

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Decolonizing Scientific Nomenclature

Carl Linnaeus & Modern Taxonomy

Carl Linnaeus was a Swedish biologist, considered the “father of modern taxonomy.” Taxonomy has been used in various forms since ancient times, but Linnaeus created the modern hierarchical system by which organisms could be named and classified, as follows:

Domain

Kingdom

Phylum/Division

Class

Order

Family

Genus

Species

Variety

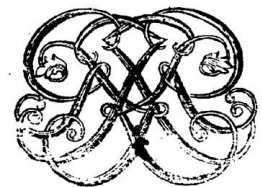
Linnaeus also played part in the movement to make racism scientific during the peak of the transatlantic slave trade. Linnaeus was the first naturalist to include man in the animal kingdom. He categorizes these people, without ever actually personally meeting any of these types of people other than Europeans, in a move that is blatantly unscientific. He makes impetuous assertions about not only their physical appearances but their behavior and self-governance, which uphold white Europeans as the “superior race” and justify activities such as slavery, ethnic cleansing, and genocide.

Human “varieties” described in *Systema Naturae* (first published 1735)

- *Homo Europaeus albus*: European white
- *Homo Americanus rubescens*: American reddish
- *Homo Asiaticus fuscus*: Asian tawny
- *Homo Africanus niger*: African black
- *Homo sapiens ferus*: Wild children
- *Homo monstrosus monorchidei*: Monstrous (this included Khoi and San of South Africa)



CAROLI LINNÆI
Naturæ Curiosorum *Dissectoris Secundi*
SYSTEMA
NATURÆ
IN QUO
NATURÆ REGNA TRIA,
SECUNDUM.
CLASSES, ORDINES, GENERA, SPECIES,
SYSTEMATICE PROPONUNTUR.



Editio Secunda, Auctior.
STOCKHOLMIÆ
Apud GOTTFR. KIESEWETTER.
1740.

Linnaeus also incorporated the four temperaments with his work on human species varieties. For example:

- “Europaeus” described as “white, sanguine, muscular” and “light, wise, inventor”
- “Africanus” described as “black, phlegmatic, lazy” and “sly, sluggish, neglectful”

Benefits & Limitation of Using Latin Binomials

Ethnocentrism is certainly present in taxonomic science, as it is in all modern scientific facets. While this does not mean that we must abandon these systems, it is essential for us to study and interact with these systems with a critical eye.

Scientific binomials, the combination of genus and specific epithet, are more universal in that they provide standardization that prevents cross-cultural misidentification. In our modern globalized world, this prevents a great deal of confusion, and learning and referring to plants to species level is a necessity for many of us doing plant work.

Common names are often regarded as inferior to their scientific counterparts, and scientific taxonomy is considered the more reliable and informative. However, in many cases the folk or indigenous names for plants are more systematic (and scientific) than our modern system. These names were given based on the plant’s deep physical and spiritual relationship with people of that culture, as well as with the land on which it grows and its non-human community members.



During colonization, there was a race to lay proclamation to the species of the “new world,” and plants were given a name upon “discovery,” before its European discovery had even begun to scratch the surface of understanding that plant, much less it as an international being. Often the “scientific” names of the plants have no bearing on the plant at all. During the imperialization process, many species were named after the colonists who discovered them. We see this pattern of self-glorification frequently among white male colonial science. Taxonomy is dynamic, and scientific names and familial categorization is frequently shifting as we learn more about these plants over time. In recent years, the influence of genetic testing has provided another facet of approach to categorization, leading to some seemingly illogical taxonomic redistribution to anyone viewing it from the outside. Indigenous taxonomy, however, is largely unchanging over thousands of years. Indigenous language provides a focal point, a cultural richness, and an often untranslatable depth of meaning in names. The erasure of indigenous language is a global catastrophe and should be taken as seriously by all.

Black Willow, *Salix nigra*. In the Unami (Lenape) language, *bnoo'shemakw* means mother tree

"[Native plant names] disclose significant facts not otherwise discoverable." - Melvin Gilmore

For practical purposes, knowing the latin binomial of a plant is important. But it is crucial to understand that Latin names do not *replace* the need for deep understanding and integration of information in regards to common names (ie. don't be a lazy ethnographer!). Common names contain a wealth of information in regards to regional relationships and sense of place, primary uses, historical context, and more. It serves us well to be cognizant of that sensation of "conquest" that might come over us once we have established the identification of a particular plant by its latin binomial. It is also important to remember that latin binomials allow for clear communication all across the world... among those who know them. Accessibility to latin nomenclature is not universal, and we should take care not to look down on those who use only common names.

If we are truly balancing our perception of the natural world with the four ways of knowing (spiritual, emotional, intellectual, physical), then we are free to explore the value of all types of knowledge while acknowledging the oppressive systems that many of our modern/scientific/western ideas arose from. Western scientific knowledge is not superior to indigenous systems or folk knowledge, and in many ways dogmatic subscription to this one way of knowing blinds us to the truth right in front of us.