



Burden of our false races: Defeating racism and the myth of race in Malaysia

We Malaysians are defined by our races. Racial thinking is deeply entrenched and ubiquitous. It pervades our society such that our race determines our opportunities and experiences in education, work, religion, culture, friendship, romance, and politics. Our race affects how we interact and how we view others. Even whom we support in politics is determined by our race.

Our lives, however, are governed by a myth. My race, so as yours, are false.

As long as seven decades ago, Ashley Montagu in 1942 wrote in his book *"Man's Most Dangerous Myth: The Fallacy of Race"* that human races did not exist. Human races did not have any evolutionary basis, and they could not explain differences among human populations. People who still believed in races, Montagu wrote, were old in their thinking. And in 1950, based on the findings of an international panel of anthropologists, geneticists, sociologists, and psychologists, UNESCO issued a statement that all humans belong to the same species and that race is not a biological reality but a myth.

Since then, increasing scientific evidence have continued to fortify the notion that race is nothing but a myth. Science has shown, for instance, that no biological relationship exists between race and intelligence, talent, law-abidingness, or economic performance, just as there is no biological relationship between race and skin color, eye color, blood group, height, skull shape, facial features, hair color, or hair texture.

Human races are not an evolutionary outcome of nature but a human invention. Race is a weapon—a powerful ideological tool—used to divide, subdue, and control people. Race is a way to institutionalize human diversity by placing people into racial categories and using these categories to shape public policies. Ironically, by preventing debates on racial issues in Malaysia, presumably to maintain social order and harmony, has helped further entrench people into their race. Race loyalty, advocacy, and activism breed further polarization, intolerance, discrimination, and inequality.

Race is both a social construct and a social contract. Not only have we allowed ourselves to be divided into race groups, we have also allowed our lives to be structured and controlled according to our race. That we have allowed all these to happen to us is not the worst; the worst is we Malaysians are disturbingly zealous to our race and adopt a “siege mentality” to preserve and defend our race. We, once the creators of our race, are now acquiesce to our creation.

Race is a modern invention because it did not appear until the mid-17th century. Before then, it was ethnocentrism, not race, that separated people. Some people may believe themselves to be culturally superior to others in terms language, diet, adornment, conduct, and religion. That slaves may have a different “race” or skin color from their owners hardly mattered; it was the differences in religious affiliations that was the main cause of the subjugation of slaves. Not even in the 1600s did the early English colonists view their “black” slaves in racial terms.

But as European exploration and colonization became increasingly widespread and established, racial thinking became prevalent. Race was invented to justify slavery, to preempt slave revolts, and to control and oppress certain groups of people. Race created hierarchies among peoples, and race became an effective tool to foster contempt of whites on blacks and people of other skin colors. The 18th century was the great age of scientific classification of biodiversity. Unfortunately, it was also the period that started misguided attempts, such as by Carl Linnaeus, the well-known Swedish naturalist, to classify humans into races. The American and European races, wrote Linnaeus in his 10th edition book of “*Systema Naturae*”, were merry, free, gentle, acute, inventive, and principled, whereas the Asian and Africans races, in contrast, were haughty, crafty, indolent, opinionated, and impulsive.

That races do not exist seems counterintuitive. Take an Indian, a Malay, and a

Chinese, for example. Few of us would have little difficulty in telling them apart. One distinguishing characteristic between them is their skin color: Indians generally have the darkest skin tone, followed by the Malays, and the Chinese the lightest tone. But skin colors do not change abruptly. They are graded, varying gradually along a color gradient. Travel by land, for instance, from Nairobi, Kenya to Oslo, Norway, and you will notice that people's skin color vary gradually from black to brown and finally to white, but there is no point along the color gradient that separates any neighboring colors. So, if we use skin color as a basis of racial classification, at what cut-off points on the color gradient do we use to classify people as having white, brown, or black skin?



Skin color is one distinguishing feature that sets apart Indians, Malays, and Chinese, but skin color, like any other human traits, is an unreliable criterion for classifying human variations (photo from Choo Choy May, themalaymailonline.com.my).

Not just skin color, but hair color and the distribution of blood types, in particular the group B type, vary gradually as well. From west to east Europe or from southeast and northeast Asia to central Asia, increasingly more people would have the B blood group gene. And in Australia, moving farther inward the country and away from the coast, the number of supposedly single-raced Aborigines with yellow-brown hair (blonde) increases and those with black hair decreases.



Dark-skinned Melanesians and Aboriginal Australians do not all have black hair. They can have traits found in “Caucasians”: red and blonde hair, for instance ... (from telegraph.co.uk)



... and for some, blue eyes (from afritorial.com).

Human races do not exist because human diversity cannot be compartmentalized into mutually exclusive groups. Individuals can simultaneously belong to two or more races whichever set of classification criteria we try to use or develop. This is because there will always be overlapping race groups such that a person in one race group would likely have the characteristics or traits from other race groups.

For instance, blonde hair is often associated with people with light skins. But this is not always true. Five to ten percent of dark skinned Melanesians (as well as Aboriginal Australians), for instance, have blonde hair. Even among the dark skinned populations in India, Sri Lanka, and Central Africa, people there can vary widely in other traits, so it is possible they can be differentiated to other races even though their skin tones are similar to one another. This shows that depending on how we define race, a person's race can change, and we can have as few as one race or as many as tens, if not hundreds, of races in any given human populations.



Human diversity is multifaceted and involves overlapping traits from other groups of people (from “Are We So Different” art exhibit: understandingrace.org).

Racial classifications will always fail because races are difficult to define, and there are no impartial and consistent rules for deciding what constitutes a race or to what race a person belongs.

Make no mistake. Human variations are real. They are just not caused by race. Instead, human variations are caused by evolution and natural selection. Modern humans evolved in Africa about 150,000 to 200,000 years ago, and some of them started to migrate out of Africa about 50,000 to 100,000 years ago. As different groups of people travelled into different parts of the world, each group picked up new genetic mutations which would not be present in the original population whence they came or among those who took different migration routes. It is tempting to believe that these genetic differences between human populations would be large enough that we could use them for racial classification. This is not the case.



Human variations are real, diverse, and wonderful. Classification by “race” is worthless simply because it cannot categorize our full range of diversity (from smithsonianchannel.com).

In 1972, geneticist Richard Lewontin, in a landmark study, showed that most human genetic variations were found not **between** human populations but **within** the same population. Subsequent studies, in particular by Rosenberg and his colleagues in 2002, have confirmed this to be true. The astonishing facts are simply this: “race” accounts only 5% or less of all human variations. Instead, nearly all of human variations (93 to 95%) are between individuals of the same population. To put it another way, there are much more genetic differences between individuals of the same “race” than individuals of different “races”. Why is this so?

Human variations are the largest where humans lived the longest. Modern humans arose in Africa, and it is here where humans lived the longest. This means they had more time here than anywhere else to accumulate the most genetic changes. When humans migrated out of Africa, they brought out with them only some (but not all) of these genetic variations because only some individuals from Africa migrated. Consequently, the genetic variations these travelers picked up were a subset of those who stayed in Africa. And this is exactly what was discovered by Yu and his colleagues in their 2002 study. They found more genetic variations between two Africans than between an African and non-African. Although those who migrated out Africa had accumulated new genetic mutations not found in the original African populations, these mutations occurred only on a small set of genes, those needed to function differently in the travelers’ new environment.

Lastly, human races do not exist because human migration out of Africa was too recent in history and the various human populations, despite being scattered over the world, were not isolated enough from one another for racial differentiation.

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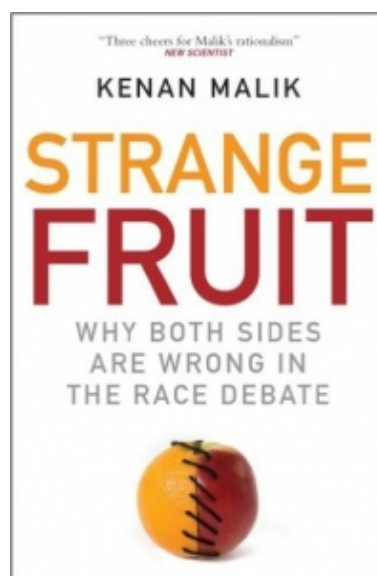
Science has shown that we are all related, that we are all mongrels—not purebreds—with intertwined and primal ancestry, and that we are all essentially Africans under our skins. Race as a concept or idea has been out of date for more than seventy years, so why is it that very few Malaysians even today are aware of this fact? Why haven't we been made aware or our children been taught in schools that race is purely a myth?

Defeating racism begins with us understanding our human origins and why people are different from one another on a genetic not racial basis. But this is only half the struggle. Prof. Mark Cohen, an anthropologist from the State University of New York and book author of *“Culture of Intolerance: Chauvinism, Class, and Racism”*, argued that we should make it mandatory that our children be taught cultural relativism: the comparative study of human cultures. Merely learning that race is myth because it does not explain human diversity is insufficient. We also need to learn that culture distinguishes one group of people from others. When people refer to “race”, they often actually mean “culture”.

As Prof. Cohen explained, “The key point is that what we see as ‘racial’ differences in behavior may reflect the fact that people have different values, make different choices, operate with different cultural ‘grammars’, and categorize things (and therefore think) in different ways.”

So, it is about various cultures, not races, that we should examine. We need to examine what people are doing and try to understand their behavior in context of their culture and situation. We need to understand that although we do not share the desires or perceptions of people from other cultures, we nonetheless recognize that our desires or perceptions in our culture can appear just as arbitrary, unusual, or different to others. When we understand and appreciate the diversity of cultures and understand people's behavior and actions in the context of their cultures, can we then realize that there is often more than one pattern for human perceptions, desires, and points of view. This in turn increases tolerance and freedom of thinking and less fundamentalist manners.

Like race, culture is a human invention too. If we fail to realize this, we risk substituting culture for race and ethnocentrism for racism, and we risk having our lives be compartmentalized and constrained by the arbitrary rules of our culture instead. According to Kenan Malik, author of *“Strange Fruit: Why Both Sides are Wrong in the Race Debate”*, people should not be subjugated by their cultures, where their identities and behaviors are chained to their culture. It is time to realize that people are free agents, rational and social beings who have the power to transform themselves and their societies through rational dialogue and activities for the better and overall good. We create and shape our culture, so why do we behave as if we are subjugated by our culture?



“Strange Fruit: Why Both Sides are Wrong in the Race Debate” by Kenan Malik

In multicultural societies, Malik argued, people are not seeking to maintain cultural differences or even equality, but they are instead seeking equal political opportunities. Many multicultural societies are failing today because of cultural attachments, that people are linked to their culture groups and are treated accordingly.

“A truly plural society,” Malik explained, “would be one in which citizens have full freedom to pursue their different values or practices in private, while in the public sphere all citizens would be treated as political equals whatever the differences in their private lives.”

So, yes, Malaysians' diversity should be celebrated, but we should not have our diversity chain us into predisposed identities, behaviors, and reasoning, or have our diversity segregate us into immutable and intolerant groups, or have some of us receiving unfair opportunities.

Despite our diversity, we Malaysians are equal to one another, and until we realize and value this, "racial" and cultural prejudice will continue unabated in our country.



Some get it — but for most of us Malaysians, we are disturbingly zealous to our non-existent race (from FB group: "1 Million Likes to Say No to Racism in Malaysia").

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