

Fenneke Sysling. *Racial Science and Human Diversity in Colonial Indonesia*. Singapore: NUS Press, 2016. 360 pp.

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For centuries, the natural abundance and human diversity of the islands that comprise modern Indonesia have excited considerable European discussion and speculation. In particular, Dutch scientists and other assorted “experts” tried valiantly to describe and represent more neatly the apparently disordered and muddled human inhabitants of the archipelago—to make them visible in ways the colonial state might recognize. In an exercise of imperial authority, they depicted the different “types” of island residents, collected bodies and skulls, made plaster casts of faces, laboriously measured heads and torsos, extracted blood and other specimens, and concocted sociological and intellectual evaluations. Out of this vast mess of material, much of it still moldering away in obscure European archives and museums, they invented (or elaborated on) categories such as Malay, Papuan, Negrito, Austronesian, and even Mestizo or Indo. These European savants, often calling themselves physical anthropologists, attempted in vain to delimit and make sense of archipelagic human variability, to discern racial clarity among the confusion and commotion of the islands’ populations. Today, human biologists (some from the region) continue to try to understand the origins and the demographic structures of Indonesians, only now they can resort to purely genetic analysis, and they are more likely to perceive population patterns than rigid types, and to trace mobility and mixing than to distill some racial essence. The “detailed palimpsest of Indonesian genetic diversity,” according to recent investigators, “is a direct outcome of the region’s complex history of immigration, transitory migrants and populations that have endured *in situ* since the region’s first settlement.”¹ Efforts to work out biologically what it means to be human in Indonesia seem both inexhaustible and irresolvable.

In *Racial Science and Human Diversity in Colonial Indonesia*—which is presumably a translation of *De onmeetbare mens: schedels, ras en wetenschap in Nederlands-Indië* (2015)—Fenneke Sysling tries to recapture a major part of the historical project of rendering human collectivity biologically visible in Indonesia. Sysling concentrates on several Dutch physical anthropologists, including J. P. Kleiweg de Zwaan, who measured and plundered their way through the archipelago from the 1890s through the 1950s. She follows them assiduously as they observe “common-sense” differences, measure bodies, make plaster casts, take photographs, and procure skulls, bones, and other human remains. Thus she “draws attention to the multifarious ways in which the colonial body was conceptualised, depending on whether it was seen, felt, measured or photographed” (12). Sysling follows the rather shady, and often marginal, anthropologists to outer islands where human “pickings” seemed most abundantly

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¹ Meryanne K. Tumonggor, Tatiana M. Karafet, Brian Hallmark, J. Stephen Lansing, Herawati Sudoyo, Michael F. Hammer, and Murray P. Cox, “The Indonesian Archipelago: An Ancient Genetic Highway Linking Asia and the Pacific,” *Journal of Human Genetics* 58 (2013): 165.

revealing. Using journals and personal papers, she attempts to reconstruct encounters between scientists and “natives,” evoking the violence, intimacy, and, most frequently, sheer confusion attendant on such colonial entanglements. Of course, her archive provides just one side of the story, so we must rely on guesswork and speculation to imagine with any accuracy the responses of local inhabitants to these peculiar and demanding outsiders. While Sysling writes an intellectual history of colonial racialization, she also aspires to sketch out the context and conditions of possibility for such ideas, even though her brush is necessarily broad and indistinct.

Sysling is far more confident in exploring the training and practices of Dutch physical anthropologists. She describes their intellectual dependence on the more liberal of prewar German anthropometrists and race scientists, their meticulous attention in the field to discovering the metrics of each body, and their futile attempts to standardize these measurements and to make sense of them. Patchy Dutch medical, military, and trading networks and infrastructures determined where they worked and what they could do. Encounters in the field depended on degrees of personal duress, sympathy or distrust, and plain luck. But all this physical labor and mental stress, all the complicated and confusing negotiation, often resulted in an inscrutable mess of data. As Sysling puts it, “anthropologists’ attempts to come to clear racial demarcations were constantly thwarted” (14). Bodies proved inimical to systematic quantification. “European anthropologists struggled to work in local colonial situations, disappointments abounded, and ideas about the right measurements changed with every generation of anthropologists” (71–72). “Objectivity” was always an illusion. One is reminded of the servant, Arsene, in Samuel Beckett’s *Watt*: “What we know partakes in no small measure of the nature of what has so happily been called the unutterable or ineffable, so that any attempt to utter or eff it is doomed to fail, doomed, doomed to fail.”² And fail it did.

Sysling revealingly documents the colonial scientific endeavor to make legible, and perhaps containable, the otherwise daunting and incomprehensible human diversity of the archipelago. Her historical research thus supplements other accounts of the racialization of Indonesia, which generally have focused on anxieties about race-mixing and white racial privilege.³ As the title implies, *Racial Science and Human Diversity in Colonial Indonesia* illuminates particularly the scientific aspects of this ambitious racial project. The book shines light specifically on the scientific platform for racial viewpoints, especially in relation to supposedly pure, original races. Accordingly, this monograph should be received in concert with other studies of the contributions of biological science to racialization in the region, and even beyond.⁴

² Samuel Beckett, *Watt* (Paris: Olympia Press, 1953), 62.

³ For example, see: Jean Gelman Taylor, *The Social World of Batavia: European and Eurasian in Dutch Asia* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983); Frances Gouda, *Dutch Culture Overseas: Colonial Practice in the Netherlands Indies, 1900–1942* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1995); Julia Clancy-Smith and Frances Gouda, eds., *Domesticating the Empire: Race, Gender, and Family Life in French and Dutch Colonialism* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998); and Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).

⁴ Within Southeast Asia, for example, see: Warwick Anderson, *Colonial Pathologies: Race, Hygiene, and American Tropical Medicine in the Philippines* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006); Hilary Howes, *The Race Question in Oceania: A. B. Meyer and Otto Finsch Between Metropolitan Theory and Field Experience, 1865–1914* (Frankfurt-am-Main: Peter Lang, 2013); Sandra Khor Manikham, *Taming the Wild: Aborigines and Racial*

Sysling does refer to many of the components of this critical literature, piecemeal, but she seems, in the end, reluctant to engage seriously and expansively with comparable race science across East Asia, the Pacific, and Australasia. Therefore we are left with a scattering of colonial and national studies, awaiting a synthesis, or at least some commixture and coalition. There is a pressing need to view racial science in Southeast Asia through the lens of “thick transregionalism.” As Engsens Ho argues, this approach allows historians “to discover veins of data that speak to connections with other regions, data that were not seen or were ignored earlier simply because we did not understand the mobile and circulatory processes that generated them in the first place.”⁵ Such an approach might profitably be applied to “diasporas” of science and medicine, too.

It may be said that Sysling has effectively reconstructed a colonial history of physical anthropology and racialization in Indonesia, rather than the “autonomous history” that John Smail recommended almost sixty years ago. While Smail’s “domestic history” drew attention to the historical agency of local actors, to the continuing cultural and social vitality of the peoples of Southeast Asia, it did not demand we dodge the historical truths of imperialism and its impact. “The colonial relationship remains a theme of great importance for modern Southeast Asian history,” Smail wrote, but he scorned scholars who assumed colonialism explained the whole of the region’s history.⁶ Presumably, then, we might craft histories of colonial science and racialization that partake of autonomous history, histories that recognize creative local agency and cultural appropriation. Sysling, however, has chosen to frame her study of Dutch physical anthropology in relation to themes of science and globalization, rather than as East Indies or Indonesian intellectual and cultural history. Her interest is in how science travels, not how it is situated. She observes repeatedly that the colonial state perceived no benefit in anthropological research; therefore, racial science did not make anything happen in the Dutch East Indies. In this respect, her conclusions echo Lewis Pyenson’s claim that the “exact sciences”—meaning physics and astronomy—simply diffused out from Europe, unadulterated, becoming a sign of civilization, without practical utility.⁷ And yet, we might ask, in the case of race science at least, how did nationalist elites take up and adapt these scientific concepts and practices? If their utility for the mechanics of the colonial state was dubious, might not they have exerted some influence in decolonization?⁸ Sysling discounts the anthropological studies by Ernst Rodenwaldt of mixed-race families in the eastern archipelago, but there is ample evidence that his equivocal estimates of “hybrid”

Knowledge in Colonial Malaya (Singapore: NUS Press, 2015); and Christina Elizabeth Firpo, *The Uprooted: Race, Children, and Imperialism in French Indochina, 1890–1980* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2016).

⁵ Engsens Ho, “Afterword: Mobile Law and Thick Transregionalism,” *Law and History Review* 32 (2014): 889.

⁶ J. R. W. Smail, “On the Possibility of an Autonomous History of Southeast Asia,” *Journal of Southeast Asian History* 2 (1961): 101.

⁷ Lewis Pyenson, *Empire of Reason: Exact Sciences in Indonesia, 1840–1940* (Leiden: Brill, 1989).

⁸ See: R. E. Elson, “‘Constructing the Nation’: Ethnicity, Race, Modernity, and Citizenship in Early Indonesian Thought,” *Asian Ethnicity* 6 (2005): 145–60; and Warwick Anderson and Hans Pols, “Scientific Patriotism: Medical Science and National Self-fashioning in Southeast Asia,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 54 (2012): 93–113.

human value were bandied about in nationalist debates in Batavia and Amsterdam.⁹ *Racial Science and Human Diversity in Colonial Indonesia* tells us much we did not know before about how the Dutch colonial state gathered information concerning its subject populations—and how opportunistic scientists took advantage of colonial anxieties—but there remains far more to be said about the role of anthropological and biological expertise in the fashioning of modern Indonesian identities.

⁹ Hans Pols and Warwick Anderson, “The Mestizos of Kisar: An Insular Racial Laboratory in the Malay Archipelago,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, forthcoming.