

Samuel Thomas Soemmerring, *On the Physical Difference of the Moor from the European* (1784)

Abstract

Samuel Thomas Soemmerring (1755–1830) was one of the leading German anthropologists and anatomists of the Enlightenment. His treatise *Über die körperliche Verschiedenheit des Mohren vom Europäer* [*On the Physical Difference of the Moor from the European*] was based on his dissections of four African slaves at the anatomical theater of the Collegium Carolinum in Kassel. His observations aimed to prove his theory that Africans were inferior to Europeans and closer to the great apes.

Soemmerring's treatise reflects the late-eighteenth-century debate about the origins of mankind. He and his colleague Christoph Meiners (1747–1810) were convinced of the existence of anatomical differences between races, and they propounded the theory of polygenism, or the separate origins of mankind. In contrast, the anatomist Johann Friedrich Blumenbach (1752–1840) argued that mankind had common origins (monogenism) but then developed into different "varieties" [Latin: *varietate*] over time.

Source

We Europeans seem to have a privilege over the Negroes in almost all parts of the world, and we have had it for a very long time; it is a privilege that is not acknowledged publicly but is thus all the more widespread in its application, to the point of being almost an affront to mankind. It is known all too well how unbrotherly we treat these unfortunates, with a coldness and lack of conscience that, because of its very universality, seems to silently betray that we consider Moors less perfect and less worthy of a top position among the animal creation on our planet—in a word, less than us whites. I should not be accused of having forgotten that we often fail to treat our fellow human beings of the same color any better, for I, too, saw the very extreme extent of slavery among Russians and Poles.

Practical prejudices that are so generally widespread in everyday life usually have some basis in truth. We often act for reasons that are not recognized or spoken by the mind, but rather come from a certain feeling. A boy will always rule over girls in his way without realizing that he is ruling, and even less, that he is ruling on account of his more solid, stronger body, even if he is considered completely equal to them in his attire, food, and exercise. Experience shows us truths, but it is often only later that reflection shows the reasons behind them.

It is not the business of the dissector to determine the moral causes of such a conspicuous circumstance; but he could perhaps be expected to investigate whether in the build and composition of the body there are certain differences to be found—that is, certain, definite, noticeable, and not just random differences that would assign Moors to a lower rank on the throne of humanity.

What if it could be demonstrated anatomically that Moors are much more closely related to the ape species than we Europeans? And that it is not conceited pride that often elevates us so far above the Moors; but it is that in which some of us Europeans are inferior compared to others among us, and it is why [on the other hand] we

willingly concede superiority to others among us. I think the distinctive organs of the intellect, which separate us from the animals, are what place the Moors somewhat behind us.

During my stay in Hesse-Kassel, I dissected a number of Moor bodies at leisure; additionally, on my last day there my unforgettable benefactor, the personal physician [Ernst Gottfried] Baldinger, whose helpfulness so graciously supports so many scholars, allowed me to examine a Moor. I thought about this subject as I journeyed to [Hesse-Kassel], this seat of the Muses, which ensures new support for the sciences in Germany and gives the most desirable luster to the general enlightenment under the rule of a beloved prince. And perhaps my observations and thoughts on this subject will find some degree of resonance on the occasion of the restauration of our ancient university; for they contribute to revealing the reasons why the arts and sciences have blossomed so exquisitely and enduringly among us whites—of course only by turns, sometimes here, sometimes there.

I will mainly be comparing the heads and brains of Moors with those of Europeans; however, I will not disregard other notes I made while dissecting Moors. The shortness of time prevents me, at the moment, from illustrating these observations in greater detail with finished drawings.

Incidentally, I have preserved those parts of Moors that have served as my documentation, so that I will be able to substantiate, if necessary, the truth of my statements by presenting the objects themselves.

It is commonly believed that the main difference between the Moor and the European is the flat nose, the result of being pushed in during tenderest childhood; this, together with the frizzy woolly hair, is considered the most important difference aside from color. Correct! But for the physiologist nowhere near enough! Differences that are sufficient for him must not be random, brought about by trends; rather, and more convincingly, they must be found in the body's foundation, in its most solid parts, in the skeleton itself.

Furthermore, even if there is no denying that Moors, in accordance with their notions of beauty, push in the nose of infants (push, turn, press, and ruin the fragile heads of newborns, as do even midwives working among us), it still does not necessarily follow that this violent act is responsible for the flat nose in all cases. I examined a Moor child only a few months old, and found the maxillary to be relatively prominent, as in the case of his grown black parents, and therefore the lower part of the nose was flatter and broader, giving him wider nostrils. But nowhere was there any trace of force having been applied to the nose; instead, its shape naturally deviated from the shape of white children's noses. Besides, so much could not have changed in so short a time. Many years ago, Mr. [Petrus] Camper, my great teacher and most gracious friend, already studied, with the same intent, the changes in Moors' heads; those changes were supposedly caused by ostensible inward pressure on the nose. Although he likewise found no particular effect on the nose bones, comparison with the skulls of other human species led him to other important principles, and thus also to the truth, that the nose, when all other circumstances remain equal, must be flat, broad, stubby, and less prominent when the maxillary protrudes.

The facial lines he devised confirm this observation beyond a shadow of a doubt, except that it is very unfortunate that his relevant illustrations have not yet become further known to the world, except from brief reports.

If the connection between the head and the trunk in a Moor versus a European are compared, a marked difference is apparent, as Professor [Georg Christoph] Lichtenberg astutely pointed out in a conversation with me; in the Moor, the transition from the back of the head to the back is flatter, shallower than in us [Europeans], concave, and straight as if the skull holding the brain descends somewhat towards the back. This is the case to a much greater degree in apes.^[1]

[...]

NOTES

[1] When I speak of “apes,” without being more specific, I usually mean the orangutan or the common monkey. See [Macaca] Sylvanus [Barbary macaque or ape].

Source: Samuel Thomas Soemmerring, *Über die körperliche Verschiedenheit des Mohren vom Europäer*. Mainz, 1784, pp. 3–8. Available online at: <http://resolver.sub.uni-goettingen.de/purl?PPN50562964X>

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