

Expository epistles on African psychology | ‘*St. Ratele, ora pro nobis*’ or ‘*Yiza nebhanti phaya erumini*’¹

[B O O K R E V I E W]

Ratele, K. (2019). **The world looks like this from here: Thoughts on African psychology.** Johannesburg: Wits University Press. Paperback 248 pages.
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Haile Matutu

Department of Psychology
University of Cape Town
haile.matutu@uct.ac.za

The World Looks Like This From Here is a magisterial (re) introduction to psychology from the continent of Africa. The book is a critique of how psychology is practiced and thought of within Africa, by the continent’s scholars, students and other practitioners of psychology from here and elsewhere. It is through Kopano Ratele’s asking the reader to think about the politics of nomenclature that much of the text’s critique about the elephant in many a psychology classroom emerges. Therefore, the question, why do we name the work we do *African* psychology? Ratele goes on to present a multipronged diagnosis of our current situation. He draws many strands of thought on why we have the modifier “African” and by extension the prefix “Afro-“ before the psychology that emerges from this continent. Much of Ratele’s diagnosis of the problems with contemporary African psychology can be reduced to the effects of colonialism and coloniality on the discipline and those who practice it, as well as the effects of the power of the discourse of superiority/inferiority on the same.

The book is presented as a series of a hundred thoughts that often reads as if they are meditations on African

¹ The dread-inducing line heard by many a black child growing up “go fetch the belt from the room”. When you hear this, you know you are about to give an account of your life choices, receive your swift ‘justice’ and be asked to make tea.

psychologies, subjectivities, and philosophies of being. The reference list tells us much about the breath of thought that has had a bearing on the authors' views. Even more telling is whom the reference list excludes. Ratele claims that the book is about one thing: African psychology as a way of seeing. Throughout the book, Ratele devotes much of his attention towards current and future students of psychology, particularly Black students of psychology. Speaking from the epicentre of one's subjectivity, is a strong argumentative device throughout this book. Readers will be pleased to see that Ratele, taking his own advice, chose to write without centring the familiar, imaginary, and seemingly omnipresent white reader, whom we often imagine perched on many an African scholar's overburdened shoulder. As a result, the tone of the book is familiar, a big brother's, or an uncle's voice, as well as what I have come to call St. Ratele (a rather large persona, perhaps not entirely of Ratele's making). As a big brother, Ratele shows you his bruised flank from his fall on his way to Damascus, "*I have not always been fully conscientised to my complicity in perpetuating colonial and apartheid-informed models of knowledge, being in the world and sociopolitical relations*" (119).

The book is deceptively accessible in content and disorienting in its form. In the fashion of most scholarly works that are (un)disciplined, this book is not short of controversies. Like the belt that one is asked to fetch from the room, I delayed my engagement with this text. In fact, it sat on my bookshelf for over a month before I could summon the courage to read it. Most readers familiar with Ratele know of his position(s) on African psychologies, especially his work from 2015 onwards. Thus, one would expect that a volume that's singularly focused on this issue would be somewhat anxiety-inducing for Black students of psychology, even as it proposes to show how the world looks like from here. The issue, of course, being 'what shall we do now that we know what we know?'. Why would this cause anxiety? Well, Ratele goes to the heart of the matter in his author's note:

A decade ago I would not have advised anyone to study psychology. Psychology, I would have said, is bad for your mental health, and were it to turn out that being a psychologist is good for your economic status, the likelihood is that you would be supporting the marginalisation of people who most need psychological help (Ratele, 2019: xi)

It is with this knowledge that I – a student of psychology and as a person that's recently gained a modicum of influence in the psychology taught at the university nestled under (the) Devil's Peak – arrived at this reading. That is, arriving at this reading with full awareness of my agency and complicity, and being implicated in the current status quo. Black scholars, especially those whose conscience has not been killed by westernised universities sometimes carry within them a sense of shame. Shame borne of their

complicity in reproducing the so-called psychology canon, which has alienated both teachers of psychology and the African students they teach.

What is African Psychology? | The thing that one is...

In contextualising his argument that African psychology is a way of seeing, Ratele presents us with a series of key problems. Among these, the central problem for psychologies practiced in contexts other than the U.S.A. and Western Europe is that they are compelled to have *isimaphambili* (the linguistic equivalent is prefix). While, in terms of formal linguistics 'Africa' in African psychology is a modifier, isiXhosa colloquial speech's reference to '*isimaphambili*' suggests ideas of respect akin to honorifics. My use of '*isimaphambili*', necessarily invokes the tension between my understanding of '*isimaphambili*' and Ratele's contention that the modifier "Africa" has a singular function: provincializing Africa's psychology without applying the same nomenclature for Western Europe and north American psychologies. It is possible for us to imagine 'Africa' in African psychology standing for a noble cause, that is, overcoming the invisibilisation of that which originates from this continent. Surely, there is a case to be made for strategic essentialism (see Spivak in Grosz: 1990). As a Xhosa queer man, I have come to appreciate the utility and necessity of highlighting that which is erased in public spaces and discourses. When I am invited to speak to Western European students about the work we do here, framing this work as distinct from their indigenous psychologies has been as powerful as centring my queerness in hostile and non-affirming classrooms. For this reader, it is possible to hold the modifier as a transitory marker that has a political function without losing sight of the importance of Ratele's argument.

Throughout this book, Ratele confronts us with the significance of 'Africa' as a modifier in African Psychology. For him, the assumed necessity for this modifier or "bracketed word" when referring to psychology from this continent is an indication of our estimation of its perceived value relative to indigenous psychologies of North America and Western Europe. Furthermore, he argues that flagging our psychologies, and thus, provincializing them, indicates our deep-seated inferiority complexes. These are important thoughts for those who are invested in the emancipatory project of a decolonised university in Africa. Like much of the book, one senses that the author does not necessarily prescribe 'one way' to make sense of the 'bracketed word'. Rather, like a good mentor, he opens the space for dissent. For, as he argues later in the book "we have to develop in black female and male children a feeling of familiarity with freedom" (208). Such freedom, for Ratele, is psychological and entails being free to ask uncomfortable questions.

Another central argument made by Ratele concerns the type of questions a situated psychology responds to. We are reminded that seeing from Africa's vantage point,

has implications for all the forms of knowledge we deem to be psychological. Ratele argues that African psychology has a distinct epistemic and ontological goal: to awake to Africa (p 6). Thus, African psychology is both a “way of seeing” (p.8) and overcoming our alienation to ourselves. Here, the suggestion is that it is imperative that we overcome our ‘coloniality of being’. However, Ratele does not go to the usual interlocutors to make this point. I noticed a tendency towards the avoidance of the ‘D’ word (decolonisation). Of course, Ratele has spoken in multiple platforms on *decolonialised* African psychology. In fact, much of what is in this book has the markings of what we recognise as decolonial. However, one senses that Ratele does not wish to position this contribution to our collective understanding of (African) psychology as *decolonial psychology*. I longed for the Ratele of 2016 who said “*decolonisation is a seriously violent act that must go beyond just tinkering with the system*” (Malherbe: 2016, 51). Perhaps, I’m splitting hairs here. Readers will undoubtedly come to their own conclusions about what this might mean. There is much to be said about disciplinary turfs, but that is a story for another day.

Readers who meditate will appreciate that meditation is seldom a linear exercise. Ratele, takes a labyrinth-like approach to discussing some topics. Often, he comes back to questions by asking us to consider what a thing is not. For example, in setting out what African psychology is not, Ratele presents the way he would have us perceive it: as a nuanced form of ‘doing’ and ‘approaching’ the psychological (79).

Inferiority Complex | Psychology’s Power and External Determination

Ratele devotes a large portion of the book to untangling the causes, the persistence and results of the inferiorisation of Africa(n/s’) psychology – both the knowledge emerging from the continent as well as the psychologies of the people and researchers from this continent. There are many instances where Ratele illustrates what an inferiority complex might look like. In the section he titles **self-sabotage** (80), Ratele addresses a hypothetical student who would, by way of situating their study within a framework, earnestly describe it as an “*African feminist perspective*” (32). For Ratele, who argues that ‘Africa’ in African psychology should be tacit, the student would be “potentially undermining the potential of [their] study. And [they] will be rejected” (80). Without trivialising the point made here, about the reality of how voices from the global south are heard and understood, I still cannot stop asking myself, where the locus of enunciation is situated in such thinking. Are we to hold ourselves responsible for how others view us? This, of course, does not take away from the persuasive argument Ratele makes about the effects of inferiorisation that he argues we (as Africans) have come to internalise about ourselves. He is inspiring in arguing that the disorientation, fear of engaging the fullness of African life, and the lack of knowledge about African experiences by students and young

psychologists also holds its greatest hope for the future of African psychology. We might recognise this “*ina, ethe*”² device as quintessential critical psychology. That is, presenting a critique of the discipline and society but also charting ways to counter the oppression thus diagnosed. One then might ask why Ratele has almost singularly focused on Euro-North American explanations of African issues? It appears as if his gripe is with how we look to those contexts for legitimation. His position being that our ontological and epistemic investment is often elsewhere - at the centre of this dilemma, is power.

The book addresses psychology’s power by looking at the alliance between psychology and power structures. Ratele reminds us that to be regarded as a psychologist is to be legitimated as knowledgeable. That is, to hold power to define oneself and the world. It is in this realisation that Ratele sees a way out of the crushing alienation brought by Euro-American psychology. He draws a line in the sand when he refers to Euro-American psychology as “a psychology that centres whiteness” (94). Going further to argue that the inferiority complex engendered by the perspectives taken from hegemonic forms of psychology is the reason that Black psychologists will resist an African-centred psychology.

Ratele speaks strongly about the alienated African and the untapped reservoir of compassion we have. However, he argues that we have persuaded ourselves that we have no need for an Africa-centred psychology because we refuse to see ourselves as ‘not-free’. Of course to convince ourselves that we are really free is an exercise in futility and profound delusion. We need only look at our curricula and classroom content to see this. The consequence of the alienation that is perpetuated in African classrooms where psychology is taught, is the legitimation of professionals (both in practice and academia) who can only see the world and (make meaning of it) from the perspectives of western thought.

As students and scholars of psychology, the site of our suffering and trauma as psychology students is the very site wherein Ratele would have us have our Damascus moments and where students should do their dis-alienation work. We know this to be true, because this is how our classrooms have evolved (see Kessi & Boonzaier, 2018; Kiguwa & Segalo, 2018). Therefore, as a remedy for the crushing alienation we’ve internalised, Ratele points to strategies of consciousness raising, familiar to liberatory forms of psychology. He will settle for nothing short of our full consciousness to the realities and recognition of being Black in Africa, as well as what being white and born on this continent might mean. Consummate with this recognition is “*taking time to learn how you are made*

² Loosely translates to ‘give and take’.

to see the world and then cultivating your way to see the world” (198). He argues that such an awakening to ourselves will then lead to us being “*disenchanted with any kind of psychological knowledge and practice that does not centre Africa*” (199). One, of course, recognises in this line of argument some of the central tenets of a postcolonial psychology. See for example Macleod, Bhatia and Kessi (2017: 316) who posit:

[Postcolonial Psychology] undermines readings of psychology that neglect colonialist history and postcolonial power relations, that are complicit in (neo) colonial forms of exploitation, that underrepresent or else exoticize particular categories of people, or that normalize and universalize the white, middle-class male. It attunes its understandings to socio-historical conditions that permeate local and global power relations, interweaving the intra-psychic with the postcolonial problematic.

Similar to the idea of a humanizing psychology as articulated through postcolonial psychologies, the psychology that Ratele is advocating for is not only for this continent but for the world. It is perhaps because of our familiarity with centuries-long, sustained, and systematic oppression that we have something of value to teach the world about the human condition.

In the recent past I have observed two kinds of students of psychology: those who seem to venerate a St. Ratele, and those yet to have their Damascus moment. In the former, Ratele like St. Paul, exposes their ‘lack’ and deficits in pointing out what they do not know. Ratele is known for taking students to task for their level of engaging Africa’s rich tapestry of thought with the same esteem and gusto they freely give to Butler and Foucault among others. The reader should see the ‘Huysamen Issue’ (my expression) pages 155-161. That section will be of interest to feminists who may ask how, and in what forms women’s voices enter dialogues on African Psychology. The lack, of which I spoke earlier, necessarily brings about a great deal of discomfort. We know discomfort can be generative, of course, but it doesn’t always translate to this though, as a ‘St. Ratele’ might seem other-worldly - ‘too woke’, in popular parlance. In my tutelage of junior students of psychology, this elevated ‘saintly’ positioning of some scholars leads to questions such as ‘what can *I* do?’ or retorts such as ‘this is what I was taught, this is the psychology I know’. To this, Ratele answers: “awaken to yourself!”. The other type of student of psychology refuses to apostatize their ‘certainty’, to the idea that they are not oppressed by psychology as a discipline. If both types of students, should happen to be Black students, it is likely that they sit with feelings of guilt for being part of a system that appears to be anti-Black. Both positions can be harnessed to galvanise change. It is partly from a combination of both these polarities that I have come to understand my initial trepidation at the prospect of reading this text. It is how I imagined reading it as similar to being asked to go fetch the belt that would be used to ‘discipline’ me. Having

reached the end of the book, I have come to see that these feelings had little to do with the author but were about my awakening to myself; and coming to recognise that such a process cannot be framed as a singular event.

Nali Ibhanti...

Many students who we ask to engage on the debates around African psychology may at times perceive these to be mind-numbingly under stimulating, as students often struggle to see the relevance of the debates on their daily lives. The same can be said of all writing that focuses only on institutions because in such writing, the centre is not the people who are impacted by those institutions. We know that the narrative of institutions is predictable at this stage. What is refreshing in any critical work that touches on institutions imbued with power is to see agentive characters being centred. In this book, Ratele accomplishes this splendidly and while doing this, he also manages to use the past as a living thing. Ratele appears to have consciously written the book that most Black psychology students wish they read when they made that first plunge into the acid sea that is psychology. I bought Ratele's **The world looks like this from here: thoughts on African psychology** as a 'gift to self'. Similar to Duiker's **Quiet Violence of Dreams** and Manganyi's **Being Black in the world**, Ratele has made us see our part of the world as he sees it and invites us to experience it through all our senses.

I am certain that I will be reviewing this work for some time as its reading will be affected by the stations of my life. The editors will not permit my delay down the 'passage', and so having arrived in the front room with the belt in my hands, I now hand it over to you, dear reader.

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