine without any mention of Onesimus's fundamental contribution to his so-called invention. To get to know of a practice that already exists cannot be a discovery as nothing that already exists can be discovered by anyone as in the case of Benjamin Jesty. Improving on an already existing practice by bringing it to another level does not amount to an invention as in the case of Onesimus and Edward Jenner. These are white fantasies of supremacy refusing to recognize the enormous and valuable contributions Black, Indigenous and People of Color have made and continue to make to human civilization.

3. What needs to change?

The eurocentric approach to telling stories has to change. Placing white people at the centre of almost every story of human achievement is a disservice to humanity. Eurocentric history has painted a picture of this world in which Europeans first became civilized through the Ancient Greek civilization, and then set forth to explore and introduce civilization to the rest of the world, with Africa being the last continent to be explored by the Europeans. In fact it was the Africans who first built the earliest civilizations, and then after, the Ancient Europeans went to Africa to learn many things from the Africans at the Temple colleges of "Waset and Ipet Isut" where the Greeks were accepted into a wide educational module which included both the esoteric and the practical sciences. Unlike modern day European historians, the Ancient Historians themselves never denied credit to Africans for training them. For example, Aristotle wrote that "Egypt was the cradle of mathematics". There is also the so-called discovery of the Americas by Christopher Columbus, even though native societies existed and had built advanced civilizations before Columbus's arrival.

In a nutshell, starting with revered Greek scholars and philosophers like Socrates, Aristotle, Hippocrates, Thales, Pythagoras, Plato and others who all went to Egypt to learn from the Africans, through to the claimed discovery of the Americas by Christopher Columbus and the case of Onesimus in the United States of America and the central part he played in the development of vaccination there, a long tradition and trend of omitting Black, Indigenous and People of Color from the stories

of contributions to human civilization and advancement becomes clearly visible. It is this very tradition and trend of omissions that needs to change in this 21st century.

4. How can things change?

white societies need to come to terms with the fact that they are less than 10% of the world's population and to the fact that Black, Indigenous People of Color have made enormous contributions to human civilization that need to be celebrated. white societies should refrain themselves from feeling intimidated by the contributions of others to human civilization, as doing so does not take anything away from them. The first step though would be to accept our common humanity. By so doing, the process of recognizing our contributions would become automatic and painless. Stories must thus be told without leaving any Black, Indigenous People of Color out who contributed to them. The practice of distortions should be replaced by rectification and contextualization, while that of omissions is replaced by naming and glorification. We are one big human family and should all be allowed to enjoy the fruits of our works and be remembered for them, irrespective of our origins.

On the other hand, Black, Indigenous People of Color must get used to asserting ourselves, taking ownership of all discourses that involve us and telling our own stories with passion and dignity. The knowledge of the contributions of our ancestor is very empowering and for this reason, we should take the task of telling the stories of their contributions to human civilization very seriously. This way we can draw inspiration from their achievements to make even greater achievements today. It is only when we ensure that the contributions of our ancestors count, will we be counted to ensure leaving living legacies for future generations.

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Van sertima

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