Cheering the 'deranged'

Evidence for medical institutions for people suffering from madness first appears in the Arabic Empire. Suman Fernando looks at the history of these medieval institutions, called märistäns or bïmäristäns, that predated asylums in Europe by more than 500 years

Today we have a strong tradition in western psychiatry of describing many human problems seen as mental (or 'in the mind') in terms of personal illness rather than their social dimensions. And we know that the 'great confinement'[1] in asylums that started in Europe in the mid 17th century was a result of institutionalising people thought to be 'mentally ill'. We tend to attribute all of this to western culture, contrasting it with (and sometimes idealising) non-western cultures. But it is instructive to look more closely at the history of institutionalising the 'mentally ill'.

Although we tend to think of schizophrenia as the hallmark of western psychiatry's diagnostic system, depression has a much longer history by far. It was first designated as an illness by Hippocrates in around 500 BC, when he called it 'melancholia'. Indeed, it was the main type of madness described as illness in western culture for many years until schizophrenia came on the scene a mere 100 years ago. But that is another story.

People thought to be mad were looked after by religious bodies for hundreds, perhaps thousands, of years in many societies. Evidence for medical institutions for people suffering from madness first appears in the Arabic Empire that stretched in its heyday (between the 10th and 13th centuries) from Persia to Spain. As medical scholarship developed within the flowering of early science in a context of Islamic cultural traditions – where, incidentally, Christians, Jews and Muslims worked together in Arabic – the idea of 'mental illness' proposed by Hippocrates was incorporated into a stronger medical framework. And the Arabs built hospitals for the sick (while

the Greeks never did), and so naturally these places, called märistäns or bïmäristäns, took in people diagnosed as mentally ill – nearly always with melancholia. Some at least of these märistäns became de facto mental hospitals. Michael Dols[2] identifies such institutions as having been established in Cairo (Egypt) in 683 AD, in Aleppo (Syria) in 755 AD, in Baghdad (Iraq) in the late 8th century and in Granada (Spain) in 1365–1367 AD.

So what were these medieval institutions for the 'mentally ill' actually like? Many of the accounts quoted by Michael Dols refer to impressive buildings, with pools, fountains, flowing water and flower gardens. It seems great care was taken to decorate the hospital wards to 'cheer the deranged'. And generally there were good

conditions, such as beds with mattresses and space for patients to wander about in. Dols quotes a travelling Rabbi who came across a märistän in Cairo, commenting on the special food supplied to patients at the Caliph's expense, but also noting that patients were held in 'iron chains until their reason is restored'. There is no doubt that physical restraint was used on 'mental patients' in the märistäns. And visitors sometimes reported observing beatings. Dispensing of medicines was commonplace: an Arabic text mentions stimulants, sedatives and drugs for 'gladdening of the spirit'. Interestingly, it seems that music was used to treat melancholia, reflecting a medico-musical tradition well established in Islamic society, going back to David treating Saul with music.

Galenic (Greek) medicine, rather than its Persian-Indian counterpart, dominated thinking about illness in the medieval Arabic Empire. Exorcism, sometimes used in the Christian tradition in instances of insanity, was not sanctioned by orthodox Islam. There were many medical texts that mentioned mental illness. One of the foremost physicians during the 12th century AD was Maimonides, a Jewish philosopher-physician who was called on to treat dignitaries, including, it seems, the Caliph. His statue (above) still stands in a square in Cordoba (Southern Spain). In one of his writings, Maimonides referred to melancholia as a 'disorder that tends towards mania', thereby describing what we now know as manic depression about 700 years before Kraepelin did so.

What was strikingly different about the märistäns in the Arabic Empire from the early asylums in Europe over 500 years later was that they were not isolated institutions but always in the centre of cities, easily accessible to most people. Clearly, the patients were frequently visited by family and friends, and more generally seen as a part of society. As far as we know, these institutions were not used for confinement of people seen as socially undesirable, as was the case in European asylums.

As with all empires, the Arabic Empire was overtaken by events and gradually broke up. The Turks carried on the tradition of providing mental hospitals in the Ottoman Empire (that partially replaced the Arabic Empire) into the early 20th century. The asylum movement of Europe, linked to western psychiatry, was exported to the Middle East in the 20th century as western hegemony was established there. I believe that the original märistäns building at Aleppo is still used as a mental hospital, very likely run in the style of the western asylums.

Photographs of Aleppo by Frederik Questier at www.questier.com
1. Foucault, M. (1967) *Madness and civilization: A history of insanity in the age of reason*, London: Tavistock.
2. Dols, M. W. (1992) *Majnün: The madman in medieval Islamic society*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.