

SYMPOSIUM What Is Real History As Science?

Wilhelm von Humboldt's Study of The Kawi Language: The Proof of the Existence Of the Malayan-Polynesian Language Culture



by Muriel Mirak Weissbach

Tablettes conservées du Doyen nuyari, ... avec celle ... inscrites dans les langues de Java, et d'Amboine, Sum.

Kawi	JAVANA					SUNDA				MALAY	
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1	ᮊ	ᮃ	ᮄ	ᮅ	ᮆ	ᮇ	ᮈ	ᮉ	ᮊ	ᮋ	ᮌ
2	ᮍ	ᮎ	ᮏ	ᮐ	ᮑ	ᮒ	ᮓ	ᮔ	ᮕ	ᮖ	ᮗ
3	ᮘ	ᮙ	ᮚ	ᮛ	ᮜ	ᮝ	ᮞ	ᮟ	ᮠ	ᮡ	ᮢ
4	ᮣ	ᮤ	ᮥ	ᮦ	ᮧ	ᮨ	ᮩ	᮪	᮫	ᮬ	ᮭ
5	ᮮ	ᮯ	᮰	᮱	᮲	᮳	᮴	᮵	᮶	᮷	᮸
6	᮹	ᮺ	ᮻ	ᮼ	ᮽ	ᮾ	ᮿ	ᯀ	ᯁ	ᯂ	ᯃ
7	ᯄ	ᯅ	ᯆ	ᯇ	ᯈ	ᯉ	ᯊ	ᯋ	ᯌ	ᯍ	ᯎ
8	ᯏ	ᯐ	ᯑ	ᯒ	ᯓ	ᯔ	ᯕ	ᯖ	ᯗ	ᯘ	ᯙ
9	ᯚ	ᯛ	ᯜ	ᯝ	ᯞ	ᯟ	ᯠ	ᯡ	ᯢ	ᯣ	ᯤ
10	ᯥ	᯦	ᯧ	ᯨ	ᯩ	ᯪ	ᯫ	ᯬ	ᯭ	ᯮ	ᯯ
11	ᯰ	ᯱ	᯲	᯳	᯴	᯵	᯶	᯷	᯸	᯹	᯺
12	᯻	᯼	᯽	᯾	᯿	᯽	᯾	᯿	᯽	᯾	᯿

If Wilhelm von Humboldt were alive today, he would be delighted with the discovery of Maui's inscriptions, and would throw himself into studying it, with every fibre of his being. In a certain sense, the deciphering of these inscriptions, which shows that the Maori language was a common language or part of a language group in Polynesia, itself confirms Humboldt's own findings. For it was Wilhelm von Humboldt who was the first to rigorously examine the languages of this part of the world, and to establish scientifically that all the languages of the region, from Madagascar to east of Pitcairn Island, were part of one language culture.

The last and greatest work by Humboldt, entitled *Über die Kawi-Sprache (On the Kawi Language)*, deals with this. The work, published posthumously in 1836-39, is prefaced by a lengthy introduction, entitled "Über die Verschiedenheit des menschlichen Sprachbaues und ihren Einfluss auf die geistige Entwicklung des menschengeschlechts," (in English, "On Language: The Diversity of Human

How is it possible to reconcile the vast multiplicity in the world and throughout history, of such diverse cultures as the Chinese and the Greek, showing them to be manifestations of the same human spirit?

Wilhelm von Humboldt. Credit: Corbis-Bettmann

Language-Structure and Its Influence on the Mental Development of Mankind”). This introduction, perhaps his greatest work on the general theory of language, is well-known, having gone through numerous editions, and translations into other languages. But, this is only the introduction! The three volumes of the work that actually apply his theory to the particular case of the Kawi language, have remained a matter for specialists, available only in the reading rooms of libraries. (In one English translation of “On Language,” it is even stated that the planned three volumes never appeared—an outright lie!)

Humboldt’s work opens with the following words:

If we consider their dwelling-place, their mode of government, their history, and above all their language, the peoples of *Malayan stock* stand in a stranger connection with peoples of different culture than perhaps any other people on earth. They inhabit merely islands and archipelagoes, which are spread so far and wide, however, as to furnish irrefutable testimony of their early skills as navigators. . . . If we take together the members of these ethnic groups who deserve to be called Malayan in the narrower sense . . . we find these people, to name only points where the linguist encounters adequately studied material, on the Philippines, and there in the most richly developed and individual state of language, on Java, Sumatra, Malacca, and Madagascar. But a large number of incontestable verbal affinities, and even the names of a significant number of islands, give evidence that the isles lying close to these points have the same population too, and that the *more strictly Malayan speech-community* extends over that whole area of the South Asiatic Ocean which runs southwards from the Philippines down to the western coasts of New Guinea, and then west about the island chains adjoining the eastern tip of Java, into the waters of Java and Sumatra, up to the strait of Malacca.

Humboldt goes on, to assert that

East of the narrower Malayan community here delineated, from New Zealand to Easter Island, from there northwards to the Sandwich Islands, and again west to the Philippines, there dwells an island population betraying the most unmistakable marks of ancient blood-relationship with the Malayan races. The languages, of which we also have an exact grammatical knowledge of those spoken in New Zealand, Tahiti, the Sandwich Islands, and Tonga, prove the same thing, by a large number of similar words and essential agreements in organic structure.

He also writes that

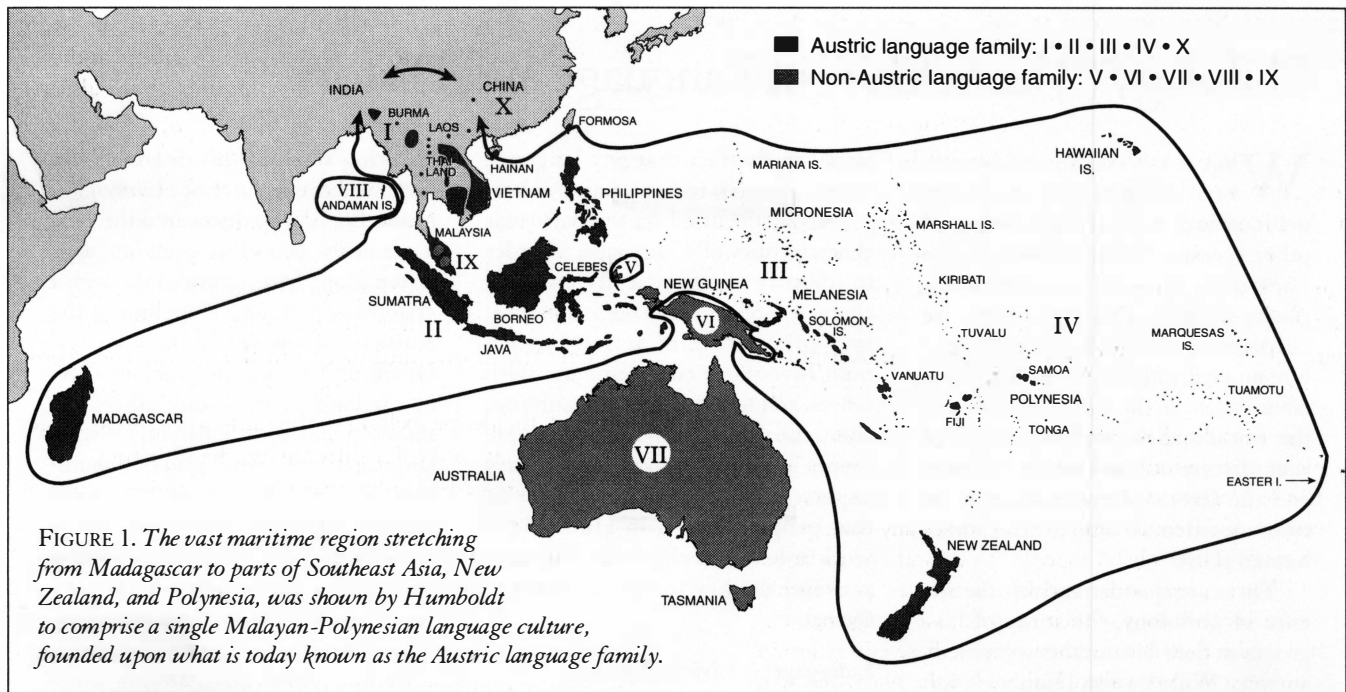
In many places we find among them fragments of a sacred language now unintelligible to themselves, and the custom, on certain occasions, of ceremoniously reviving antiquated expressions, [which] is evidence, not only of the wealth, age, and depth of the language, but also of attention to the changing designation of objects over time.

Humboldt believed that the people of this region “seem never to have attained to the possession of writing, and thus forgo all the cultivation dependent on this, although they are not lacking in pregnant sagas, penetrating eloquence, and poetry in markedly different styles.” Such literary works must therefore have been recorded in writing at a later time. Humboldt saw these languages not as a degeneration, but as representing the original state of the Malayan group. What he accomplished was to subject the main languages known to comparative analysis, to establish their membership in one language family. As for the ethnic stock, Humboldt specifies that in both the broad areas identified, the people belong to the same stock. “If we enter more accurately into color differences,” he says, they constitute “the more or less light-brown among whites in general.” In addition to this stock, he mentions a group similar to Black Africans, particularly in New Guinea, New Britain, New Ireland, and New Hebrides. Given that the languages of these people had not been recorded, Humboldt could not include them in his study—except for the special case of Madagascar, which will be treated later.

The manner he chose to go about this enormous task, was not to take the vocabularies of all the languages involved, and compare them, as if running them through a computer. Rather, Humboldt seized upon what was an egregious characteristic within the languages, a singularity, which was the very strong Indian influence. A glance at the map [SEE Figure 1] explains why it would be obvious for people from India to travel to the islands and populate them. Yet, as Humboldt saw, this is not uniform throughout the region. The overwhelming Indian influence, not only in language, but also in religion, literature, and customs, he found to have affected the Malayan circle “in the narrower sense,” that is, the Indian archipelago *per se*. It is here that an alphabetic script was found, and of the Indian type.

The questions posed by the extraordinary Indian influence, for Humboldt, were two: He asked himself “whether . . . the whole civilization of the archipelago is entirely of Indian origin? And whether, also, from a period preceding all literature and the latest and most refined development of speech, there have existed connections between Sanskrit and the Malayan languages in the widest sense, that can still be demonstrated in the common elements of speech?” Humboldt’s tendency was to answer the first question negatively, and to assume that there had been “a true and indigenous civilization among the brown race of the archipelago.” He saw no reason to think that “the Malaysians should be denied a social civilization of their own creation.”

As to the second question, Humboldt tended to answer in the affirmative, that the Indian-Malayan contact had been ancient and continuing:



Without yet mentioning Tagalic, which incorporates a fair number of Sanskrit words for quite different classes of objects, we also find in the language of Madagascar and in that of the South Sea Islands, right down to the pronoun, sounds and words belonging directly to Sanskrit; and even the stages of sound-change, which can be viewed as a comparative index of the antiquity of mingling, are themselves different in such languages from the narrower Malayan circle, in which, as in Javanese, there is also visible an influence from Indian language and literature that was exerted at a much later date. Now how we are to explain this . . . remains, of course, extremely doubtful. . . [H]ere it is enough for me to have drawn attention to an influence of Sanskrit upon the languages of the Malayan stock, which differs essentially from that of the mental cultivation and literature transplanted to them, and seems to belong to a much earlier period and to different relationships among the peoples concerned.

To conduct his research, therefore, Humboldt focussed on that area of greatest Indian influence, which was manifest in the “flowering of the Kawi language, as the most intimate intertwining of Indian and indigenous culture on the island that possessed the earliest and most numerous Indian settlements,” which was the island of Java. Humboldt went on:

Here I shall always be looking primarily to the indigenous element in this linguistic union, but will take an extended view of it in its entire kinship, and will pursue its development up to the point where I believe I find its character most fully and purely evolved in the Tagalic tongue. In the third book [he concluded], I shall spread myself over the whole archipelago, return to the problems just indicated,

and so try to see whether this way, together with that discussed hitherto, may lead to a more correct judgment of the relations among peoples and languages throughout the entire mass of islands.

His method, therefore, was to penetrate to the innermost the Kawi language, which represented the highest expression of the Indian-Sanskrit language cultural influence, but from the standpoint of the “indigenous element,” which Humboldt recognized must be the basis of the identity of the language group as a whole. What he asked himself was, essentially, what is the underlying, indigenous language beneath the Sanskrit influence? What relationship does it bear to the languages in the strictly Malayan group, and, then, what is their relationship to all the languages of the vast island world?

From its very name, the Kawi language betrays its deep debt to Sanskrit (Skr.). Derived from the root *ku*, which means “to sound,” or “resound,” in Sanskrit it means “poet,” and, in derived forms, a “wise, educated man.” The generic name given to the syllabic meter in Kawi poetry, is *sekar kawi*, which means “flowers of the language,” and is derived from the Skr. *sekharā*, “garland.” *Sekar*, “flower,” is the usual expression for poetry. And in the “Brata Yuddha,” the poem which Humboldt used as the basis for his study of the Kawi language, the related word *kawindhra* means “a good singer.” The “Brata Yuddha” itself, which means “war [from Skr. *Yudha*] of the ancestors of Bharata,” is inspired by the great Indian epic poem *Mahabharata* (which contains the “Bhagavad Gita”). The names of the main characters are the same, and it recounts the process of the war in seven

Philology: The Science of Language and History

What manifestation of human activity best expresses the uniqueness of man, as distinct from all other species? What activity, at the same time, demonstrates the multiplicity of human society, of diverse cultures developed by different human civilizations? How is it possible to reconcile the vast multiplicity in the world and throughout history, of such diverse cultures as the Chinese and the Greek, showing them to be two manifestations of the same human spirit?

These are questions which the science of philology, the study of languages in their historical development, answers. Wilhelm von Humboldt was the founder of this modern science, and the Nineteenth-century German school of philology was the greatest the world has ever known. Other great names associated with Humboldt and this school include Franz Bopp, Rasmus Rask, and Jacob Grimm.

Universal Principles of Language

Wilhelm von Humboldt, who was a close collaborator of Germany's national poet, Friedrich Schiller, approached the study of language from the standpoint of the humanist spirit which pervaded all his work: seeing in man the highest product of creation, Humboldt identified in language the most universal expression of the capacities of the human mind. To understand how man conceptualizes the universe, and how man organizes social relations, one must, Humboldt realized, examine the way in which man develops language. Through his study of numerous languages—well over fifty, ranging from Basque, to the Native American languages, from Sanskrit to Chinese—Humboldt succeeded in demonstrating the universal principles of language in general.

While emphasizing the universal principles, whose existence is mani-

fested in the fact that any language can be translated into any other, Humboldt focussed on the particular characteristics of a language, in order to identify its specifically national character. Since language is the most immediate form of activity which man invents to communicate with others, and to investigate the universe, then the form in which a people shapes its language most immediately expresses the national character of that people. Hence, in Humboldt's work it becomes clear that language provides the key to the character of the nation.

Language: A Living Organism

In Humboldt's view, language was not a fixed system, as some modern linguists might think. Language is a living organism, a form of energy, which changes, develops, and also in some cases, degenerates, in the course of a people's evolution. The achievements of a language, such as Greek in the Classical period, denote the more general progress of that people and culture; thus, for Humboldt, the teaching of Classical Greek and the study of Greek culture, must be the means through which to develop the mind. It was Humboldt's extraordinary education program, which he elaborated and introduced in Prussia, based largely on the study of Classical languages, to shape the character of the student, which laid the basis for the flowering of science and culture in Germany, in Europe, and in the United States, in the Nineteenth century.

In looking at the multiplicity of language, Humboldt used a comparative approach, to see how different peoples succeeded in solving the same task, of expressing concepts. At the same time, the comparative approach made it possible to establish scientifically the relationship among different languages and therefore, historically, among different peoples. The ground-

breaking work in this direction was done by a collaborator of Humboldt's, Franz Bopp, who discovered the existence of the Indo-European language group. Bopp had compared the verbal systems of languages, including the Sanskrit of ancient India, Classical Greek and Latin, and various Germanic languages, among others. By showing that such apparently distant languages had verbal systems, conjugations, which obeyed the same laws—and hence, shared the same “geometrical” structure—Bopp showed that the languages must have been related also in their historical development.

Other philologists, among them Jacob Grimm, had studied the way in which, through time, certain sound differences in words of distant languages, which have the same meaning, can come about. By comparing groups of roots in different languages, which are used to designate the same actions or things, one can discover the laws of change in sound. For example, if in Sanskrit the word for “father” is “pitṛ,” and the word for “father” in Germanic, is “Vater” (modern English “father”), and if such examples can be shown to exist consistently, then it appears that the “p” sound in Sanskrit corresponds to the “f” sound (spelled *v*) in Germanic, and so forth.

The study of philology as conducted by Humboldt, was not an academic exercise, but a passionate search to discover the laws governing the creative processes of the human mind. For Humboldt, there was nothing more joyful than to discover and learn a new language. In 1803, he wrote, “The internal, mysterious, wonderful coherence of all languages, but above all the extreme pleasure of entering with each new language into a new mode of thinking and feeling, exerts an infinite attraction on me.”

—MMW

battles. It is just one example of the way in which Kawi culture assimilated the Indian religious culture, which is also evident in its great architecture.

The Indian influence in the Kawi language and culture is also manifest in the characteristic method of counting years in dates, by using words for numbers, a method known as “Chandhra Sangkala.” (*Chandra sangkala* is from Sanskrit, with the second term meaning “collection, quantity, addition,” from the root *kal*, “to count,” and the first element meaning, “method”; thus, “counting according to the method.”) For example, to signify the date 1021, the Sanskrit expression would be *sasipakshakhaikē*. The syllables are read left to right, but they refer to the date read from right to left. Thus, 1 is expressed by *sasin*, which means “moon.” There is only one moon, therefore the correspondence. *Paksha* means wings, and stands for 2, for obvious reasons. The other syllables, *kha* and *eka*, are number words for 0 and 1, respectively.

When this usage was taken over in the Kawi language, it was in a certain sense further developed, such that not only syllables strung together stood for the date, but the syllables constituted a phrase, which had to do with what the date recorded. For example, there is the story of a Muslim king who had travelled to Java, in hopes of converting the King of Majapahit, to whom he had promised his daughter, to Islam. The enterprise ran into difficulties, many of the entourage fell ill and died, and his daughter herself became very sick. The king prayed to the Almighty, that, if the venture were destined to succeed, his daughter should be saved, and if not, not. His daughter died in the year 1313, and the date was recorded as follows:

Kaya wulan putri iku.
3 1 3 1

Kaya means “fire,” which, as in Sanskrit (*agni*) stands for 3. *Wulan* is the Javanese word for “moon,” again for 1. *Putri* is Sanskrit for “daughter of the prince,” and stands for 3, for reasons which even Humboldt could not fathom. Finally *iku* or *hiku*, is the Javanese pronoun for a distant person (“she, over there”), and corresponds to 1. Thus the phrase would be translated “Like unto the moon was that princess,” in Humboldt’s rendition. The numbers would be 3131, read from right to left, the date 1313.

Another, more obvious example, denotes the legendary date 1400, when the state of Majapahit was conquered by Muslims. This date is rendered as follows:

Sirna ilang kirti-ning bumi.
0 0 4 1

Sirna is the Sanskrit passive particle from the verb *sri*, *sirna*, meaning “destroyed,” and it therefore corresponds to nothing, 0. *Ilang* or *hilang* is Javanese for the same

thing, “lost,” and also equals 0. *Kirti-ning* means “well-water” and in Sanskrit means also “fame.” The original root of the word is *kri*, which means “flow, bubble,” like water or fame. The Sanskrit and Javanese words for “work,” something that has been created, also apply, from the root *kri* (whence our verb “create”). In Java, the word *karte*, was used to denote a state with an orderly administration, that is, where a state of quiet and peace reigns. It is used to designate 4, from its meaning as “water,” since there are four oceans in the world. Finally, *bumi*, corresponding to Skr. *bhumi*, means “earth,” or “world” (in extended sense, “land”), of which there is only one. Thus the phrase would read, “Lost and gone is the work [pride] of the land,” certainly an appropriate way of characterizing the event.

The penetration of Sanskrit into Javanese—what must have been the language of the people of Java when the Indian settlers arrived—goes far deeper, however. As Humboldt shows through an incredibly thorough examination of vocabulary, word-formation, and grammar, the influence is determining. The following examples make the point.

In the process of the creation of Kawi, Sanskrit words entered the Javanese language, almost always in the form of a substantive, specifically in the nominative case singular, which were then transformed, according to the Javanese laws of word-formation, into verbs, adjectives, etc. Sanskrit verbs or roots never enter the language as such, but only in a nominative form. Thus, for example, Skr. *bhukti* (which refers to the act of eating) becomes *b-in-ukti*, or, with consonant shifts, *ma-mukti*; *dwija* (“bird”) becomes *dwija*, or *dhwijangga*, through duplication, a process often used for poetical reasons, to lengthen the syllables. Thus also *rana* (“battle”), which becomes *rana*, or *ranangga*, or *rananggana*, etc. The plural in Kawi is formed often by repetition, thus Skr. *wira*, for “warrior,” becomes *wira wira*, “warriors.”

As for the verb, it is formed from the Sanskrit nominative, in various ways. For instance, the syllable *um* is inserted right before the initial consonant, or after the initial vowel: thus, the noun *tiba*, meaning “fall,” becomes a verb, “to fall,” as *tumiba*; *lampah*, “trip,” becomes a verb, “to walk,” as *lumampah*. Or, the verb can be distinguished from the noun, through a different initial consonant: thus, *neda* is “to eat,” whereas *teda* is “food”; *nulis*, “to write,” and *tulis*, “writing”; *mitik*, “to prove,” and *titik*, “proof.”

As a result of the emphasis on the noun or substantive form, verbal expressions are often in the passive voice. For instance, one would say literally, “my seeing was the star,” to indicate, “I saw the star.” The passive is formed through the prefix *ka-*. Since, in Kawi, there is no inflection to the verb, as opposed to Sanskrit’s highly developed

inflectional system, the meaning of a sentence must be grasped through word order and context. However, Kawi does have tense distinction, with a past, present, and future, as well as some differentiation of moods, especially the imperative and subjunctive. The following gives an idea of how difficult it may be to figure out how a sentence should be read.

Thus prayer his to three-world be spoken victory in battle

This actually means:

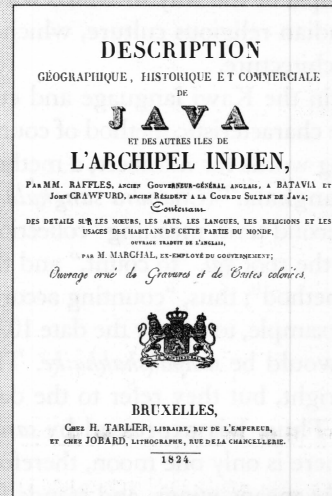
Thus was his prayer spoken to the three worlds, for victory in the battle.

If there is difficulty in grasping the sense, owing to the row of words without grammatical indicators, there is, on the other hand, as Humboldt emphasizes, a “noble brevity and a stronger impact of the poetical images which follow one another immediately.”

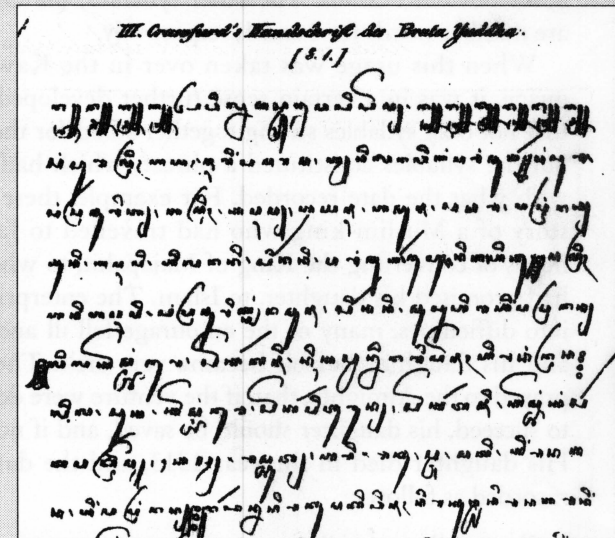
Wilhelm von Humboldt concludes from his study of Kawi, that it was “an older form of the Javanese national language, which however, in the elaboration of scientific knowledge transplanted there from India, assimilated an indeterminable number of pure Sanskrit words, and thereby, as well as owing to the peculiarity of its exclusively poetical diction, became a closed form of speech, deviating from the usual form of speech.” It was, however, the language of the educated population, which gradually fell out of use, following the emigration of the last Brahmins out of Majapahit to Bali, in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth centuries.

As to the time frame, when the Indian influence was first introduced to Java, Humboldt had no clear records. The annals of Java begin with the era of Ari Saka, who was reputed to have brought the era from India, in the year A.D. 74 or 78. This coincides with the period of the Brahmin figure named Tritresta, who was said to have built the first state on Java, after it had been taken under the rule of Vishnu. The massive impact of Sanskrit on the language, greater than that on any other language in the Malayan group, led Humboldt to conclude that the Indian colonists who settled there must have used Sanskrit as their living, spoken language, which places the settlement far back in time.

The dating of the “Brata Yuddha” is also controversial; one version puts it at A.D. 706, another, at A.D. 1079. The alphabet in use for Kawi must have been introduced by the Indians, and taken up by other languages as well, like the Biscaya and Tagalic. This alphabet, Humboldt takes to be the same as modern Javanese, but written in different signs, with numerous sounds in common with Sanskrit. However, it is not simply the Sanskrit alphabet, because it has many fewer consonants, lacking the entire array of aspirated consonants, for example.



Humboldt consulted and criticized previous studies by British colonial agents Thomas Ruffles and John Crawfurd. Left: 1824 French-language edition of Ruffles and Crawfurd. Below: Transcription of the Kawi epic, the “Brata Yuddha.” Right: Phonetic comparison of Roman, Devanagari (Sanskrit), Kawi, and other Malayan alphabets (top), and various Javanese scripts (bottom).



Whether or not a pre-Kawi alphabet for Javanese existed was not known to Humboldt, but he did not exclude it.

The question to be raised at this point is, what is Javanese? If one puts to one side all the Sanskrit elements of Kawi, and examines the remainder of the language, which Humboldt called the non-Sanskrit Kawi, would it be the same as modern Javanese? To answer this question, and the related one—what is the entire Malayan language group, and what are its relations to the other great language groups of the world?—Humboldt broadened his study, to cover all those languages which were known from the region.

He was the first to do this, and it was not only a monumental task philologically: it also constituted a direct challenge to the language studies that had been conducted up to that point. Significantly, prior to Humboldt’s efforts, the only studies that existed on the Kawi lan-

Table des consonnes du Dava, comparées avec celles usitées dans les langues de Java, d'Avet et de Siam.

Noms	JAVA					AVA				SIAM		
	h	ch	r	k	d	h	ch	r	k	d	h	ch
h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h
ch	ch	ch	ch	ch	ch	ch	ch	ch	ch	ch	ch	ch
r	r	r	r	r	r	r	r	r	r	r	r	r
k	k	k	k	k	k	k	k	k	k	k	k	k
d	d	d	d	d	d	d	d	d	d	d	d	d
s	s	s	s	s	s	s	s	s	s	s	s	s
w	w	w	w	w	w	w	w	w	w	w	w	w
l	l	l	l	l	l	l	l	l	l	l	l	l
p	p	p	p	p	p	p	p	p	p	p	p	p
d	d	d	d	d	d	d	d	d	d	d	d	d
j	j	j	j	j	j	j	j	j	j	j	j	j
y	y	y	y	y	y	y	y	y	y	y	y	y
n	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	n
m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m
g	g	g	g	g	g	g	g	g	g	g	g	g
b	b	b	b	b	b	b	b	b	b	b	b	b
t	t	t	t	t	t	t	t	t	t	t	t	t
ng	ng	ng	ng	ng	ng	ng	ng	ng	ng	ng	ng	ng

Anciennes formes de l'alphabet javanais.

h	ch	r	k	d	s	w	l	p	d	j	y	n	m	g	b	t	ng		
h	ch	r	k	d	s	w	l	p	d	j	y	n	m	g	g	b	t	ng	
h	ch	r	k	d	s	w	l	p	p	d	j	g	n	m	g	g	b	t	ng
h	ch	r	k	d	s	w	l	p	d	j	j	y	n	m	g	b	t	ng	

available, contained only 139 of the original 719 four-line stanzas. Humboldt, eager to have a better version, finally got one from Crawfurd, who had generously added 19 stanzas. Raffles, it appears, had decided to omit anything which he found objectionable, which was clearly a lot.

But, in addition to such obvious manipulations, both Raffles and Crawfurd, in Humboldt's view, had committed ghastly errors of method. Most importantly, they had neglected to consider languages from the standpoint of the entire language area in question, and limited themselves to very small areas. Crawfurd, in his history, considered only the area from Sumatra to New Guinea, and from 11° to 19° latitude, as the area of Indian influence. Most important, Humboldt writes, is the fact that Crawfurd thus ignores the basic demographic facts of the region: that, in the small area he had carved out for study, there lived side by side black-skinned people with curly hair and whites with

guage, were those of British and Dutch colonial agents. The first, Sir Thomas Stamford Bingley Raffles (1721-1826), was an English East India administrator and Lieutenant governor of Java from 1811-1815. He is credited with having secured Singapore for the East India Company in 1819. John Crawfurd was resident at the court of the Sultan on Java, and the author of a *History of the Indian Archipelago* (1820). It was Raffles's 1817 *History of Java*, and Crawfurd's work, which provided Humboldt basic information on Java, as well as texts of the "Brata Yudha" poem.

Needless to say, Raffles's approach was not disinterested. His leading aim appears to have been to falsify the record, especially to deny the possible existence of an independent Javanese civilization and language. He considered the Kawi language to be an artificial idiom used by a priest caste, essentially a dead language used only ritually. The version of the "Brata Yuddha" which he made

straight hair, whereas the blacks no longer lived in Java and Sumatra. Furthermore, on Madagascar, there lived at the time of these studies blacks of African extraction, as well as Malaysians and Arabs together, and they all spoke the exact same language. As Humboldt stressed, this extraordinary fact meant that the common language they shared must go very far back in antiquity, since it had effectively replaced any other languages which would have been specific to the black African population. On these grounds alone, in Humboldt's view, it is absolutely outrageous to leave Madagascar out of the area of study.

Furthermore, he complains, the "English scholars" utterly ignore the Tagalic language, which lies in the area. (Another Briton, William Marsden, had acknowledged the importance of Tagalic, but had, said Humboldt, nonetheless excluded it from his word analysis in the *Archaeologia Britannica*.) For Humboldt, on the

other hand, the Tagalic language was of absolutely crucial importance, because (1) it shows a very broad agreement with Malaysian; (2) of all the languages in the group, it has the richest grammatical development, such that the grammars of the others can be understood only from this standpoint—just as Greek can be best understood from the standpoint of Sanskrit; (3) neither Arabic nor Indian religion or literature have altered Tagalic's original color; and (4) there is no other language of the group which has so many research aids, like dictionaries and grammars, largely thanks to the work of Spanish missionaries.

Perhaps the English scholars did not want to discover the truth about the languages and the peoples of the great ocean civilization; Humboldt, however, did. In fact, he even rejected the name Polynesian to designate this category, on the grounds that it was geographical and limited, and preferred to it the term Malaysian, meaning not only the language culture, but the people.

The linguistic material that Humboldt considered was vast. He examined vocabulary, which showed “not only that these peoples designed many concepts with the same terms, but that they also took the same route to shaping the language, creating words with the same sounds according to the same laws, and that they possess there-

fore concrete grammatical forms, borrowed from one another.” But he went beyond vocabulary, since “[o]ne cannot consider languages as an aggregate of words. Each is a system, whereby sound is linked to thought. The business of the language researcher is to find the key to this system.”

In this spirit, Humboldt assembled a list of over one hundred words, from Malaysian (proper, i.e. as spoken in Malacca), Bugi, Madecassian (or Malagasy), Tagalic, and the Polynesian languages: Tonga, New Zealand, Tahiti, and Hawaiian. The comparative tables, completed by his student Buschmann, show striking similarities, as the few examples in Table I demonstrate. (The large number of examples for Madecassian derive from the fact that several sources were consulted, including dictionaries and the translation of the Holy Scriptures).

But, not only are the words similar. Grammatically, the pronoun for the first person singular, I, is also the same: New Zealand *ahau*, Mad. *ahē, ahy*; the /h/ sound is transformed in the other languages (except Tahiti) into its corresponding hard sound, in *gua, co, aco, ku, aku*, very much in the same way that Latin *ego* is constructed from Skr. *aham*, or in the way that English “I,” differs from German “ich” or “ik.” Also, in the third person singular, there is an extraordinary similarity, especially in the possessive form,

TABLE 1. Comparison of vocabulary words within the Malayan-Polynesian language family.

	Mal.	Jav.	Bugi	Mad.	Tag.	Tonga	N.Z.	Tah.	Haw.
to die	mati	mati pati (death)	mate	matte fatte matē fate (death) mattē	matay patay (death)	mate	māte	mate	make
fruit	būah	woh	buwa	voa voha voua	bongaa auoy	fooa		hodu	hua
year	tāun	tahun	taung	taoune taun tau taonne	taon	tow			makahiki
fire	āpi	hapi genni gni Kr. latu K. hapuyi, bahning	api	afou af affe motté langourou	apuy	afi	ahi ai	auahi	ahi

(Kr. designates the elevated language, and K. stands for Kawi.)

“his”: Mad. *ny mpiana’ny*, which means “his young ones”; Mal. *kapala-nia*, meaning “his head”; Tag. *ang yna-niya*, meaning “his mother”; Tah. *to’na ahu*, “his dress”; N.Z. *tônatoqi*, “his axe”; Tong. *ana falle*, “his house.”

The relationship among these languages is also transparent in number; and so on and so forth, for the process of word-formation, syntax, and other aspects of the language.

In the final part of his monumental study, Humboldt moved yet farther eastward, to examine the languages of the South Sea Islands [SEE map, Figure 1] And, here again, by comparing the basic vocabulary, the laws of grammar and syntax, he was able to demonstrate the nature and degree of relationship among them, as well as between the eastern and western branches of the Malayan group.

The method Humboldt applied is truly wonderful, because he focussed on identifying the crucial example to prove the general law. In the case of the verbal particles, Humboldt himself says that “this discovery is one of the most important discoveries that I have made in my striving to present the whole Malayan language group as a unity of system and sounds, and would by itself suffice to justify this work of mine and its tendency.” This discov-

ery was to establish the link between the two branches.

The word Humboldt is referring to is an adverb of time; if this verbal particle functions as an adverb of time, he says, then it is certain that other verbal particles will also have that function. “The Mal. *juga* and *jua*, . . . is an adverb of very varied and complicated meaning, often meaning ‘empty,’ this means one can hardly attribute a meaning to it.” However, he goes on, “in the meaning of ‘still,’ it functions as the sign of the present and imperfect tenses.” The single example he gives for this is a phrase which means: “a huge blustering rose up in the sea, such that the little ship was covered with waves.” The original is *tetapi iya tidor juga*. Another example given is *tiada juga*, meaning “not yet,” which had the function of placing the verb in the perfect tense (as in English, “it has not yet happened”). Another example shows it as the sign for the pluperfect, in the meaning of “already” (as in English, “it had already occurred”). Humboldt notes a curious fact, which is, that the verbal particle always appears after the word it modifies in the western branch of Malayan, and always comes before the word, in the eastern branch. Humboldt draws up a chart showing the overview of the word for the whole language family [SEE Table II].

TABLE II. Overview of the verbal particle of time for the entire Malayan-Polynesian language family, as presented in “On the Kawi Language.”

	Adverb	Verbal Particle	Pronoun
Mal.	<i>juga</i> “also” 2. “only, alone” 3. “so” 4. “however; moreover” 5. “still” 6. “already” (<i>lama juga</i> “already long since”) <i>jua</i> “only” 2. “so” 3. “still”	<i>juga</i> sign of present, imperfect, perfect, pluperfect	<i>itu juga</i> “the same” (m.) <i>sama</i> and <i>sama juga</i> “the same” (m.)
Kawi	<i>juga</i> “only”		
Jav.	<i>huga</i> “also” 2. “only” 3. “so” 4. “yet, however”		<i>hiyahika huga</i> “the same” (m.) (<i>hiyahika</i> “this one”)
Mad.	<i>coua</i> “also” 2. “yet” 3. “more” (<i>davantage, plus que cela</i>)		<i>isicoua</i> “the same” (n.) [<i>isi</i> , “this one” (m.)] <i>zanicoua</i> “the same” (m. & n.)
Tonga	<i>gua loa</i> “before, long ago”	<i>gua</i> sign of present, sometimes of preterite	
N.Z.		<i>koa</i> sign of perfect	
Tah.		<i>ua</i> sign of present, preterite, future, of imperfect conj.	<i>taua, aua</i> “this one” (m.)
Haw.		<i>ua</i> sign of present, imperfect, perfect	<i>ua</i> “this one” (m.)

Having reached this point, Humboldt takes one further crucial step, and considers the entire group which he has established as the Malay family, in comparison with, first, the Chinese language, and then, with the native languages of America. With Chinese, the group has much in common: The South Sea Islands languages have the habit of forming different words by making very slight sound changes, almost imperceptible to the untrained ear. And, "these languages recall the Chinese, in that the words which indicate a grammatical relationship, follow or precede the expression of the concept separately from it, such that they, more than the other languages, could be written in a script similar to Chinese."

In his detailed analysis of three languages in the South Sea Island group (Tonga, New Zealand, and Tahiti), Humboldt identified several characteristics which they shared with Chinese, such that they could be written in Chinese characters. These are: that each word which can be considered by itself, exists in the word order by itself, including words which indicate a grammatical relation; that none of these words undergoes any changes in the context of the phrase; and, that

the grammatical words do not fuse with others.

By the same token, he identified several aspects which they shared with American languages, but specified that the overall grammatical construction of the two groups had very significant differences. One key feature of American languages is their use of the first person plural pronoun, "we," in both the exclusive and the inclusive form: one says either "we" (and you) or "we" (without you). This characteristic, which had been thought unique to America, Humboldt showed to be shared by the languages in the Malayan group, those in Malaysia proper, as well as in the Philippines and Polynesia.*

Humboldt was very clear about how such phenomena came into being in the course of human history: On the one hand, he saw the ocean, not as a hindrance, but as a connecting factor among peoples. On the other, he recog-

* In this connection, Humboldt also noted the findings in Kentucky and Tennessee, of ancient graves showing burial practices similar to those in the Sandwich, Caroline, and Fiji Islands, and the conclusion drawn by one Hr. Mitchell, that colonists had arrived there from the Malaysian-Pacific region.

Humboldt's Discovery Today

The following excerpt from a modern linguist shows the long-term impact of Humboldt's groundbreaking "On the Kawi Language," published in 1836-1839. The implications for the even earlier development of man's maritime culture have not been pursued by this contemporary author, however.

The Austric language family [Malayan-Polynesian-Ed.] of Southeast Asia consists of four sub-families: Austroasiatic, Miao-Yao, Daic, and Austronesian, the last two of which appear to be closest to each other. . . . Austronesian languages are found on Taiwan, which is probably the original homeland of the family, but also on islands throughout the Pacific Ocean, and even on Madagascar, in the Indian Ocean close to Africa. . . .

About 6,000 years ago [populations from China or Southeast Asia] crossed

the Strait of Formosa (now the Taiwan Strait) and became the first inhabitants of Taiwan. And from Taiwan these shipbuilding agriculturalists spread first southward to the Philippines, and then eastward and westward throughout most of Oceania. The archeological record indicates that the northern Philippines were reached by 5,000 B.P., and 500 years later these migrants had spread as far south as Java and Timor, as far west as Malaysia, and eastward to the southern coast of New Guinea. By around 3,200 B.P. the expansion had reached Madagascar, far to the west, and had spread as far east as Samoa, in the central Pacific, and the Mariana Islands and Guam, in Micronesia. During the next millennium the expansion spread to encompass the remainder of Micronesia. The final step in this vast human dispersal was the occupation of the Polynesian

islands; by A.D. 400 the Hawaiian Islands and Easter Island—the most northern and eastern islands of Polynesia—had been occupied; while New Zealand—the most southern island group in Polynesia—was not reached until around A.D. 800.

This bare-bones account is based on the archaeological record, as worked out by the English archaeologist Peter Bellwood (1991) and others, and of necessity presents little more than a relative chronology of one of the broadest dispersals in human pre-history. Unmentioned are the extraordinary navigational skills these peoples developed, and the remarkable boats they constructed to facilitate trans-oceanic voyages across hundreds, even thousands, of miles of open water.

—from Merritt Ruhlen,
*The Origin of Language:
Tracing the Evolution of the
Mother Tongue*, 1994

nized that when such contacts occurred, as between the Indian civilization and the island populations, "the predominance of a civilization so ancient and so cultivated in every branch of human activity as that of India was bound to attract to it nations of an alert and lively sensitivity. This was more a moral change," he writes, "however, than a political one," and he refers to the way Hinduism "struck roots among the Malaysian people," showing "that as a spiritual force, it again excited the mind, set the imagination to work and became powerful through the impression wrought upon the admiration of peoples capable of development."

Considering this, what would Wilhelm von Humboldt have said, had he seen the cave drawings from Santiago de Chile, and those of his beloved Java, and those of Pitcairn Island? Upon hearing that the name of the captain of the ship was Rata, he most certainly would have exclaimed, "Aha! You know, that is fascinating! Because the name *Ratu*, was used as the word for 'king' or 'prince' in Javanese." As he noted, "It was so explicitly treated as a Javanese word that it developed forms with indigenous sound changes and form changes, like *ngratu*, meaning 'to recognize or acknowledge someone as king,' and *ngratonni*, which meant 'to govern, to rule.' " The same word, Humboldt pointed out, is found in Malaysian proper, as *ratu*, in Sundanese on Madura and Bali, and also in Tagalic as *dato*. Not only, but there are legends in Polynesia, about the white god who created the place, named Maui. . . .

Humboldt would have been intrigued by the idea, that Egyptians had travelled through the ocean islands and left their inscriptions everywhere. He, too, in his great work, had cited "obscure reports" about Egyptians who had been banished or otherwise left their homeland for the islands in the eastern oceans.

But, what would have thrilled him the most, is the idea that there was indeed one language, Maori, which was documented at least as early as the Third century B.C. from the northern coasts of Africa, to Java and eastwards as far as Pitcairn Island. Maori, still spoken today on New Zealand, is the modern form, indeed very different, but the same language genealogically, as the ancient Maori in which Rata and Maui wrote their inscriptions. Whether the roots of Maori were planted into the soil of the ocean islands at the time of the Egyptian expedition, or much earlier, the fact is, that Maori is one of the dialects of the vast language group of so-called Malayo-Polynesian, which Humboldt named the Malayan family.

From the archaeological and historical records which have emerged since Humboldt's time, it is prob-

able that the islands of Malaysia and Polynesia were populated by waves of settlers from India and Egypt, going back to as early as the Third millennium B.C., in the case of India, and the Second millennium B.C., in the case of Egypt. The records of gold mining conducted on the island of Sumatra in the Second millennium B.C., point to probable Egyptian explorers. Most probably, it was settlers of Dravidian stock from India, who may have been the dark-skinned people referred to in the early records of the islands; some affinities of the Dravidian languages with those of Papua New Guinea, have been researched. Following the Dravidians, who went to the islands, or stayed in southern India, came the Aryans of Sanskrit language culture, who had entered India from Central Asia, and thence, travelled on to the islands. Thus, the continuing waves of settlements from India, which Humboldt hypothesized, as well as from Egypt, would explain what Humboldt found: the existence of a deep layer of Sanskrit in the Malayan family, even beneath the Sanskrit assimilated in the Kawi language. Furthermore, such waves of migration from Egypt, would explain the similarities which become manifest in the inscriptions by Maui, comparable to those in Libya and other sites in northern Africa.

Most unfortunately, Wilhelm von Humboldt died in 1835. Just six years later, in 1841, one of his greatest students, Franz Bopp, published a work entitled *Über die Verwandtschaft der malayisch-polynesischen Sprachen mit den indisch-europäischen (On the Kinship of the Malayan-Polynesian Language to the Indo-European)*, a work for which he came under attack. Bopp was the genius who had virtually invented the science of comparative philology in 1816 with his groundbreaking work on the conjugation systems of Indo-European languages (*On the System of Conjugations of the Sanskrit Language in Comparison to those of the Greek, Latin, Persian, and German Languages*).

Then, in his 1841 work, Bopp had dared to assert an affinity between those languages which Humboldt had reunited into one family, and the Indo-European group (of Sanskrit, Persian, Greek, Germanic, Italic, etc.). Bopp was thus undertaking the task which Humboldt did not live long enough to tackle, to examine the organic relationship between Sanskrit, as primary among Indo-European, and the Malayan family. And, in 1890, another follower of Humboldt's, Carl Abel, went so far as to propose a relationship between ancient Egyptian and Indo-European, which, in light of Maui's inscriptions, is rich with implications.

Abel recounts in a famous lecture he delivered pre-

senting his findings, that, if the Nineteenth-century European classicists—those dedicated to the study of Greek and Latin, etc.—had been destabilized by the discovery of the relationship of the classical tongues to an ancient Indian language, Sanskrit, which was a far older, more developed and perhaps actually parent tongue to theirs (a discovery now universally accepted!), it was partially out of a sense of cultural superiority. The “Hellenists and Latinists,” he said, “had always impatiently borne their dark-skinned cousinship,” and balked at the idea that everything had to be explained from the standpoint of Sanskrit grammar. Now, continued Abel, “After such precedents, it was not the least to be wondered at, that when the Egyptian began to ask for admission on its own behalf into the Indo-European circle, the same cold reception was repeated which Sanskrit originally experienced” (speech to the Ninth Congress of Orientalists, London, 1891).

Philological study, at least in the tradition of the great minds like Humboldt, Bopp, Grimm, Abel, and others, has never been an academic pursuit, to win recognition

or power. It has been a passionate endeavor, to plumb the depths of the human mind, in its uniquely human capacity to create language, and to trace out the process through which human populations have moved about the earth, to populate and develop it, in fruitful communication with one another. Humboldt understood philology in this vein, as contributing to the process of the perfection of mankind, as he wrote in *On the Kawi Language*:

If there is one idea which is visible in all of history in ever more extended value, if ever one [idea] proves the frequently contested, but even more frequently misunderstood, perfection of the entire species, then is it the idea of humanity, the striving to lift the limits which prejudices and one-sided views of all types place hostilely between men, and to treat humanity as a whole, without regard to religion, nation and skin color, as one great, closely fraternal group, one existing whole, for the achievement of one aim, of the free development of internal strength. . . .

Language enclaps more than anything else in men, the whole species. . . .

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One cannot understand what is happening to the world today without considering what is to be learned of a process which has been thousands of years in the making. All the things that have happened over these thousands of years are now embodied in a great crisis which grips this planet as a whole.

—LYNDON H. LAROCHE, JR.

February 13, 1999

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