

## Paradise Observed: Taxonomic Perspective in Alfred Russel Wallace's *The Malay Archipelago*

Tiffany Tsao

In 1869, the Victorian naturalist Alfred Russel Wallace—co-founder with Darwin of the evolutionary theory of natural selection—published an account of the eight years he had spent in the Malay Archipelago. For a scientific travel narrative, the account opens in a surprisingly fairy-tale like manner. Unfurling a map of the Eastern hemisphere in our mind's eye, Wallace asks us to note a group of islands between Asia and Australia, “distinct from those great masses of land, and having little connection with either of them” (*Malay Archipelago* 1). We swoop in for a closer look, and indeed, it seems a land exceptional unto itself,

teem[ing] with natural productions which are elsewhere unknown. The richest of fruits and the most precious of spices are indigenous here. It produces the giant flowers of the Rafflesia, the great green-winged Ornithoptera (princes among the butterfly tribes), the man-like Orangutan, and the gorgeous Birds of Paradise. It is inhabited by a peculiar and interesting race of mankind—the Malay, found nowhere beyond the limits of this insular tract, which has hence been named the Malay Archipelago. (1)

He appears to be describing an otherworldly paradise, disconnected not merely from its continental neighbours, but from reality itself—a virtual Garden of Eden brimming with rare fruit and spice, gigantic flowers and butterflies, strange creatures, and “peculiar” men. Indeed, only a little further on, Wallace stresses that the region is “one apart from the rest of the world with its own races of men and its own aspects of nature” and “altogether peculiar to itself” (2). Surely, such a beginning for a supposedly factual account should inspire doubt about the reliability of our narrator and the document before us.

As fantastical as these opening passages may already seem, Wallace gives his reader even more reason to doubt his credibility once he takes us further into the interior of the archipelago and introduces us to its human inhabitants. He tells us of a multi-racial “motley, ignorant, bloodthirsty, thievish population” living peacefully in the absence of government or police (336). He speaks admiringly of natives whose physical beauty surpasses that of Grecian statues, and falls asleep unprotected and “with a sense of perfect security” amidst “good-natured savages” (354, 352). Toward the account's end, he even claims to have found “some approach to... a perfect social state” among these savage communities (456). On the surface, these descriptions of local human life are hardly as unbelievable as the account's opening passages; but in light of the dominant scientific discourse about the races and the opinions Wallace had himself expressed only five years beforehand, we might consider these praises of native life to be as exaggerated as the passages that begin his account, if not even more so.

Just five years beforehand, in 1864, Wallace delivered a paper to the Anthropological Society of London, in which he declared that “the same great law of *the preservation of favoured races in the struggle for life*” was resulting in “the inevitable extinction of all those low and mentally undeveloped populations with which Europeans come in contact” (“Origin of Human Races” clxiv). The Indians of North America and Brazil, the Tasmanians, Australians, and New

Zealanders, Wallace maintained, were dying due to an “unequal” mental and physical struggle” with the European races (clxv). He concluded by anticipating a future where “the higher—the more intellectual and moral” had displaced “the lower and more degraded races,” and where the world was “inhabited by a single homogeneous race” (clxix). A few years later, in 1867, Wallace would express similar opinions in a letter to the editor of *Anthropological Review*, noting that “the more rapid mental, moral, and physical development of a few superior races” was resulting in the extermination of the rest of mankind (“Letter” 104). “The more extreme forms, the native American, the New Zealander, the Australian and the Polynesian races are all doomed,” Wallace asserted. “This is the ‘struggle for existence’ on the grandest scale; and I believe the next few centuries will see it go on at such a rate that even the great races hitherto dominant in their own areas—the Negroes, the Hindoos, and the Mongols—will begin to suffer from it” (104).

The 1864 and 1867 documents paint a sinister scenario indeed, casting interracial relations as an “unequal” and violent “struggle for existence” between the superior European races and the non-European races, whose mental, moral, and physical degradation doomed them to extinction. Representative of prevailing scientific opinions at the time, these observations stand in sharp contrast to *The Malay Archipelago*’s observations of happy and harmonious interracial relations in the archipelago, not to mention its praise of the physical and moral attributes of the “savages” there. For the humans of Wallace’s archipelago, life appears to be as Edenic as the natural environment they inhabit. The question I would like to address here is, why did Wallace emphasize the virtuous qualities of the very races he had described as lowly in almost every respect? And why did he concentrate on the interracial harmony in the region rather than the deadly interracial struggle he expressed belief in only a few years before?

One possibility is that Wallace was deliberately romanticizing his actual observations and experiences there. Nancy Stepan has noted that the popular success of *The Malay Archipelago* came from its fulfilment of contemporaneous readers’ expectations of what an account of the tropics should be, in contrast to his 1853 account of his travels in South America, *Travels on the Amazon and Rio Negro*, which was not only “unromantic,” but “unheroic,” and did not sell well (*Picturing Tropical Nature* 62). However, I would like to put forth another possibility: what if Wallace’s portrayal of the archipelago as paradise, and more specifically, his portrayal of interracial relations and “uncivilized” society as positively pre-lapsarian, resulted not from the impulse to romanticize, but rather, a stubborn fidelity to scientific accuracy?

In the latter half of his career, Wallace would base many unpopular and seemingly unscientific beliefs on what he considered to be sound scientific observation and reasoning. His conversion to Spiritualism at the end of 1866 was the first step in that direction, but *The Malay Archipelago* might be seen as the second step of the many more he would take. In this essay, I will show how Wallace arrived at his surprisingly favourable and “anti-scientific” assessments of the inhabitant races and communities of the Malay Archipelago by applying the principles of taxonomic classification to the human realm. Given that Wallace’s primary employment in the Malay Archipelago was to collect specimens of flora and fauna and classify them according to the principles of the Linnaean taxonomic classification system, his adoption of what I will term a “taxonomic perspective” in viewing the humans whom he encountered should hardly be surprising. Using these same principles of taxonomic classification, Wallace was able to achieve

a perspective on the Malay Archipelago hitherto unachieved by authoritative accounts of the region, challenging the predominant scientific views of race held at the time and unsettling even his own views of the “uncivilized” races.

At the time *The Malay Archipelago* was conceived and written, waxing eloquent on the luxuriance and beauty of the archipelago’s flora and fauna was a standard feature of scientific writing on the region. Wallace’s descriptions of a veritable paradise merely followed the precedent set by the writings of William Marsden, Thomas Stamford Raffles, and John Crawfurd—British colonial administrators in the region whose prodigious accounts formed “the real beginnings of Indonesian historiography,” and who stressed the scientific accuracy of their observations concerning a land generally brimming over “in the bountiful indulgences of nature” (Bastin 252; Marsden iii).<sup>1</sup> Far more incredible were his observations of the admirable qualities and the nearly “perfect social state” of the people he found there, for such views had been falling out of favour with the scientific community for over two centuries (*MA* 2, 456).

The Enlightenment era saw a gradual decline in European esteem for other races and cultures, as scientific innovation, technology, and adherence to democratic principles of government became the measurements of a civilization’s worth (Adas). The rise of “racial science” in the 1800s only served to bolster this sense of European superiority, attributing such civilizational accomplishments to biological, racial differences (Stepan *Idea*; Bowler). Prior to the nineteenth century, the predominant educated stance was that all the races possessed the same spiritual and intellectual abilities, even if their actual achievements in various areas (social organization, art, science, etc.) differed. However, by the mid-1800s, figures who insisted on the equal abilities of all races were in the minority, “on the defensive against the prevailing image of a racial hierarchy created by the combination of biological and cultural evolutionism” (Bowler 287). Although there were still a number of scientists who held that various “lower” races were capable of progressing further along the scale of civilization, their doing so would inevitably require much time.

Unfortunately, time was not something the “lower” races had a great deal of. Starting in the late 1700s, a great deal of literature began to be written about the inevitable extinction of the primitive races due to contact with the superior white races (Brantlinger 1). The white settlement of various parts of the globe appeared to be taking a severe toll on indigenous populations everywhere. As we have seen from Wallace’s own observations in 1864 and 1867, the application of Darwinian theory to the human realm only served to strengthen extinction discourse, and as Darwin himself would observe in *The Descent of Man* (1871), “When civilized nations come into contact with barbarians, the struggle is short...” (Brantlinger 164; Darwin 1:238).

Both the 1864 paper and the 1867 letter written by Wallace incorporated these two concepts that had become so central to scientific discussions about the races: the ranking of races along a linear scale of civilization, and the fatal inability of the lower-ranked races to compete with the vastly superior European races. And yet, the tone and views of both documents were inconsistent with some of the positive opinions Wallace had previously expressed about the savages he had encountered in the course of his Amazonian and Eastern travels, not to mention the social harmony and happiness he had witnessed among the natives there (Durant 43). A

poem he penned in 1851 while inhabiting a small village in South America sings the virtues of uncivilized life:

...They are a peaceful race; few serious crimes  
 Are known among them; they nor rob nor murder,  
 And all the complicated villainies  
 Of man called civilized are here unknown.... (*Travels on the Amazon* 260)

Once back in civilized England and writing for a European audience, Wallace was hasty to chalk the poem up to over-emotionalism and boredom: “a state of excited indignation against civilized life in general, got up to relieve the monotony of my situation, and not altogether my views when writing in London in 1853” (*Travels on the Amazon* 257). Yet, further interaction with “savages” in the Malay Archipelago also produced favourable impressions on Wallace, as evident from the letters and notes he produced during his eight years there. In a letter from Borneo, dated May 1855, Wallace wrote, “The more I see of uncivilized people, the better I think of human nature on the whole, and the essential differences between civilized and savage man seem to disappear” (qtd. in *My Life* 1:342-43). Wallace goes on in the letter to observe that the Chinese, Malays, and Dyaks among whom he currently resides behave far better than Europeans would in the same situation: “I can safely say that in any part of Europe where the same opportunities for crime and disturbance existed, things would not go so smoothly as they do here” (1:343).

Of course, Wallace’s estimation of the archipelago’s natives was not invariably high. In his observations on New Guinea and its islands, he described some natives there as “very ferocious” and “treacherous” (“On the Trade” 130). Such negative descriptions, however, are the exception rather than the rule in Wallace’s writings from the archipelago. On the whole, his varied experiences with different races in different contexts seemed to have instilled an appreciation for the admirable elements to be found in other cultures. It is this documented history of “savage” appreciation that makes the 1864 and 1867 documents all the more surprising, and it is possible that the opinions Wallace expressed concerning the imminent extinction of the “lower and more degraded” races may have resulted more from peer pressure than from his actual views on the subject. The 1860s were a time when Wallace was trying to fit in with the societies devoted to the study of man, and he tried to participate in both the Darwinian Ethnological Society of London and the anti-Darwinian Anthropological Society of London, only to discover that his views were ill-suited for both (Vetter). By expressing such negative opinions in such forceful language, Wallace may have been trying to convince himself of these views as well.

In putting together *The Malay Archipelago*, Wallace drew heavily on the writings he produced while actually in the region, and re-visiting them may have reminded Wallace of the many good qualities he found among the natives there, not to mention the many instances of interracial harmony he witnessed, which seemed to fly in the face of the struggle and mass-extinction he had more recently written on since his return to England. It seems that Wallace’s decision to provide an overall favourable and optimistic perspective on native life in *The Malay Archipelago* was also a decision to rely more on the empirical data he had obtained firsthand while in the region than on the theoretical viewpoints on race held by many of his scientific colleagues, and even by himself.

Ironically, scholars who have used Wallace as an example of racial tolerance exceptional for his time have held the reverse, attributing his high estimation of the non-white races not to a desire for scientific accuracy, but rather, to religious and sentimental inclinations—a Spiritualistic “theological interpretation of man with which his fellow biologists were, on the whole, uncomfortable” and a lingering Romantic streak that made him “a Rousseuistic Darwin” (Stepan *Idea* 77; Brantlinger 182). For Stepan and Brantlinger, the elements of cultural relativism and racial tolerance found in Wallace’s work are the residual traces of a bygone era—one in which the religious belief in the common spiritual worth of all humanity and Romantic notions of “the noble savage” prevailed, as opposed to the scientific materialism and the devaluation of savage life which predominated in the intellectual culture of Victorian England and Europe as a whole.

Wallace may very well have been influenced by theological and Romantic inclinations; but these in themselves do not fully account for the comparatively egalitarian opinions on race that he held. Or to put it another way, for Wallace, “feeling” that savages were in some respects superior, would not have necessarily made it true. I would argue instead that his positive portrayals of human life in the archipelago had just as much scientific basis as his opening portrayals of the archipelago’s natural environment as an otherworldly Eden. If Wallace’s construction of a paradisiacal natural environment relied on his utilization of scientific precedent and natural selection theory, it was his application of taxonomic classification that enabled him to see the human individuals and communities of the archipelago as uniquely paradisiacal as well. Wallace’s taxonomic perspective enabled him to break away not only from dominant perceptions of the races as different stages on a single, linear scale of sociocultural evolution, but also from the social Darwinist tendency of his day to view interracial relations as an inexorable struggle in which the white races would prevail.

What does it mean to say that Wallace had a “taxonomic perspective?” In a chapter on the rules of taxonomic classification, Darwin’s *Origin of Species* explains that the assignment of organisms to various groups depends mainly on the number of characters (i.e. characteristics or traits) they have in common: “correlated or aggregated characters have especial value in classification” (344-345). The main taxonomic groups—kingdom, phyla, classes, orders, families, genres, and species—represent the progression from the more general to the more specific, and the more characters that an organism shares with another organism, the higher the likelihood that the taxonomist will place them together in a more specific group. For example, a human, Bornean orangutan, and a Sumatran orangutan all have enough characteristics in common to warrant them belonging to the same kingdom (Animalia), phylum (Chordata), class (Mammalia), order (Primates), and family (Hominidae). But the human belongs to a different genus (*Homo*). The Bornean orangutan and Sumatran orangutan are so similar that they share the same genus (*Pongo*), but are ultimately not of the same species (respectively, they are *Pongo pygmaeus* and *Pongo abelii*).

What counts in the practice of taxonomy are individual characteristics rather than the individuals who possess those characteristics. Individuals are regarded merely as bundles of varying characteristics, any number of which may differ from or coincide with those of other organisms. Viewing the natural world according to the guidelines of classification—“taxonomic perspective”—means looking past individuals to the traits that comprise them.

The logic of taxonomy thus differs from the logic of, say, social commentary or narrative fiction. In her study of individualism and the novel, Nancy Armstrong notes that the novel instituted the idea of the individual human being as the “most basic unit” –an idea that eventually spread to all fields of British thought (3). For us who read novels, it is the characters—the “most basic unit[s]” of a book—rather than the traits or “characters” of those characters, which form the chief object of our attention. For example, let us consider a scene from George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*. One of the tasks undertaken by Eliot’s narrator is to shed light on the individual inhabitants of the town of Middlemarch: “I at least have so much to do in unravelling certain human lots, and seeing how they were woven and interwoven, that all the light I can command must be concentrated on this particular web...” (170). Consequently, our focus is on the individual organisms—organisms such as Dorothea Brooke or Edward Casaubon. In the following scene, Mr. Casaubon shows his young fiancée, Dorothea Brooke, her sister Celia, and their uncle, a group of miniature family portraits. Dorothea is looking at a portrait of Mr. Casaubon’s aunt.

“It is a peculiar face,” said Dorothea, looking closely. “Those deep grey eyes rather near together—and the delicate irregular nose with a sort of ripple in it—and all the powdered curls hanging backward. Altogether it seems to me peculiar rather than pretty. There is not even a family likeness between her and your mother.”

“No. And they were not alike in their lot.”

...Celia, who had been hanging a little in the rear, came up presently, when she saw that Mr. Casaubon was gone away, and said in her easy staccato, which always seemed to contradict the suspicion of any malicious intent—

“Do you know, Dorothea, I saw some one quite young coming up one of the walks.”

“Is that astonishing, Celia?”

“There may be a young gardener, you know—why not?” said Mr. Brooke. “I told Casaubon he should change his gardener.”

“No, not a gardener,” said Celia; “a gentleman with a sketch-book. He had light-brown curls. I only saw his back. But he was quite young.”

“The curate’s son, perhaps,” said Mr. Brooke. “Ah, there is Casaubon again, and Tucker with him.

He is going to introduce Tucker. You don’t know Tucker yet.”

“Mr. Tucker was the middle-aged curate, one of the ‘inferior clergy’, who are usually not wanting in sons...” (101-2)

The young man with curly brown hair turns out to be Will Ladislaw—Casaubon’s cousin. At this point in the novel, we are familiar with the personalities of all the characters, except for that of Ladislaw. We know that the beautiful Dorothea has a “Puritan energy,” which “glow[s] alike through faults and virtues” (31). We know that Celia is of a less Puritanical persuasion and has “more common-sense” (29). We are familiar with Mr. Brooke’s good-natured confidence in his own knowledge and reason, despite the fact that he actually possesses very little of either. And we know that Mr. Casaubon has been mentally described by one character as “a dried bookworm” (45). Guided by the narrator, as well as by our own readerly inclinations, our attention is on the qualities and nuances of each personality, and how each personality interacts with the others. In short, what matters to us are the organisms. While the narrator does mention Ladislaw’s curls, which serves to alert us to the kinship between him and the curly-haired

woman in the portrait (he turns out to be her son), what is important is not that son and mother share this physical attribute, but rather, that Casaubon and Ladislaw are cousins who dislike each other immensely.

In contrast, a taxonomist's description of this scene might read something like this:

There are a total of eight individuals (*Homo sapiens*) mentioned in this scene. Of the eight, five are bodily present, two are deceased and present in artistic representation, one is extant but not present. Four are female and four are male. Two of the females are very young and of marriageable age, and the other two (as aforementioned) are deceased. Three of the males are middle-aged or above and one male is "quite young".

With regards to discernable colour and texture of hair, two individuals possess curly hair. Of the six individuals not deceased, two have brown hair (one dark-brown hair, one light-brown hair), one has blonde hair, one has grey hair, and the hair colour of the other two is not known.

The main impression left by this description is a number of different possible groupings, organized by shared characteristics—male or female, curly or straight hair, brown or blonde, alive or deceased, present or absent—instead of the individual beings which these characteristics comprise.

Moving closer to the primary text of this article, let us leave the world of nineteenth-century narrative fiction and enter the world of nineteenth-century naturalist non-fiction. The following is excerpted from Thomas Horsfield's ornithological observations in *Zoological Researches in Java, and the Neighbouring Islands* (1824):

On *Irena puella*. "*Oriolus* resembles *Irena* in the proportional length of the bill, and in the carinated culmen or back; but it has this organ considerably arched, with a smaller terminal notch, and a shorter hook at the tip; the sides are also less convex, and the nostrils completely naked. The tarsi in *Oriolus* are longer in proportion to the size of the body, and more robust....*Turdus* has naked nostrils, and in comparison with *Irena*, a slender somewhat compressed bill, with an obtusely carinated back, blunt point, and a small terminal notch: it has likewise elevated tarsi and robust claws. (n.p.)

Here, we see that the characteristics that make up the individual birds are the primary object of concern, and whether those characteristics are shared or divergent. Horsfield pays particular attention to which characteristics coincide and which differ among the different genres of bird: the naked nostrils of *Oriolus* and *Turdus*, the carinated back of *Irena*, *Oriolus*, and *Turdus*, and so on and so forth.

Although Wallace writes far more engagingly, one can find many passages in *The Malay Archipelago* like the one following, where he describes the characteristics of a certain race and compares them to those of other races:

...portraits of a New Zealander or Otaheitan will often serve accurately to represent a Papuan or Timorese, the darker colour and more frizzly hair of the latter being the only differences. They are both tall races. They agree in their

love of art and the style of their decorations. They are energetic, demonstrative, joyous, and laughter-loving, and in all these particulars they differ widely from the Malay. (453)

From this passage, we know that the Papuans and Timorese, and the New Zealanders and Otaheitans, are extremely similar: they are tall, they love art, they have similar decorative styles, they are energetic, demonstrative, etc. We also know that they differ in some minor physical characteristics: the Papuans and Timorese are darker and have “more frizzly hair”. We know that the Malay is very different from either of these two groups. Based on such information, Wallace decisively categorizes the Papuans and Timorese together with the New Zealanders and Otaheitans as members of “one great Oceanic or Polynesian race,” while excluding the Malays, whom he considers to be members of the Asiatic race.

To sum up, a taxonomic perspective involves a focus on the characteristics that comprise organisms, rather than the organisms themselves, who are treated as variable bundles of characteristics. Although the units Wallace is dealing with are individual races rather than individual organisms, his focus is still on the characteristics, which he sees as comprising those races. That is, to him, each race could be a variable bundle of civilized, semi-civilized, and savage characteristics, rather than possessing only civilized, semi-civilized, or savage qualities.

By adopting this taxonomic perspective in his analysis of the races he encountered in the Malay Archipelago, to a certain extent, he was able to break away from arranging the races on a single, linear scale, as the previous authorities on the Malay Archipelago had done before him. In order to rank the different races on a linear scale, one had to assume two things. First, that all members of a given race possessed more or less the same physical characteristics, mental capabilities, and dispositions. Second, that all of a race’s physical, mental, and dispositional attributes corresponded to their rank on the scale of civilization. The tendency was to consider each race a more or less monolithic unit to be ranked as absolutely lower or higher than other races. We can see this tendency at work in the early British accounts of the region and their description of the local peoples as child-like in all aspects of their being. In his *History of Sumatra* (1783), Marsden comments on the infantile practices of Sumatrans: the ceremonies accompanying the taking of oaths are “whimsical and childish,” as are the titles and epithets assumed by the Sultans, which he also labels “mere childishness” (243, 338). Although Raffles certainly believed the Javanese to be capable of improvement, at the time he wrote *The History of Java* (1817), he considered their “relative rank in the scale of civilized society” as tending towards the low (1:244). In addition to their lack of book-learning, they are “remarkable” for their “almost infantine credulity,” unable to control their passions when angered, and will abandon honesty for lies and intrigue in the heat of conflict: in short, the Javanese exhibit all the qualities of children (1:245).

These authorities on the region, who perhaps by no coincidence were also the authorities of the region, relegated the natives not in part, but entire, to pre-pubescent or adolescent stages of progress; and as a result, they had difficulty considering *any* aspects of primitive native culture to be civilized. Confronted with the Sumatrans’ “extraordinary” workmanship in creating delicate gold and silver filigree, their intricate wood and ivory carving, and their “expert” cane and basket work, Marsden interprets what might otherwise seem a mark of “high civilization” as an sign of



their primitive and simplistic attraction to finery: while men “of modern sense and manners” despise superfluous ornament and splendour, such humility and simplicity “is utterly incomprehensible to an uncivilized mind” (180, 183, 206).

John Crawfurd adopts a similar tactic in order to avoid acknowledging any evidence of “civilization” among the natives. In an 1816 journal article, he attributes the remarkable ruins of the Prambanan temple in Java entirely to the more civilized Hindu immigrants from India who, upon their arrival on the island’s shores, lifted the natives out of their “barbarous state” (“The Ruins of Prambanan in Java” 159).

Another way of accounting for surprisingly civilized traits in the local population was to regard them as lingering traces of a distant past when they had been more advanced, before their subsequent regression along the scale of civilization. Raffles was of this opinion, and in an 1811 letter to Lord Minto, blamed the introduction of Islam for the degeneration of the Malay nations who beforehand had “made considerable progress in civilization” (qtd. in S. Raffles 80).

These three colonial administrators found it difficult to assess groups like the Sumatrans, the Javanese, and the Malays as anything but monolithic units, with every aspect of their respective cultures corresponding to their relative rank on the larger “scale of civilized society”. Marsden admits that “[c]onsidered as a people occupying a certain rank in the scale of civilized society, it is not easy to determine the proper situation of the inhabitants of [Sumatra]” (204). But that doesn’t prevent him from ranking the major races of mankind, then assigning the more civilized tribes of Sumatrans to the third tier, and the rest of the Sumatrans to the fourth. While Raffles concedes that the Javanese were once more civilized, he considers them so no longer: the achievement of high civilization is a matter of all or nothing at all.

In contrast, Wallace found that a “savage” race could possess civilized characteristics, and a “civilized” race could, in some of its aspects, prove very barbarous indeed. For example, he describes the Malays as having a “reckless cruelty and contempt of human life.” Yet they are also “exceedingly polite”, as dignified as “the best-bred Europeans”, and in their treatment of their children as “almost invariably kind and gentle” (*MA* 448, 450). The Papuans are similarly a mixture of “civilized” and “uncivilized” qualities. Wallace rates their intellect higher than that of the Malays, yet “deficient” in “affections and moral sentiments...In the treatment of their children they are often violent and cruel” (450). Wallace believes that the Papuans live in “utter barbarism...entirely wanting in all sense of order, comfort, or decency”, yet he finds that their woodworking skills of “tasteful and often elegant design” worthy of European schools of design (388-389). Although he finds this combination of savagery and high civilization surprising, unlike Marsden when faced with the Sumatrans’ artistry, he makes no attempt to interpret their skill as a primitive trait.

Of course, Wallace himself had many theories about how Europeans should treat the “savage” races. At one point in *The Malay Archipelago* itself, he calls the natives “children” who “must be subjected to some degree of authority and guidance...Children would never grow up into well-behaved and well-educated men, if the same absolute freedom of action that is allowed to men were allowed to them” (195). Yet, as a taxonomist, he also seemed to recognize the possibility that a race’s characteristics could be assessed independently of each other: for

example, the trappings of civilization (agriculture, industry, social organization, etc.) might not necessarily correspond to actual physical, moral, and mental capabilities. Wallace ranked the Malays as more civilized than the Papuans—the other main race occupying the Malay Archipelago—but ranked the Papuans as higher in intelligence (447-448). More controversially, though, Wallace concluded the account by noting that the savages he had encountered possessed higher standards of morality and better social organization than the British. Ending with a resounding denouncement of English civilization, and his belief “that the civilized can learn something from the savage man,” Wallace continues to speak of how among “communities of savages in South America and in the East” he has found “some approach to such a perfect social state...Each man scrupulously respects the rights of his fellow, and any infraction of those rights rarely or never takes place” (455-456). With respect to morality then, Europeans have “not at all advanced beyond the savage code of morals, and have in many cases sunk below it” (456). In the final endnote to the work, Wallace continues his attack against his country, pointing out various social ills that keep England, “as regards true social science...in a state of barbarism” (458).

In the earlier parts of the account, Wallace appears to cling theoretically to the idea that Europeans were on the whole more advanced than the other races—enough to advocate governing the natives of the archipelago as if they were children and to admire the “paternal despotism” adopted by the Dutch colonial government in ruling the archipelago (195). Yet, as the account progresses, the numerous detailed observations he makes of the natives’ highly civilized attributes counter, if not overwhelm, these other moments in Wallace’s account. It appears that empirical observation, seen through the lens of taxonomic perspective, was complicating even Wallace’s own opinions regarding European superiority.

Just as Wallace’s ability to observe admirable, “civilized” traits among the natives enabled him to challenge the conventional practice of ranking races wholly above or below each other, his ability to perceive unusual combinations of racial characteristics among the local people provided a counter-example to the model of interracial relations as a struggle for existence, which the lower races were fated to lose.

More so than other observers of the region at the time who limited their attention to groups of what they perceived to be purely indigenous peoples (e.g. the Javans, the Sumatrans, the Minahasans), Wallace takes into consideration the assimilation of foreign immigrants into the local community, in large part due to his attention to the individual traits of the races, cultures, and individuals he encountered. Waves of immigrants had been settling in the archipelago since 600 BC, first from India and China, then the Middle East, followed by the Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, and British starting in the sixteenth century. Through their sustained presence and intermarriage, these immigrant populations had assimilated into and influenced the local community. From a taxonomic perspective, the great number of characteristics being exchanged and shared among these races would make it increasingly difficult to organize the people into distinct racial groupings, much less a hierarchy—a difficulty that Wallace acknowledges in an oddly triumphant tone at certain points, boasting of how such combinations would utterly baffle any ethnologist (254, 344). Puzzled by the “delicate features of European type” found in the dark-skinned natives on the Aru Islands, Wallace finally hits upon an explanation: the earlier presence of Portuguese traders in the region: “If we add to this the occasional mixture of Malay,

Dutch, and Chinese with the indigenous Papuans, we have no reason to wonder at the curious varieties of form and feature occasionally to be met with in Aru” (344). Wallace also remarks on the racial intermingling in other locations, such as Coupang on Timor, which consists “of Malays, Chinese, and Dutch, besides the natives; so that there are many strange and complicated mixtures among the population” (142); Tonádo on Celebes (inhabited by people “as white as the Chinese, and with very pleasing semi-European features” (201); and Banda (“at least three-fourths of the population are mongrels, in various degrees of Malay, Papuan, Arab, Portuguese, and Dutch” (223).

The exchange and sharing of characteristics among the races extended beyond physical attributes to cultural practices and language. Wallace frequently finds residual traces of Portuguese language and custom in many different locations, especially among the Amboynese whose language “has still much more Portuguese than Dutch in it,” and who still retain some festivities of the Catholic Church (230-213). Elsewhere, Wallace meets “a native of Menado, but who was educated at Calcutta, and to whom Dutch, English, and Malay were equally mother-tongues” as well as a half-European government official who only speaks Malay (185, 188).

While Wallace still acknowledges the existence of distinct races in the region, dividing the bulk of the population into two main races—the Malay and the Papuan—one gets the overwhelming impression that the region is also a place where the boundaries between races are in the process of being broken down. In such a context, maintaining any clearly defined set of racial categories becomes downright impossible, as does any sort of hierarchy of civilized and savage races. With no one race greatly superior or greatly inferior to the other, and with few “pure” races present at all, the region becomes a site where the lower races are not vanquished by the higher races, but rather, where the widely varying characteristics of races from high to low are blending together in a variety of combinations, and in such a way as to produce new races over the long term.

Again, we find Wallace’s taxonomic perspective belying the supposedly reality, witnessing harmonious racial and cultural mixing instead of the mass extinction that seemed to be occurring in Australia, in South Africa, in the Americas, and everywhere else Europeans were coming into contact with primitive peoples. Rather than exterminating each other, advertently or inadvertently, the people of the archipelago, including those from Portuguese and Dutch stock, flourish in a proliferation of harmonious racial diversity and intermingling: a far cry from Wallace’s prediction in 1864 of the inevitable racial homogenization of mankind (“On the Origin” clxix).

Perhaps the most unreal and utopian instance of such thriving heterogeneity Wallace recounts to us can be found in his description of a small town called Dobbo, located in an area where Wallace noted an especial amount of Portuguese, Dutch, Chinese, and Malay blood and culture intermingled with that of the local Papuans:

I dare say they are now near five hundred people in Dobbo of various races, all met in this remote corner of the East, as they express it, “to look for their fortune;” to get money any way they can. They are most of them people who have the very worst reputation for honesty as well as every other form of morality—Chinese, Bugis, Ceramese, and half-caste Javanese, with a sprinkling of half-wild Papuans from Timor, Babber, and other islands—yet all goes on as yet very quietly. This

motley, ignorant, bloodthirsty, thievish population live here without the shadow of a government, with no police, no courts, and no lawyers; yet they do not cut each other's throats; do not plunder each other day and night; do not fall into the anarchy such a state of things might be supposed to lead to. It is very extraordinary!

...Here we may behold in its simplest form the genius of Commerce at the work of Civilization. Trade is the magic that keeps all at peace, and unites these discordant elements into a well-behaved community. (335-36)

Wallace's attribution of Dobbo's social harmony to the absence of government and to unrestricted commerce takes on new significance when we consider that such an attribution contradicts the views he expresses earlier in the account about the necessity of despotic colonial rule and the restriction of free trade with savages. As aforementioned, Wallace endorsed "paternal despotism" as the proper means of governing child-like savages. Wallace similarly objected to allowing free competition between "men of a superior race" and "men of a lower race" on the grounds that such competition would only harm the welfare and civilizational development of the latter (*MA* 73). In a world where such vast disparities existed between the races, such measures were a means of protecting, or at least slowing the extinction of, the lower races. However, like many other parts of the archipelago, Dobbo doesn't seem to be part of that world. Here, races didn't struggle to the death; they married and intermingled freely with each other. In an area exempt from "'the struggle for existence' on the grandest scale, it seemed that such protectionist efforts were no longer necessary ("Letter" 104). Again, we find Wallace's earlier opinions being transformed by the counter-evidence before him.

"Trade is the magic," claims Wallace in his description of the utopian community of Dobbo. To what extent should the inclusion of that word, "magic," make us suspicious of *The Malay Archipelago* as a whole? Counterintuitively enough, it is the "magic" of Wallace's account that signals its unstinting fidelity to detailed scientific observation. In the archipelago, Wallace observed savages who rivalled and even exceeded Europeans in civilization, and he witnessed the suspension of Darwinian struggle among humanity in a geographical zone where races and cultures intermingled freely and happily. These encounters and the conclusions he drew from them surprised him as much as anyone else. If anything, the fact that he really did consider the region "one apart from the rest of the world" indicates an open-minded willingness on Wallace's part to let his observations determine his conclusions instead of imposing his own beliefs, or prevailing scientific beliefs, on what he saw (*MA* 2).

Unfortunately, it was this willingness to let empirical observation lead him to unconventional and even "unscientific" conclusions that ended up harming Wallace's credibility as a scientist. About two years before *The Malay Archipelago*'s publication, Wallace embraced Spiritualism, claiming that his conversion was brought about "simply by the force of evidence.... I have come to believe facts which render this highly probable, if they do not actually prove it" (*On Miracles and Modern Spiritualism* 125). In 1870, Wallace would horrify his scientific colleagues by declaring his belief that "a superior intelligence has guided the development of man in a definite direction, and for a special purpose," basing his conclusion on the empirical observation that humanity possessed too many attributes that could not be accounted for by natural selection ("The Limits of Natural Selection as Applied to Man" 359).<sup>2</sup> Based on his re-analysis of the

statistical evidence used to support vaccination, he became a staunch opponent of it, penning many pamphlets, including one titled, “Vaccination a Delusion; Its Penal Enforcement a Crime.” The same capacity for scientific originality that produced the acclaimed theory of natural selection and Wallace’s Line (his theory that the western and eastern halves of the Malay Archipelago hailed from not one but two different continents—Asia and Oceania) ended up leading him into the overly unconventional, where none of his colleagues were willing to follow. *The Malay Archipelago* represents one of Wallace’s first steps into that beyond, and for all its scientific unscientific glory, bears testimony to the diverse forms which scientific practices and interpretations can take.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Although the Dutch would eventually become the dominant colonial power in the archipelago, the British remained a strong contender for political and economic control of the region until the Treaty of 1824, which officially placed most of the archipelago under Dutch rule. The westernmost parts of the archipelago, including the Malay Peninsula and the northern portion of Borneo (modern-day Malaysia, Singapore, and Brunei), were given to the British.

<sup>2</sup> Wallace actually stated his inferences regarding the direction of human evolution by a higher power several months before the 1870 essay, in an article reviewing new editions of Charles Lyell’s *Principles of Geology* and *Elements of Geology*. However, the article was anonymously penned (though Lyell and Darwin knew of Wallace’s authorship), and the 1870 essay can be taken as Wallace’s first public declaration of the conclusion at which he had arrived.

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