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Race, Racism and Some Rhinos

Posted by [JONATHANSAHA](#) on [NOVEMBER 27, 2018](#)

I have badly neglected this blog over the last few months, but it's been for a good reason: I am one of the co-authors of the Royal Historical Society's *Race, Ethnicity and Equality in UK History: A Report and Resource for Change*. The findings of the *Report* are damning. Academic staff in history departments in UK Higher Education Institutions are overwhelmingly and disproportionately White (93.7%), more so than almost every other discipline. Workplace racism in the form of either discrimination or abuse was widely reported by Black and Minority Ethnic historians studying and working in UK history departments. Along with the *Report* itself, I have also written a couple of shorter companion blog posts introducing the findings, and reflecting on the initial responses. Here are links to all three:

- Hannah Atkinson, Suzanne Bardgett, Adam Budd, Margot Finn, Christopher Kissane, Sadiya Qureshi, Jonathan Saha, John Siblon and Sujit Sivasundaram, [*Race, Ethnicity and Equality in UK History: A Report and Resource for Change*](#) (October 2018).
- [“Why is History in the UK so White?”](#), *Wonkhe* (18 October 2018).
- [“The RHS Race, Ethnicity & Equality Report: A Response to Critics”](#), *History Workshop Online* (30 October 2018).

Returning to my research after being involved in this diversity work has had its challenges, but it has pushed me to reflect on the different ways that race and racism has played out in my work.

In the *Report*, the focus is on the lived experiences of racial difference in terms of disadvantage, discrimination and under-representation. Critiquing “race” as a discursive field for ordering and understanding the world is not the purpose of the *Report*. This does not infer that racial differences are taken to be natural categories or an implicit given by the authors. The *Report* does detail some of the prejudicial assumptions and micro-aggressive misrepresentations encountered by BME staff. It is also careful to explain its use of unavoidably problematic racial categories. Nevertheless, the *Report*'s focus is a reflection of the urgent need to address and ameliorate the very real effects of racism. In other words, the *Report* is principally examining how racial differences are *socially manifest*, rather than excavating how racial differences have

been *discursively constructed*. It is about racial differences as they are embedded in social structures; in short, structural racism.

In my research, the focus has more-often-than-not been the other way around. I have mostly explored how ideas of racial difference have emerged and changed over time. While I have also studied the effects of colonial racism in British Burma, especially in terms of how (along with gender) racial differences structured access to inadequate systems of justice and medical care, the bulk of my analysis has been unpicking how race operates in imperial texts.

Deconstructing “race” as an intrinsic, organizing element in imperial ideology is often the analytically animating element of my research work.

It is with this attempt to de-naturalize racial categories that my current work on animals relates to the history of race. Colonial authors’ views of animals informed their understandings of racial differences. Deconstructing the spurious logic that sustained these links can help to expose the intellectual superficiality of racist ideologies in the past and, perhaps, contribute to de-legitimizing racist ideologies in the present. But sometimes animal history can also point to alternate ways of ordering the world.

In my [last blog post](#) I wrote about a set of hybrid “Company-style” paintings [digitized by the Victoria and Albert Museum](#), likely commissioned by a British official or soldier but made by a Burmese artist at the end of the nineteenth century. This collection began with depictions of King Thibaw’s elephants, and it then moved on to portrayals of his human subjects. Here are some of them:



D.569-1901 "Ruckhein people who live west side – Arakanese" ©Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Ideas of racial difference are no doubt at work in these images, but their operation and meaning is obscure. We don't know why these groups were selected for depiction. We can't be certain who selected them, the Burmese artist or the British patron. The order that the people have been placed in doesn't seem to have any significance; it doesn't appear to indicate status. The titles for the images provided in the opening pages of the book use ethnicity, religion, dress, and geography interchangeably as identifying markers. The images themselves deploy sartorial differences as much as somatic differences to render the people representative of their group, with the differences between genders within the group also being portrayed. But as we move to the back of the book, things get odder...



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D.576-1901 “Ulambé a snake player” ©Victoria and Albert Museum, London

..we have a snake charmer apparently called “Ulambé” (အလံဘယ်)...



ဝိဇ္ဇာ
Bilu (ogre)

(18)

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Albert Museum, London

..as well as some mythical “bilu” (ဘီလူး) supposedly from the Andaman Islands (although it is not clear whose supposition that is)...



This seemingly arbitrary collection of images might serve as a reminder of the kaleidoscopic nature of difference in culture and in nature. Within these differences “race” is just one “[floating signifier](#)“, to borrow Stuart Hall’s phrase. But as the *Report* reminds us, it is one that has had, and continues to have, profound effects in structuring the world.