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## Hidden treasures of knowledge

Mohamed Gamal el-Din Abdelaal Khougali argues that Western psychology has much to gain by abandoning its largely Eurocentric view

In my postgraduate year, we had classes on the origins and history of psychology, and on social psychology and cognitive psychology, where we were exclusively exposed to white scholars and philosophers. It was routine to discuss the plethora of white accomplishments, whether it was directly related to psychology or otherwise. The course content line-up was composed of Spinoza, Jung, Fritz Perls and the like. I remember in one class, the lecturer talked about how it was a 'universal phenomenon' that white blonde girls were the most popular and attractive demographic in middle school. During this time, any discussion of blackness or African-ness was intrinsically bound to colonialism or postcolonialism; sometimes when there was a slight deviation from the norm of praising white accomplishments in social settings, we might entertain and appreciate the rebellious and ideological stance of Biko, Fanon or Malcolm X.

During this period, I had an acute awareness of George Orwell's 1984 dystopia, specifically in relation to Goldstein's 'The Book', which states that in order to keep the proles content, it was common practice to erase any existence of a time where the governing party did not exist, and to confine the people to their own paradigm,

lest they contrast their state of existence with another. It is an awkward feeling to know that every black person's history is composed entirely of either colonialism or postcolonialism. Of course, there is no one sole architect of this reality, but this misconception can easily be resolved by reading such works as Robert Bauval and Thomas Brophy's *Black Genesis* or Van Sertima's *They Came Before Columbus* or Martin Bernal's *Black Athena*. I tried to locate these books in the university library, and lo and behold! the books are not available. Ironically, it is the same library that contains ancient books about the 'science of eugenics'. Following that incident, the intensity of my awareness of the blatant Eurocentrism peaked, in an effort to jolt myself from this passive hyper-normative reality, I started exploring Golden Age Islamic philosophy, Kushite and Nubian history (as I am Sudanese), outside the university library.

The awareness of the hegemony of Eurocentrism over academia left a lingering sensation in my mind; I become helpless, but think that this monopoly perpetuates the persistence of the racial disparity in society. My four chief concerns with the unidimensional rendition of historical philosophical and scientific advances are (1) whitewashing, (2) loss of history, and intellectual

ignorance, (3) frozen time, consequently moulding of identity, and (4) intellectual privilege. Starting from high school, there is a stringent framework that educators need to abide by, at least in the UK: GCSE, A-levels, S4 to S6, etc. The framework maintains its rigid form throughout college then university, it promotes a skewed portrayal of history that not only glorifies Eurocentrism but also marginalises other schools of thought. The history of human progress is more or less restricted to the Greek Golden Age of philosophy, the Roman Empire, Catholicism, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment Age, colonialism, postcolonialism and finally globalisation, with occasional mention of some outliers such as the Golden Age of China, or Ancient Egypt.

This whitewashing of history inadvertently precipitates the loss of history and intellectual ignorance; for instance, today when we talk about the genesis of psychotherapy we often talk about Sigmund Freud or Alfred Adler. But almost a thousand years earlier, Islamic scholars, such as Abu Zayd and al-Razi, talk about synonymous concepts under the terminological façade of *al-ruhaniyat* (spiritualism). In this particular example, we not only lose part of history by not revitalising it in class rooms, but we also fixate on the achievements of a single group of people and any mention of another is ignored and placed outside the mainstream: intellectual ignorance.

Thirdly, when the history of a group of people are restricted to a certain time and place, that group become frozen in that time and place. This phenomenon is particularly salient with the rendition of African history, where almost annually a film is released to depict the struggles of African slaves in the West, or where most conversation on the subject lead to the great accomplishments of Nelson Mandela and the like. Occasionally, when there is a digression from the general narrative, there will be movies about a fictional, fantastical, wealthy country in Africa, or Ancient Egypt where, apparently, the pharaohs were white. I have yet to see a film about the adventures of the great explorer Ibn Battuta, or one of the wealthiest men to have walked this earth, Mansa Musa; or come across a lecturer that acknowledges the work of Ibn Khaldun, who in his book *al-Muqaddimah* talks in great depth about sociology and economics, before the time of Adam Smith. Outside of Sudan, I have yet to come across a person familiar with the work of Tayib Salih or Hassan al-Turabi or Abdalla el-Tayeb, who are all great contemporary scholars in their respected fields. This narrow representation of history usually depicts the African person to a restricted archetype, that of struggle and resistance. This should not be the case, Africans cannot be categorised as a singular binary archetype.

Finally, intellectual privilege: when one demographic of people holds dominion over science, history and philosophy, they also possess the power to narrate mainstream history from their point of view; 'who controls the past controls the future; who controls the present controls the past'. That demographic also has an expectation to advance knowledge, which creates an almost hereditary right to achieve greatness.

This expectation is detrimental, not only to the 'other' groups, but also to the group that is expected to prevail intellectually. The obvious detriment to the former groups is disenfranchisement; it would be unlikely to relate to the course content, at least ethnically. In addition, this creates a world of patronising 'firsts': 'first Asian to...', 'first African to...'. The negative effect this has on the latter group is living up to expectation. When it is a given that almost all modern advances and history belong to a certain group, that group has an obligation to succeed their predecessors, failure to do so may result to a feeling of impotence.

It's not all doom and gloom. Towards the end of my postgraduate year, where I just started my archaeological excavation into the vast and deep mine that is Golden Age Islamic philosophy, I was struck with awe at the beauty of the rediscovered, seemingly new, hidden treasures of knowledge, not just new to the layman, but to mainstream academia. For example, in Irvin Yalom's *Existential Psychotherapy*, one of the four 'ultimate concerns' is death... he writes in the second chapter about the aloofness towards the subject of death in the psychotherapeutic dialogue. A thousand years before, Razi [pictured] wrote in the final chapter of his book *The Spiritual Physick* about the effects death has on the soul or psyche: he goes on to explore this fear from a secular and theistic point of view. Razi also starts the second last chapter, 'Of the virtuous life', with:

The life which has been followed by all the great philosophers of the past may be described in a few words: it consists in treating all men justly. Thereafter it means acting nobly towards them, with a proper continence, compassion, universal benevolence, and an endeavour to secure the advantage of all men...

These same words reincarnate themselves more comprehensively in the work of Irvin Yalom regarding the ultimate concern of 'meaninglessness' in the form of clinical examples, previous points of views about the meaning and purpose of life and altruism. This is not just a unique occurrence, these jewels are found in the works of Avicenna, Abu Zayd and more. A study of the historical treatment of mental illness around the globe, and throughout different eras will, I believe, be valuable to the advancement of psychology, as will an examination of different cultural norms in the treatment of the mentally ill. *If we see further, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants*. Start with *Abu Zayd al-Balkhi's Sustenance of the Soul: The Cognitive Behaviour Therapy of a Ninth Century Physician* and see if you can find the hidden jewels.

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