

## WHOSE PSYCHOLOGY IS THIS?

### Book review

Daudi Ajani ya Azibo (ed) (1996) **African psychology in historical perspective and related commentary**. Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, Inc.

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This is a book about reclaiming the origins of psychological knowledge. It is also about the need for liberation from dominant discourses, particularly in psychology. The collection of chapters in this edited book argues for the centrality of African (Black) Psychology (which) “is defined as a system of knowledge (philosophy, definitions, concepts, models, procedures and practice) concerning the nature of African Cosmology [meaning that] ... African (Black) Psychology is nothing more or less than the uncovering, articulation, operationalization, and application of the principles of the African reality structure relative to psychological phenomena.” (p5).

The first chapter forms the foundation of the book. Using historical evidence, the writer traces the origins of what is referred to as Africentric knowledge and how it differs from Eurocentric psychology. In doing so, he reflects on the influence of Kemetic (original Black Nile River Valley civilization) and their system of knowledge. “Kamites practised the cultivation of the human psyche or soul and the attendant higher mental faculties as part of a holistic, complex approach to the social universe that meshed “the understandings of man [with] ... religion, science, ... mathematics ... and government” (p5). While this is interesting and at times illuminating, it becomes clear that the real issue is how to reclaim the rightful place of African thought and values against that of a hegemonic Eurocentric psychology.

Essentially the introductory chapter seeks to claim back the hegemony of what constitutes knowledge for Black Americans and how these voices have been appropriated by the dominant discourses. Even African-American psychology is seen to have been hijacked by Eurocentric influences. Clearly, it is the intention of the introductory chapter and the book as a whole to reflect the view that African thought forms predate that of the currently more dominant Eurocentric approaches to psychology. The writer traces the history of the real voices of African Psychology by examining the contributions of key figures in being the “first” to establish such a voice. The failure of any of these paradigms to reflect the contribution of *Africentric* psychology is highlighted. In fact, the writer argues that the “constructivist / constructionist approach is the way in which African psychology was initially practiced”. (p21). As such it is one of the oldest approaches and the not the most recent as European psychology would

argue. In this context, the writer believes that much of Eurocentric psychology is anti-African. (p21).

Throughout these debates, references are made to what are essentially conflicts within professional psychology in the USA, including how African Americans have bought into these Eurocentric viewpoints. These individuals then hold “incorrect and contradictory” psychological orientations (psychological misorientation). African psychology (as articulated above) is then marginalized. While reference is made to prominent figures who have made significant contributions to African psychology (many of these names are unknown to at least this reviewer and there is more than a hint of parochialism in this description), one gets the impression that the debate is really about whose voice has legitimacy within the context of North American psychology. It is about how Black psychologists struggle to develop authentic voices in predominantly White departments of psychology. In an interesting way, South African psychology has gone through the worst forms of such representations, and in some instances continues to do so. These views have resonance with the struggle for what constitutes the authentic voice of the majority of people in South Africa. Pre-1994, the legacy of apartheid ensured that such a debate could occur only in pockets of resistance, and it is entirely unclear where that debate is in psychology departments in South Africa today. The fact that this struggle continues says as much about the persistence of ideologies in various guises as it does about systems that wish to continue to exercise hegemony. As such, it may have interest to only a very small group of individuals who believe that such issues critically define the work that they do. This is disappointing as the book fails to capture some of the “real” African voices that extend beyond the politics of formal psychology associations, especially as it pertains to the USA in particular.

The book itself does not necessarily bring anything surprisingly new to the table, but what it is doing is attempting to assert an independent voice and use indigenous terms and language to refer to psychological processes to highlight that not all knowledge about psychological process emerges from Europe. For example, a chapter describing Afrocentric psychotherapy approaches this task using language that places greater emphasis on African philosophy and belief systems. These concepts translate easily into the recognizable elements of psychotherapy, but are articulated within an African paradigm. For e.g., the term “harmony”, is considered to be the building block of psychotherapy and refers to building trust through shared experiences. In general, the writers argue for holistic, natural, inclusive, communal, spiritual, complementary, groupness, sameness, humanistic approaches.

In attempting to articulate a theory of personality (no arguments are made that such a concept is itself open to challenge), mental health is defined in terms of what is culturally acceptable. Thus, “mental health is that psychological and behavioral functioning that is in accord with the basic nature of the original human nature and its attendant cosmology and survival thrust.” (p54).

Various writers believe that the only way to challenge the dominance of the Eurocentric discourse is to set up separate educational institutions as well as transforming curricula in various psychology departments to develop “true” Afrocentric forms of thought and world views.

While the book views the salvation of African Americans to lie in Africa, at least in the sense of claims to a different way of knowing, one does get the sense that these noble sentiments do not have much practical value as they have to exist within a dominant and domineering system of knowledge production and knowledge claims (the USA and Europe) that cannot simply be argued away. It does seem that some of the tensions that exist within African psychology in the USA are a function of the wider tensions that dominate relationships between African Americans and white Americans. The battle for whose psychology it is really reflects a microcosm of the wider challenges facing North Americans, as much of the rhetoric is about liberating African Americans from their own psychological oppression.

A sombre instruction for how South Africans should deal with similar issues is the urgent and continuing need to develop indigenous knowledge systems as a key strategy in giving appropriate voice to local discourses in a landscape filled with competing discourses.