

Island Race

Gary Y. Okihiro*

In the annals of European science, there is only one island race. That race and the four others are a gift of the Enlightenment to the world courtesy of the imperial science of taxonomy. Carl Linnaeus, the “father of taxonomy,” or the science of presuming to name, classify, and attribute natures to all of the earth’s organisms, identified four human varieties in his *Systema naturae* (1735). The book has several iterations, but most consider the 1758, or tenth edition, the founding tract of taxonomy. *Homo sapiens*, Linnaeus held, consisted of Europeans, Asians, Africans, and Americans (Indians), corresponding with the then conventional continental divisions of Europe, Asia, Africa, and America.

Those four human “varieties” later became “races,” which mirrored the meta-geographies of men like Carl Ritter, the most influential geographer of his time, who maintained that biotic communities arose from, were conditioned by, and were thus unique to each continent. “Each continent,” Ritter wrote, “is like itself alone Each one was so planned and formed as to have its own special function in the progress of human culture” (Lewis and Wigen, p. 30). Continents, then, constitute distinctive spatial designs with their own climates, soils, and plants, animals, and peoples. The continent of Asia, accordingly, has Asian plants, animals, peoples, and civilizations. To this day, those continental divisions organize natural history museums into halls devoted to the geology, botany, and zoology, including races, of Africa, America, Asia, and Europe as if each was “like itself alone.”

In the past present, but now most times absent, is the fifth race, named by Johann Blumenbach in his 1795, or third edition, of *On the Natural Variety of Mankind*, which began as his doctoral dissertation submitted to the medical faculty at the University of Göttingen in 1775. In the third edition, Blumenbach followed his teacher Linnaeus’ lead in naming the four human varieties derivative of continents, but he added a fifth, the Malay variety. Like the American, which was between the Caucasian, or European, and Oriental, or Asian, he posited that Malays were intermediate between the Caucasian and Ethiopian, or African. Malays were mainly island peoples of the Pacific and Indian oceans, including the islands of Southeast Asia and of the clusters called Micronesia,

* Professor, Columbia University

Island Race

Melanesia, and Polynesia. Moreover, Blumenbach observed, the Malay variety belonged to the same language group that extends from Madagascar off East Africa to Hawai'i (Blumenbach, 266, p. 275).

The human varieties designated by Linnaeus comprised races because he defined them by physical traits, including appearance, stature, and skin color and by temperament. The taxonomist borrowed from ancient Egyptian and Greek belief that certain bodily fluids called "humors" induced behavior such that blood ruled for Europeans, making them cheerful, black bile made Asians melancholy, yellow bile rendered Americans choleric, and phlegm made Africans sluggish. Linnaeus described the physical attributes of Europeans as white and muscular, Asians as yellow and stiff, Americans as red and upright, and of Africans as black and relaxed (Gould, p. 404).

Blumenbach added to Linnaeus' stature and skin color specific bodily parts such as hair, nose, skull, breasts, penis, and so forth that became markers for what we now know as race. The Malay, Blumenbach asserted, had a tawny skin color, black, soft, curly, thick, and plentiful hair, a head that was "moderately narrowed" and a forehead "slightly swelling," a nose that was "full, rather wide," a mouth that was "large," and an upper jaw that was "somewhat prominent." He noted diversity within certain sub-groups like the Tahitians, some who were tall and lighter complexioned with faces resembling Europeans, and others, short, darker, with mulatto-like faces. Those in New Guinea, Blumenbach admitted, approached the look of Africans (Blumenbach, pp. 266, 275). Importantly, Blumenbach cited the Caucasian, a name he coined for the European variety, as the most beautiful of all the earth's peoples and as the "primeval," or original, form. All the other varieties were "degenerations" from that ideal type.

Although Blumenbach might have had classifications other than races in mind (see, for instance Eigen), his varieties of mankind became the basis for racial discourses. My curiosity about Blumenbach's varieties in the context of this special edition of the *International Journal of Okinawan Studies* narrows upon his sole island variety or race, the Malay. Continents and continental discourses dominate Western worldviews and scholarship. The four continents, races, and civilizations prevail in those arenas, whereas the island race, like islands physically and metaphorically, is nowhere to be seen. The Malay race, nonetheless, depending upon time and place, was and is a critical subject position beyond the spatial symmetry it provides for Blumenbach's hierarchical taxonomy as was suggested by Gould (p. 412).

The term *Melayu* is of ancient derivation. Ptolemy, the second-century C. E. Egyptian geographer, located West Melayu near present-day Burma, and the twelfth-century Arab geographer Edrisi described Malai as a large island full of gold and spices. Closer to Blumenbach's time were seventeenth and eighteenth-century Dutch accounts of Southeast Asia and the Chinese, Malay, Javanese, and others who formed maritime communities in Dutch ports. The Malay community in Batavia, the capital of the Dutch East Indies, was substantial and important during the seventeenth century. After Blumenbach, during the early twentieth century, British colonial administrators installed the Malay as a race to

facilitate their governing of Malaya, and the anti-colonial movement and Malay nationalism claimed self-determination for the Malay race (Reid).

Within the United States, the Malay race made its appearance in contests over the definitions of the Asian race, which was subject to immigration exclusion, marriage prohibitions, racial segregation, and property rights restrictions. Most states had miscegenation laws “protecting” white women and the white gene pool from the contaminating threat of nonwhite men. A 1905 California law prohibited the marriage of whites with “negroes, mulattoes, or mongolians.” In 1931, Salvador Roldan, a Filipino, applied to marry Marjorie Rogers, a white woman, in Los Angeles but was rejected on the grounds that Roldan was a Mongolian or Asian. “I asked for an application blank required by law,” recalled Roldan of his effort to obtain a marriage license, “and they asked me whether I was a Filipino and...also whether I was white, or yellow, or brown, or red.” After Roldan replied he was Filipino, the clerk asked the race of his fiancée, who was white. “Then they told me that I could not have a license,” he testified (Pascoe, p. 153).

Roldan sued Los Angeles County for that denial on the grounds, his attorney Gladys Towles Root contended, of science and social science and racial classification as advanced by Blumenbach in 1795. Argued Root, “a Filipino is *not* ethnologically, historically or legally a Mongolian.” According to Blumenbach, she noted, Chinese and Japanese were Mongolians, but Filipinos were Malays. The defense attorneys for Los Angeles County countered that other scientists, like Thomas Henry Huxley, a nineteenth-century English biologist whose racial classification had subsumed Blumenbach’s Malay race under the Mongoloid group, had supplanted Blumenbach’s dated classification. Filipinos, they contended, were thus Mongolians.

In April 1932, superior court judge Henry Gates ruled in favor of Roldan and Blumenbach that Filipinos were Malays and not Mongolians, and he directed the county to issue a marriage license to Roldan and Rogers. Appeal courts upheld judge Gates’ decision, revealing Blumenbach’s authority to the twentieth century. By then, an appeals court noted, there had developed a common sense to the use of the term Mongolian, which referenced in ordinary speech the Asiatic, coolie, and Chinese. That infiltration of racial discourse into common speech is revealing and testifies to the power of taxonomy, ideology, and the state and its apparatuses.

Some Filipinos participated in that race making, cheering their status as Malays and not Mongolians. A Filipino newspaper, *The Three Stars*, praised the “racial right” achieved by Malays and urged its readers to take pride in their identity as members of the “Malay or brown race.” Filipinos, the paper’s editor claimed, were “their own distinct race for centuries,” and “they cherish it—they have been developed and identified with it—fought and died for it. They are—if you please, A MALAY or BROWN RACE and PROUD OF IT” (Pascoe, p. 158). The cheering was short lived. In March 1933, the California state legislature added “members of the Malay race” to the provision prohibiting marriage with “white persons.”

Today, continental races remain the standard classification of the earth’s peoples

Island Race

despite the falsity of race. A similar error is the racial geography of continents, which are not solitary worlds but are, in fact, borderless. Plants and animals routinely violate the manufactured divides between Europe and Asia or Africa and Asia. America, too, was once connected to Africa and Asia, and the air and water that now surround the American island are highways, not mere barriers. The island race proposed by Blumenbach, now subsumed under the Asian continent and race, was largely based upon the linguistic family of Austronesian languages that girdles over half the globe from the western reaches of the Indian Ocean to Oceania and its sea of islands.

The sole island race, thus, while clearly a fiction of the European mind in the act of empire, suggests a union of land and sea, and like its watery element, fluidity, movement, and connections that transgress human constraints.

* I acknowledge with gratitude the research work of Carrie Montgomery in the writing of this essay.

References

- Blumenbach, J. F. (1865). On the natural variety of mankind, 1795 ed. *In The anthropological treatises of Johann Friedrich Blumenbach* (T. Bendyshe, Trans. & Ed.). London: Longman, Green, Longman, Roberts & Green.
- Eigen, S. (2005). Self, race, and species: J. F. Blumenbach's atlas experiment. *The German Quarterly* 78: 3 (Summer), 277–98.
- Gould, S. J. (1996). *The mismeasure of man*. New York: W. W. Norton.
- Lewis, M. W., & Wigen, K. E. (1997). *The myth of continents: A critique of meta-geography*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Pascoe, P. (2009). *What comes naturally: Miscegenation law and the making of race in America*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Reid, A. (2001). Understanding *Melayu* (Malay) as a source of diverse modern identities. *Journal of South-east Asian Studies* 32: 3 (October), 295–313.