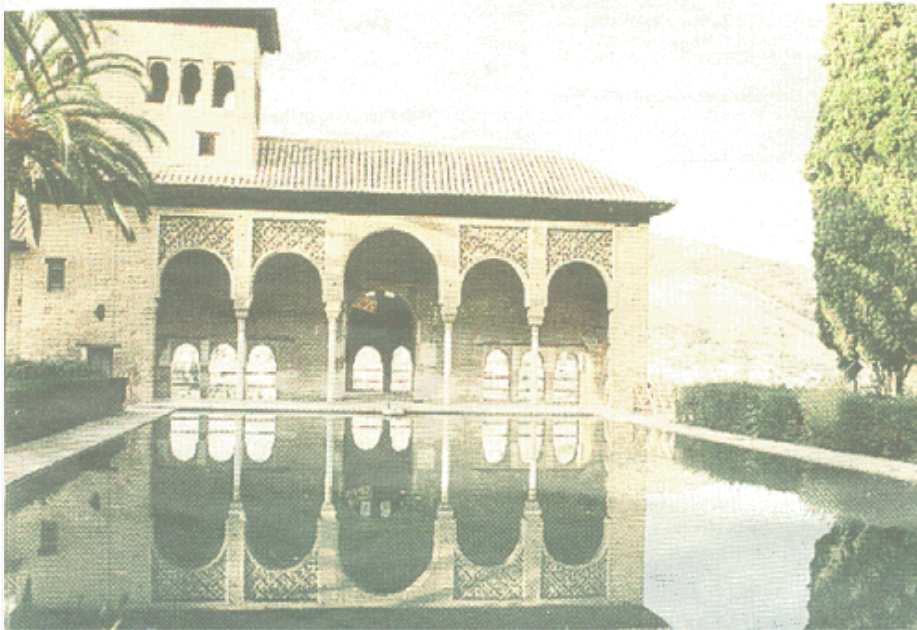


Fostering a cosmopolitan scholarly culture

Dato' Dzul kifli Abd Razak

Article

New Sunday Times - 07/17/2005



SERENE SURROUNDINGS: The Alhambra's oldest palace, Palacio del Partal, with all that remains: a five-arched portico and reflecting pool.

Other than Spain, southern Italy which was ruled by the Norman kings of Sicily, also assisted in diffusing Andalusian culture to other parts of Italy and central Europe as well.

The continuous intellectual intercourse between the two Norman states of England and Sicily was instrumental in bringing many elements of Muslim culture to as far as distant Britain.

A case in point was the work of the greatest surgeon of the Middle Ages, Abu al-Qasim al-Zahrawi, (known in the West as Abulcasis or Al-Bucasis), who was born near Cordoba.

His work was used as a standard reference work in the subject in all universities of Europe for over 500 years.

His book, *Al-Tasrif*, was translated into Latin and became the leading medical text in European universities during the later Middle Ages.

Robert Briffault in his well-known work, *The Making of Humanity* (London, 1938), writes: "It was under, the influence of Arabian; and Moorish cultural revival, and not in the 15th century, that the real renaissance took place. Spain, and not Italy, was the cradle of the rebirth of Europe.

"After sinking lower and lower in barbarism, it had reached the darkest depths of ignorance and degradation when the cities of the Saracenic world Baghdad, Cairo, Cardoba, Toledo, were growing centres of civilisation and intellectual activity.

"It was there that the new life arose which was to grow into a new phase of human evolution. From the time when the influence of their culture made itself felt, began the stirring of a new life."

Philip K. Hitti, the Orientalist, acknowledges the greatness of Arab culture when he wrote in his *History of the Arabs* (London, 1937):

"Moslem (sic) Spain wrote one of the brightest chapters in the intellectual history of mediaeval Europe.

"Between the middle of the 8th and the beginning of the 13th centuries, as we have noted before, the Arab-speaking peoples were the main bearers of file torch of culture and civilisation throughout the world.

"Moreover, they were the medium through which ancient science and philosophy were recovered, supplemented and transmitted in such a way as to make possible the renaissance of western Europe."

To this, J.M. Roberts in *History of the World* (1995) reaffirmed that "Arab Spain was of enormous importance to

Europe, a door to the learning and science of the East".

Among others, this is evident from the range of Arabic loanwords in European languages covering a variety of scientific fields.

The existence of scientific words of Arabic origin in European languages is attributed to the pioneering efforts of Muslim scholars in the fields of astrology, mathematics, physics, chemistry and medicine.

Europe became the most technologically and scientifically advanced part of the world.

By 1100, it marked the time when Western names began to appear, but the honours were still shared with Andalusian names, especially Ibn Rushd (Averroes) and Abu-Imran Musa bin Maimoun (the Jew, Maimonides).

By then the list of towering personalities of Andalusian scholarship was already peaking.

Overall, from 750 to 1100 (some historians would argue even later) for at least 350 years continuously, it was the unbroken succession of the Ages of Al-Jabir, Khwarizmi, Razi, Biruni and Ibn Sina (Avicenna) and then Omar Khayam.

Men belonging to the culture of Andalusia — Arabs, Turks, Afghans, Persians, Jews and Christians — created the unbroken chain of tolerance and prosperity.

These scholars made a concerted effort to make use of the whole of classical learning realising not only a "Golden Age" of science but also eclipsed anything found in Christian Europe which often considered such works blasphemous and often destroyed them.

Hence, in the intervening period of Andalusia, a lively, cosmopolitan, and learned culture sprung up facilitated by the Muslim, Christian and Jewish scholars who mingled freely.

This led to a new sense of confidence, and a renewed creativity and vigour in intellectual pursuits.

New technologies played a vital role in revitalising the medieval culture and knowledge.

With the "invention" of paper medium, what followed was an explosion of books.

"It was as revolutionary as the printing Press," writes Jonathan Bloom in *Paper Before Print: The History and Impact of Paper in the Islamic World*.

Some historians labelled this as the seeding period of the Renaissance.

The local (Arabised) thought and intellectual product came to dominate and surpass that of the Greek learning.

Scientific sources of the Greek (including that of the Syriac sources) were passed to the Arabised Andalusians who began to write new Islamic science.

In presenting their works, the scholars had to coin an entirely new terminology to introduce their innovations, which included such novel concepts as algebra, the algorithm, alkali, alchemy, and alcohol.

Arabic technical words and scientific terms were later adopted in Latin, and were introduced into the vocabulary of Europe where some are still in use. According to some historians of science, these challenges to classical scientific ideas may have been a significant factor in the genesis of Scientific Revolution of the 16th and 17th centuries, writes Elspeth Whitney in a book, *Medieval Science and Technology* (2004).

Medieval science and technology was shaped by the recovery of classical and Arabic science, including the works of Aristotle and the Arabic commentaries.

Texts by Aristotle and his Arabic commentaries became the basis of the university curriculum and hence for the scientific thought of medieval Europe until the 16th and 17th centuries, according to Whitney.

Even as the Muslims lost control of major cities of eastern Spain around 1248, there was purportedly still enough social energy and impetus on behalf of the Arab rulers to foster a rich, scholarly culture, one which drew medieval luminaries such as Gerbert d'Aurillac (who was later to become Pope Sylvester II).

Among others were Robert Grosseteste (who later became Chancellor of Oxford University), Roger Bacon also known as Doctor Mirabilis (Latin for "wonderful"), to name a few.

Indeed, Pope Sylvester II was regarded as the first Christian "to take up the torch of learning".

In short, complemented by the high level of learning, religious tolerance and social freedom, a large number of Christian students from all parts of Europe flocked to Andalusia to study in Moorish schools.

On completion, they returned home and spread the new knowledge and intellectual tradition.

[Terms & Conditions](#)