The Arab Renaissance: Epistemological Deficits and the Call for Decolonial Knowledge

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Abstract
This article takes a close look at the ideas that drove the Arab Nahda (Renaissance), by focusing on two central figures, Rifaʿa al-Tahtawi and Muhammad Abduh, while reading them against the backdrop of French colonial rule in Egypt. It shows that, although both men tried to reshape Arab-Islamic thought by welcoming Western liberal concepts, their effort fell short of producing a fully grown decolonial theory. Drawing on voices from decolonial work, including Edward Said and Frantz Fanon, the article argues that mimicry of European knowledge and the sidelining of local ways, delayed the Nahda's confrontation with colonial ideas and the shackles of intellectual domination. Through a genealogical and contextual reading of Tahtawi and Abduh's major texts, it reveals how colonial power lines set the limits for reformist writing and later fed into the kind of authoritarian rule many Arab states showed. It calls for genuinely decolonial knowledge grounded in local histories, ethics, and institutions to imagine modernities that do not need to follow Western designs.
Keywords: Decolonial Epistemology, Tahtawi, Abduh, Nahda, Colonialism

Introduction

The first aim of this article is to describe how the epistemological origin and source on which these thinkers (e.g., Tahtawi and Abduh) depended in order to develop Arab intellectualism of that era. It was mostly French, and not free of colonial components and orientalist views of the West-East dynamics. The second aim is to demonstrate that although French colonialism in Egypt was brief, it left a lasting impression on Egyptian society. This influence persisted even after the defeat of Napoleon Bonaparte's colonial expedition. Although this article is focused on the period of French colonialism, it sometimes employs examples and evidence from the postcolonial period. All is integrated to prove that there is an epistemological gap, in which these intellectual efforts lacked a coherent doctrine or decolonial epistemology.

Critical analysis is employed here to understand why and how problematic it was that scholars of the Arab Nahda lacked an epistemological modality for examining the necessities of responding to colonialism and fine-tuning the development of their societies with the world's transformation. This article bases its analysis on a historically aware, critical reading of intellectual discourse among Arabs from the perspective of postcolonial theory, intellectual

history, and decolonial critique. Additionally, it attempts to take a genealogical approach, tracing how the colonial dynamics introduced under French imperial rule instantiated the terms under which Tahtawi and Abduh imagined modernity, knowledge, and reform. It asks: in what ways of knowing were opportunities made, and closure achieved, in the shadow of empire?

Technique of Investigation

To answer this question, the methodology draws on three interrelated strands:

(i) Contextual Intellectual History

The Nahda thinkers' intellectual work is being thought about in terms of the political and cultural contexts in which they wrote it. Their texts are positionally located thinking; performed under colonial constraints, mobile identities, and transplanted ideals. On this basis, the article combines critical analysis with a historical and contextual approaches, seeking to comprehend the contributions of those thinkers "in their historical milieu" (BEVIR 2011, p. 594).

(i) Critical Postcolonial Theory

Inspired by Said, Fanon, and other thinkers, the article follows a diagnostic, route that unpacks how Enlightenment concepts of freedom, reason, and progress geared toward Eurocentrism. These ideals, though valued by Nahda intellectuals, were prone to carry with them habits of mimicry and epistemic dependency that reproduced rather than dismantled colonial hierarchies.

(ii) Decolonial Epistemic Critique

It also seeks towards the future: to reconsider indigenous forms of knowledge—those rooted in domestic civilization, community life, and precolonial institutions; to aspire to one grounded in the histories, ethics, and local communities' aspirations.

Together, these approaches offer a space that is more than mere criticism. They leave space for both the diagnosis of what was lost or askew during the Nahda, as well as the visioning of what a grounded, plural, and decolonial modernity might be today.

The organization of the article will unfold as follows: Part I investigates the intellectual trajectories of Tahtawi and Abduh, with an emphasis on their engagement with Western concepts in a non-decolonial manner. Part II demonstrates their epistemological deficiencies and attempts to offer a decolonial alternative. The conclusion draws the strands together and promotes an epistemology situated in local knowledge, which seeks to redress colonial differential.

Colonialism, the Study of Postcolonialism, and Arab Nahda

a) *Orientalism and the tools of colonial hegemony*

Fanon, who is one of those who provided critical perspective on colonialism, views colonialism as "a system of absolute violence that can only be opposed through violence" (GIBSON 2021). Historically speaking, if one views colonization as a system, as in Fanon's definition, it is clear that there is a set of traditions and rules imposing specific modes of behavior and being. As a historical trauma, colonialism continues to shape critical aspects of formerly colonized nations' futures.

By contrast, Edward Said presents colonialism as a result of imperialism; "the implanting of settlements on distant territory" (SAID 1994, 9). The crucial in Said's approach is that he understands colonialism linked to "cultural […]ideological, economic, and social practices" (SAID 1994, 9). More particularly, he is interested in how the vocabularies and terminologies of the nineteenth century, such as "inferior," "dependency," and subordination (SAID 1994, 9), were extensively put into conceptual use. Specifically, to grasp the relations between the West and the Orient, but later to structure the perspective of the Orient from a Western position. For instance, in his book Orientalism, colonialism operates through various instruments, one of the most significant being Orientalism (SAID1979, 205). Such instruments provide a lens for understanding how colonialism is designed to function.

Said's [Orientalism] reveals how the 'non-Western other' was systematically distorted, who will be here considered as the outside-other. This is applicable, for example, to his critique of John Stuart Mill's Liberty and Representative Government, in which Mill argues that Western civilization is not applicable to India because of presumed civilizational inferiority (SAID1979). This is significant because it demonstrates how Western thinkers often failed to grasp the complexities of non-Western societies, especially when examined from a Western perspective rather than one suited to these societies themselves. This belittles them and makes such societies easy targets for labeling them as uncivilized or backward, and thus the "white burden" of civilization may be justified, which is in fact a form of colonialism.

This type of representation reduces entire cultures into remnants of cultures, implying that they are uncivilized/backwards. This type of framing is central to justifying the "white man's burden" and legitimating colonialism as a noble project of civilizing the Other. Fanon helps us understand that colonialism works through (i) military violence; (ii) economic exploitation, but more importantly, (iii) it works through a deep penetration of the colonizer into the psyche and identity of the colonized (FANON 1963). Colonialism imposes on the colonized to view themselves as inferior or to internalize that portrayal, in which they are portrayed as less human or incapable of becoming fully human. Mignolo, on the other hand, draws attention to how colonialism shapes epistemologies (MIGNOLO 2011). For instance, Eurocentric ways of knowing continue to prevail at the expense of indigenous ways of thinking even in the post-colonial eras, and are often justified by labeling indigenous ways of thinking as irrational, unscientific, or primitive.

Though Fanon reveals how colonialism violently influences the psychologies of the colonized and disfigures understandings of the self, Mignolo pushes to question the very foundations of what counts as legitimate knowledge. Mignolo calls this "epistemic disobedience" (MIGNOLO 2011, p. 44), or the advancement of a clear attempt to disengage from Western systems of knowledge and recover the original systems that had been lost. In brief, Fanon asks how colonialism possesses the power to shape who we are, and Mignolo asks who can normatively specify what is true? In fact, Mignolo's inquiry digs beyond the epistemological tools by which we can know ourselves by. There is a tension in

the philosophies of both Fanon and Mingolo, which reflects challenges more complex than those faced by Nahda thinkers. As they face modernity with colonial influence, they are under political and societal pressure but also face deep-rooted obstacles around identity, knowledge, and belonging. Their project involves confronting modernity as a third-world intellectual in an era of modernization, without abandoning their intellectual and cultural dynamics.

A prominent example of Orientalism is Description de l'Égypte, which divides Egypt between ancient and modern times within an Orientalist framework, viewing the "French Expedition" as the locus of knowledge in interpreting sites such as the temples of Tentyris (MOTHE-FÉNELON, 1818, 53-54). The way the authors talk about these temples still carries a hint of judgement. Phrases such as absurd, positive ideas, correspondent, and so on, pop up in their notes. All in all, their entire frame reads as subjective, clearly catering to the colonial slant of the French political scene at the time and framing Egypt's past and present through a non-native lens.

b) ***French rule in Egypt and its legacy***

When Napoleon invaded Egypt, he took some talented individuals and scholars with him who would carry out the work of the "mise en valeur."[1] In this case also, it is observed how the French, on their own initiative, desired to represent the Egyptians in the Description de l'Égypte from their own perspective (PROCHASKA 1994, 81). In this case, the Egyptians were not shown to be influential; instead, the French were portrayed as the influential party in this display when encountering the Egyptians. In this case, the Egyptians are portrayed as lacking self-independence. This either distorts the Egyptian image or presents them as lacking agency and power, such as self-development. For example, how the "a French detachment [approaches the temple] to the right, while members of a local tribe lurk [sic] behind the sand dunes[…]" (PROCHASKA 1994, 84). The French were depicted as engaged in activities (e.g., sketching, measuring, contemplating the monuments) that manifested their superiority over the Egyptians (PROCHASKA 1994). The Egyptians, by contrast, were depicted as servants to the French, cooking and waiting (PROCHASKA 1994).

Napoleon envisioned himself as a modern-day Alexander the Great, illuminating the "benighted people," thus demonstrating that colonialism is far more complex than being reduced political or business-oriented practice (FEKI 2008, 388). When he arrived in Alexandria, Egypt, his army of approximately 40,000 men included scientists, artists, and other persons (FEKI 2008); this indicates that his expedition had cultural agendas, if not an entire construction of Egypt. He brought companions with him because he believed their talent and knowledge were necessary for the colonization of Egypt (PROCHASKA 1994, 85). In his article "'Mission civilisatrice': French Cultural Policy in the Middle East, 1860-1914," Mathew Burrows discusses that Napoleon's failed campaign in Egypt actually marked the start of French influence in the Middle East as a whole, and not just in Egypt (BURROWS 1986, 111). France maintained its support for Muhammad Ali's rule against competing European interests, during a time when

[1] mise en valeur means to make it clear to the public.

France was presenting itself as a modernized nation aligned with the values of its Revolution.

Briefly, French colonialism in general, (and Napoleon's expedition particularly) had cultural objectives that on the one hand, aimed to influence the people colonized by this expedition's evolutionary history. However, Napoleon's failure did not end French ambitions in Egypt; it only changed the tools of influence, and carried on the legacy of this failed expedition in new forms, as shall be explored in the following section.

c) *Perspectives and critiques of the Arab Renaissance*

i*. Tahtawi's intellectual inheritance and liberal importing*

Between 1870 and 1950 (and possibly even earlier), Arab intellectuals, especially in Egypt, sought a "cultural revival," which paralleled political movements demanding the end of colonization and social groups calling for reforms (PORMANN 2006, 4). Tahtawi, who was sent on an official mission to Paris, observed cultural structure in France, more importantly, the conception of power and political context. He expressed admiration for Europe's ability to communicate and inspire the Arab world. He saw that Egypt could be modernized through cultural exchange with Europe (SPADA 2023, 36-68). Tahtawi stressed the importance of public participation in governance, stating: "[…] the people could and should participate actively in the process of government; that they should be educated for this purpose." He was inspired by Montesquieu's conception of the "nation" (HOURANI, 1983, 70) in his *Spirit of Laws*, where Montesquieu demonstrated that a nation can be understood and known about looking at its laws, customs, traditions, and so on. This played a crucial role in shaping Tahtawi's view of communication within society (HOURANI 1983). This helps examine the political philosophy that influenced Tahtawi. For example, there must be a certain mode of social relations homogenous to easily pave the way for a political practice, rather than depending on rigid elitist codes that are imposed and don't take people's needs and ambitions into account.

According to Hourani, "Tahtawi's ideas about society and the State are neither a mere restatement of a traditional view nor a simple reflection of the ideas he had learned in Paris" (HOURANI 1983, 73). Although Tahtawi attempted to address societal challenges using Western ideals (NADDAF 1986), he lacked a clear, well-defined approach to view colonialism and failed to promote emancipatory values suitable for local contexts.

ii. Muhammad Abduh and the ambiguities of religious modernism

Scholars, such as Muhammad Abduh, who succeeded Tahtawi in the Arab Renaissance, adopted a more critical stance toward colonialism (SPADA 2023). Abduh recognized the critical role of science and the universality of scientific progress. He advocated reforming Islam, attempting to invent a suitable modernity for Islam. Specifically, to integrate measures of "reason, science, and progress" into Islam; a matter that resulted in his exile to France. When he went back to

Egypt from exile, he wrote this famous phrase “I went to the West and saw Islam, but no Muslims; I got back to the East and saw Muslims, but not Islam” (SPADA 2023, 39). This phrase highlights a mismatch between values and their societal context, showing that the problem lies in the values and the context in which they were applied.

Although limited, Abduh’s approach acknowledged the destructive nature of colonialism. There was an effort to form new epistemological frameworks, though they remained underdeveloped and illustrated within a reformist Islamic approach. Here, it becomes more complicated because colonialism, at that moment, required a new epistemology, setting in motion a set of emancipatory practices.

While Abduh’s previous phrase suggests awareness of the problems facing Islam, his focus on reforming religion as a basic aspect of society led to limitations in his approach. Reformists, religious reformers like Abduh, are not in the habit of looking beyond the narrow scope of what they are trying to alter. This does not allow them to apply their solution to the broader context and the underlying connotations of colonialism, for example, fragmentation and distorted social context, which Abduh did not reflect on sufficiently. Rather than examining modern issues through a fresh lens, Abduh chose to return to classical Islamic norms, a move that prevented him from honestly confronting the colonial world around him.

Different from Abduh’s reliance on Western rationalism, the Andean indigenous revival-in which figures like Bolivias Evo Morales reshaped the nation using Aymara and Quechua (DE LA CADENA 2010) worldviews, offers a striking foil to the Arab Nahda. This rejected the liberal model and embraced “Buen Vivir” as a project of shared flourishing rather than Western development, going beyond simply advocating for indigenous rights on liberal terms. These examples show that political modernity can be epistemologically reformulated rather than merely appropriated. Although their social location and time period partially explain this failure, the Nahda intellectuals lacked the conceptual necessity and political imagination necessary to effect such a break.

Abduh, in his Al-Urwah al-Wuthqa, clearly recognized colonialism and its instruments, labeling regimes that served colonial objectives as harmful to Arab interests. This is applicable to when he connected the experiences of Jamal Al-Din Al-Afghani with the efforts of Khedive Tawfiq Pasha to suppress Al-Afghani’s ideas (ABDUH 1904, 23). Abduh’s establishment of Al-Urwah al-Wuthqa journal was an endeavor to counter colonial ideas, warning Arabs against their consequences (ABDUH 1904, 29-32).

iii. The missed opportunity for decolonial knowledge

He failed to articulate a genuinely local epistemology, one that could ground new systems (e.g., cultural) in their own context. For example, addressing the cultural system in society is to attempt to build the future based on the tools currently available. The distortion of this system leads to one of two possibilities: losing this cultural system, or its distorted growth, in which it grows while lacking one or more substantial components.

The second possibility may inform how it occurs when importing conceptual tools from other cultural systems to build that internal cultural system, attempting to internalize these imported tools in the heart of the system. Another possibility is how this cultural system becomes distorted when searching for past tools to rechange. This is relevant to Abduh's approach when looking in the history of Islam for tools to understand the new reality.

Last but not least, Abduh's attempt at reconciling Islam and modernity, while great, remained rooted in outdated traditions, limiting his ability to respond to the new challenges that arose in the face of colonialism. Additionally, his reformist approach failed to fully confront the challenges colonialism introduced in Egypt and elsewhere. This suggests an epistemological gap that demands attention, but more importantly is that both scholars, had a sort of access to power and a large-scale influence in society for the fact Abduh established a journal and Tahtawi as a teacher and societally active on different fronts, most importantly education (NURYANA 2024, 4).

Unsuitable Systems that are turned into Epistemological Errors

Post-Colonial Theory has been selected to guide the research process employed in this article. It questions how, inspired by the scholars of this theory, it is essential to examine the foundational knowledge transferred from the West during the Arab Nahda, i.e., France, and to attempt to transfer those kinds of knowledge to Arab societies. One must realize that these attempts were made under colonial rule, without regard for the sensitivity of the relationship between such types of knowledge and the geographies from which they were imported. For example, although not comprehensive, the case of democracy: Al-Tahtawi promoted the introduction of the Western notion of democracy into the Arab political system. Yet it is paradoxical that Arab societies remained colonized, and that these Western democracies had never themselves been colonized in the way Arabs had been. Precisely, how colonialism led to tribal clashes over power, territorial fragmentation, and, occasionally, sectarianism. Can democracy function effectively in societies fragmented by tribal or sectarian divisions? Or should the leaders ignore these factors and simply implement a top-down democracy?

Tahtawi's understanding of democracy was at odds with its colonial contradictions and incompatible with Arab communal life. This misalignment smoothed authoritarianism; its consequences are reflected in King Farouk's demise and the counter-revolution led by Nasser's military. Moreover, turning democracy into little more than voting and a representative body masks its deeper philosophy, which pictures each person as solitary, self-interested, and free of kin or creed. That picture clashed with 19th-century Arab life, which rested on tribal ties, extended families, waqf charities, and religious guilds that wove people together. Their failure to recognize these mismatches reflects what Mbembe calls a "conceptual misunderstanding born of mimicry" (MBEMBE 2001).

a) ***Part I: Colonialism and Intellectual Experiences of Travelling and Translating***

i. Misplaced admiration: Tahtawi's selective enlightenment

Arab thinkers confronting French rule in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries — Tahtawi and Abduh among them —provide a revealing window onto the tangled birth of modern Arab identity. Their work urges readers to examine the uneasy connection between foreign ideas, imperial power, and long-standing local beliefs. Yet their works fall short of birthing a fully decolonial framework capable of confronting the scars left by colonial rule. Their efforts failed to challenge colonial fragmentation or orientalist misrepresentations of Arab societies, despite their reformist goals.

In Takhlis al-Ibriz fi Talkhis Bariz, Tahtawi expresses admiration for European culture, believing Egypt could adopt Western models of governance, education, democracy, and liberty (LIVINGSTON 1996). Tahtawi sought to ground Enlightenment principles within Islam, arguing that meaningful progress could flourish through patient East-West dialogue and borrowing (WARREN 2017).

Tahtawi's uncritical embrace of French rationalism reveals his failure to grasp colonialism's broader impact on Egyptian society and culture. How can a society transition from Ottoman subjugation to modern statehood when colonial powers impose that statehood? His admiration for European rationalism overlooked how such ideals were also tools of colonial domination and reeducation. His embrace of Western concepts was not accompanied by a critical analysis of colonialism as a grassroots force that significantly transformed the Egyptian landscape. Furthermore, both thinkers ignored how Western concepts such as democracy/bureaucracy served to sustain colonial domination, thereby limiting the radical potential of reforms.

A lesser-known but revealing moment in Takhlīṣ al-Ibrīz is Tahtawi's observation that "al-ḥākim ʿendahum lā yuʿbad wa lā yuhān, bal yurāqib wa yusāʾal" ("Their ruler is neither worshipped nor insulted, but monitored and held accountable"). This subtle statement conveys Tahtawi's struggle with an ethical-political culture that differs from the Ottoman sultanate's revered hierarchy, and it goes beyond simple appreciation for constitutional governance. His language, though cautious, betrays a nascent critical curiosity. While he admired European political thought, he never undertook a direct side-by-side appraisal with Islamic models such as bay'a, leaving his analysis imperfectly balanced. His silence represents a missed opportunity for epistemic synthesis, rather than a critique of prevailing norms.

As an alternative to analyzing Western modernity and its potential link to colonial objectives, Tahtawi assumed that Egypt's trajectory of advancement was illustrated by this unquestioned Western modernity. Unlike Tahtawi, Abduh recognized the challenge and thought Islam could be reformed by learning from how Christianity adapted to Western societal needs. Specifically, by incorporating to Islam modern science, rationality, and progress (ABDUH 1904). Living in Paris did stir something new in Abduh; it deepened his sense of the tug-of-war between reason and faith. Yet his plan for reform remained circumscribed by the privileges and official posts that colonial overlords still granted him. He praised science and rational thought, yet his attempts to modernize Islam ignored the full toll of colonization-social fracture, loss of self-rule, and everyday suffering. Because of this blind spot, his idea of a bright, modern future remained tightly tied to religious

authority and never dared to unsettle, let alone topple, the colonial order.

Abduh vehemently condemns colonial despotism in al-Urwah al-Wuthqa, but his epistemological position is ambiguous. One well-known quote is "Kullu umma uṭlab nuhūḍahā min ṭarīqin ghayri ṭarīq al-ʿilm fa-hiya makhdūʿah" ("Any nation that requires its renaissance outside the path of science is deceived"). Abduh defines knowledge in a very abstract way, focusing mostly on what he sees as rational or empirical inquiry. Although he never ranked traditional disciplines such as ʿilm al-nafs or maqāṣid al-sharīʿa above others, Abduhs picture of knowledge still leans on Enlightenment ideals. Because of this bias, even his sharpest critiques of colonial rule overlook the local ways people had lived long before French or British guns arrived. So, his critique, while dressed in anti-colonial language, never quite becomes a genuinely decolonial stance; it remains an insider's complaint rather than a roadmap for rebuilding knowledge on one's own terms.

ii. Epistemological mimicry in the Nahda era

The intellectual debates of the Nahda period, then, don't immediately seem to contain any major epistemological flaws. Nahda thinkers borrowed European blueprints for modernity yet neglected to question the colonial ground that supported them. Their imported ideas about progress, democracy, and administration echoed excitement but missed how these concepts thrived on colonial origins and how their socio-cultural and political institutions distorted them. They failed to recognize how these concepts—such as democracy—could contain internal contradictions, allowing equitable governance internally while enabling the oppression of external "others." It is puzzling how concepts that appear inherently humanistic fail to protect external groups from marginalization or domination, and how those thinkers of the Arab Nahda didn't observe the potential schizophrenia in this regard!

When historical cultural memory and educational practices are lost, it can lead to what Suad Joseph terms "emotional coloniality" (JOSEPH 1999.) Under this state, the colonized subject becomes prone to internalizing emotions of moral confusion and self-doubt. Even in their critiques, Nahda intellectuals possessed a clear self-other binary, rendering Arab identity secondary by portraying modernity as redemptive rather than a complex trauma to be confronted. In building a decolonial horizon, one must recover emotional archives, including Qur'anic education, folklore, and elegy poetry, as political spaces of education.

b) Part II: The Errorized Epistemology: An Alternative Epistemology?

i. Epistemological Errors and Historical Consequences

Tahtawi and Abduh both contributed intellectually to shaping early modernity, particularly, in the earlier times. They had provided a fixed epistemology that neither adequately understood nor adequately resisted colonialism, based on a decolonial epistemology. Both, to some extent, have engaged or were educated Western values of liberalism and rationalism. This is apparent in the way both have promoted ideas of democracy, governance, and the integration of Western modernity into Arab culture and education systems. Most importantly, it appears that there was a weakness in engaging with decolonization, to the extent that there was potential to observe a form of subordination of Western thought and

perceptions of modernity, especially when viewed from a decolonial and critical perspective.

Even in anti-colonial efforts, the depth of colonial influence is evident in the imitation of foreign epistemologies under the guise of Arab nationalism. Even as Nasser's policies interrupted formal colonialism, they did not produce an epistemic grassroots revolution that could have connected with tribal councils (shūrā) or waqf-based self-governance as institutional forms of justice and solidarity. Rather than fostering freedom, adopting Western paradigms such as party-state models, centralized military control, and centralized planning ultimately led to authoritarianism (KANDIL 2012). Indeed, this explains that Nasser's 1952 revolution adopted nationalism and socialism, in a top-down, Westernized manner, replicating centralized authoritarianism.

Instead of dismissing later authoritarianism as being politically abnormal, it should be viewed as a consequence of a epistemological inheritance. It was the rational bureaucratic constitutive imagination of Tahtawi's for order and Abduh's call for disciplined rationality that later regimes tapped into. It would be an oversimplification to explain the state as the singular locus of reason, thereby constraining all alternative explanations as tribal and local to superstition and backwardness. Authoritarianism, as seems, was one of the unplanned legacies of Nahda; something a genealogical approach explains.

ii. Community Autonomy and Indigenous Archives

This is in contrast to South Africa's Ubuntu constitutionalism, which prioritizes the people over the state, and Zapatista politics in Chiapas, where politics is re-embedded in local cosmologies. If Nahda intellectuals had recognized and built similar epistemological foundations into the daily lives of their people, the postcolonial trajectory would have been quite different, necessitating a new theory of being, society, and knowledge —more than just political.

The absence of an intellectual framework of decolonization, which Egypt, like many other Arab countries, lived its consequences, has resulted in obstacles to own grassroots strategies of preventing despotism or to uproot the societal fragmentation colonialism initially resulted in; as these Western-based models of understanding societies fail to provide substantial treatment of societal problems in those societies. This epistemological absence became more visible in later stages, when their historical legacy doesn't show that their ideas are employed to address the social and political problems resulting from colonialism. A decolonial framework would have fostered grassroots approaches to combatting authoritarianism and colonial fragmentation while protecting against sectarianism and tribal competition, which manifest the persistent social and political dislocations of colonialism.

There is a sort of epistemic dependence observed, which challenges developing new local forms based on either communal forms, such as Nahḍa intellectuals looked to the imported liberal (SALVATORE 1997), forms as the modes of progress. This epistemic dependence obscured the potential of existing ways of organizing ideas about political involvement, such as shūrá and mutual aid

agencies from below. In contrast, they pushed elite-driven reform over community-driven mechanisms. In Egypt, for example, the Nahḍa reformers increasingly saw centralized state development, mimicking European models of nation-states (ELSHAKRY 2013), as the main potential vector of modernization, erasing traditional ways of political participation that could have led to more locally representative decolonial strategies.

Under both colonial and postcolonial rule, waqf, as a structural mechanism for community-based reform, was dismantled. In the case of Egypt, for example, Muhammad Ali's centralization project in the 19th century laid the groundwork for this process when he confiscated awqāf lands to finance modern standing armies and the bureaucratic state; thus undermining civil society actors' ability to organize (KOZLOWSKI 2008) (POWERS 1989). British colonial rule only institutionalized this process because the administration of waqf was incorporated into the colonial state, severing waqf from its pre-colonial (organic) community connections.

It is claimed that there was a link between the incapability to develop a decolonial, local or indigenous branch of knowledge and the rise of authoritarian regimes, despite their promises, these regimes failed to establish truly independent Arab realities that suit the ambitions of the people, but on the contrary, reproduced a reality of alienation, reflected the colonial dividing policies of the Arab world. Hence, the failure of the Nahda intellectuals to construct a stable intellectual critique of colonialism created the conditions for political instability and repression to grow stronger in the postcolonial era.

iii. Legal Pluralism and Educational Reform

The role of decolonial epistemology is to critique, expose, and address the pathologies of reality constructively, while this type of study of knowledge is well aware of colonial influences, placing indigenous and locally rooted knowledge at its core. In the Arab world, precolonial social structures emphasized societal unity. For instance, prior to French colonialism, there was the millet system, which allowed religious communities to self-govern according to their own traditions, with one religious chief coordinating with the central ruling system (BRITANNICA n.d). Another example was the Waqf system, a longstanding institution in Egypt (ASROHAH 2012, 281). Waqf was a system that sought to foster overall societal participation to achieve "social development." It contributed to having a commonality and a common ground for people's interests (SPACE 2022).

The fierce multiculturalism of indigenous intellectual systems that upheld social contracts without state authority was a feature of pre-colonial Arab societies. For example, the 'ulamā' class was pre-colonial Morocco's scholar and community mediator (LAMBTON 1981). In a similar vein, Sufi zawiyas fulfilled both political and spiritual purposes by providing food security, land redistribution, and even military defense (EICKELMAN 1976). Contextualizing these epistemes in modern Arab discourse is vital to any decolonial project. According to Santos, "Global social justice cannot exist without global cognitive justice" (SANTOS, 2014).

In order to correct these flaws, a decolonial epistemology sensitive to the particular histories and experiences of colonized societies is required. It was chosen to be defined here to support the development of the research. It is a study of knowledge that seeks to build a set of consistent understandings of the social, political, cultural, economic, and psychological structures in a constructive manner. This study must provide a clear account of the reality imposed by colonial forces, recognizing that there may be a need to foster a form of knowledge sufficiently comprehensive to address crises caused by colonialism that persist in the post-colonial era. For example, this decolonial epistemology might be required to provide a new understanding of how to address the socioeconomic structures arising from colonialism by unifying the efforts and ranks of the framers to create a solid economic foundation, reflected at the cultural level of society.

Al-Tahatawi and Abduh lacked a clear epistemological response to deal with any potential schizophrenic elements may stem from liberalism, rationalism, and democracy, particularly when these, as critical parts of the entire Western intellectual project, are projected to the Arab context. This claim became clear when they lacked the capacity to comprehend, confront, and resist the colonial epistemic structures and their postcolonial remnants.

This explores, if reading Walter Mignolo's "The Darker Side of Western Modernity" (MIGNOLO, 2011, p. 72), the critical need to confront the centrism of Western knowledge patterns, particularly when these knowledge patterns undermine the thoughts and practices of the landowners themselves. Landowners must seek to build their societies on their own systems of knowledge, without alienation and without resulting in schizophrenic phenomena or feeding colonial remnants, such as fragile social systems and other phenomena.

In fact, Mignolo has provided grounds for claiming that epistemologies produced in the era of the collective self-building of colonized nations must have a solid style to challenge the claim that western patterns of knowledge are always and must be the permeates of universal intellectuality and cultural systems.

As in other regions, colonial structures in the Arab world persisted even at the post-colonial level. For example, the stereotype of inferiority (which was promoted through the colonial mission of civilizing the other), dependency on the colonial power, and moreover. This marks the Arab Nahda thinkers' inability to understand what was really needed; perhaps a radical change was required at that time, rather than a reform of the political systems based on a Western form of knowledge.

When society's fabrics —social, political, and urban —are historically constructed in a way that serves people's need for advancement but are suddenly disrupted by shocks (e.g., colonialism), social cohesion and local relations of self-rule and self-organization become problematic. However, this problem becomes more complicated when knowledge created within the same colonial context is used to address it. That is on the knowledge level.

However, Nasser, as a political leader, will use the available epistemological framework for that urgent political moment. It shows that there was a lack of elements that may serve in the positions of nationalism and socialism at that era. Therefore, it is natural that he will depend on those Western styles.

This article suggests that a decolonial epistemology be founded on three interconnected pillars in order to compensate for the absence of history:
1. Historical Consciousness: Citing indigenous memory regimes as legitimate means of knowledge, such as oral tradition, tribal justice, and religious learning (fiqh).
2. Subaltern Agency: Putting the knowledge of marginalized sects (such as the Zaydis and Ibadis), Bedouins, and peasants at the core of any national epistemology.
3. Border Thinking: According to Mignolo, this refers to asserting the "colonial difference" as opposed to the universal center of Europe (MIGNOLO, 2011).

Instead of sentimentalizing or romanticizing, these spaces are to be places where there is epistemic resistance that works in opposition to world orders such as Westernized secularism, settler colonialism, and neoliberalism. So, re-centering knowledge on pluriversality and not negating everything Western is what decolonial epistemology advocates.

For Santiago Castro-Gómez, "epistemic disobedience" (CASTRO-GÓMEZ, 2007) is a refusal to recognize but a single form of rationality, European. Decolonial epistemology would then have to start in the classroom by demystifying Eurocentric texts that present colonial modernity as globally progressive. Scholars like Ibn Khaldun, Fatima Mernissi, and Zaynab al-Ghazali would be brought to the center of political and social theory, to the extent of Rousseau or Durkheim, through a decolonial educational framework. This is a call for geo-epistemic equality: learning from multiple geo-epistemic centers, rather than reversal. Recovery of the language is also necessary; apart from cultural objects, Arabic, Amazigh, and other native languages are also intended to be used as tools of pedagogy. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o promotes the recovery of indigenous archives as epistemologically stable knowledge systems in an effort to decolonize the mind (THIONG'O 1986). This means taking people's religious exposition, Sufi hagiographies, and oral jurisprudence (e.g., tribal sulh) into the academy in the Arab world.

As decolonial epistemology resists museumification of Arab-Islamic history and engages with these sources as active epistemes, not passive artifacts, decolonial epistemology must be archivally insurgent. This action would challenge colonial-era accommodations that, in the name of "rational progress," displaced or relegated non-elite. In Mbembe's "pluralization of sovereignties" initiative, postcolonial governments must decentralize to be able to incorporate various forms of governance. Retrieving indigenous councils for dispute resolution, waqf-institutionalized public services, and Sufi-guided school models alongside the state is merely one means by which decolonial epistemology ought to facilitate institutional pluralism.

Conclusion

The epistolary activities of the Nahḍa intellectuals, which stand at the core of contemporary arab thought, have remained devoid of any proactive decolonial epistemology. Tahtawi and Abduh failed to analyze the features of domination and subordination that created the conditions for the post-colonial Arab state, and, as

such, were overly influenced by the barriers of Western liberalism. The absence of a direct, critical engagement with colonial subjugation created a profound epistemic gap that persisted into the postcolonial period. That gap later emerged as authoritarianism and other distortions in the postcolonial period. Such a gap needed a postcolonial theory of knowledge situated within the indigenous waqf, shūrá, mnemonic legacies, and other subjugated formations enlightened by the practice of politics reframed empirically. The absence of such frameworks configured the liberal, nationalist democracy, and other borrowed concepts to bind the subject people to the new elite order.

Eventually, a decolonial epistemology must create a space for legal pluralism, establishing communal and religious law alongside state law. It would also re-design education, no longer asking students to memorize a colonial curriculum, but instead allowing an open-ended pedagogy that recognizes historical consciousness, ethical thinking, and indigenous intellectual traditions– from Ibn Khaldun to women's lineages of scholarship. This is how epistemology can become a vehicle for liberation.

Today's Arab crises, from authoritarian relapse to sectarian fragmentation, underscore the urgency of this task. For instance, the Arab Spring called forth public desire for justice, dignity, and self-governance – values and principles central to Arab-Islamic traditions and consistently suppressed by both colonial and postcolonial regimes.

The lesson of the Nahḍa is to pluralize modernity and to think that true liberation will require intellectual projects that refuse mimicry and can return their episteme to a local perspective. Recovering these repressed archives is essential for confronting colonial legacies and constructing futures grounded in indigenous ethics and historical consciousness.

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