

Melungeon Voices Podcast Season Four Transcripts, Episode Seven: Dr. Jose Pimienta-Bey

Lis Malone:

This is the Melungeon Voices podcast presented by the Melungeon Heritage Association. My name is Lis Malone, podcast producer, and I am here with Heather Andolina, who is the president of the Melungeon Heritage Association. And once again, Heather, we are at a season finale, episode seven. Again, bittersweet as usual. Any parting thoughts about this season that you'd like to share with people?

Heather Andolina:

Yes, Lis. I would like to thank the entire Executive Committee of the MHA, MHA members, donors, and listeners for continuing to keep this podcast going. Without all of you, we wouldn't be able to continue to do this. So thank you all so much.

Lis Malone:

At the end of each season, it's always such a rewarding experience to be able to see this season launch and to listen back, and hear the finished episodes, and reflect again on all the wonderful conversations that we've had over the past seven episodes in this season. And then for the other three seasons as well, for sure. It continues to be an amazing journey being part of this podcast, for me as a producer.

Heather Andolina:

Oh, yes. And I include myself in that as well. This has been such an amazing journey.

Lis Malone:

So before we jump into talking about this week's final guest for this season, you have another announcement to make about the MHA. And this is considered to be the worst kept secret ever, but there are still those who may not know. So Heather, I'm going to turn it over to you to make an announcement.

Heather Andolina:

Thank you, Lis. Yes, some people do already know, but we're still making an announcement about next year's 2024 Annual Union Conference. It will be in Hillsborough, North Carolina, and dates will be soon to come.

Lis Malone:

Well, that is wonderful news. I think that there will be lots of people very excited to have this North Carolina homecoming.

Heather Andolina:

Yes. I know, right?

Lis Malone:

I guess me, selfishly, I'm like, "Yay! North Carolina."

Heather Andolina:

It's only two hours from Charlotte.

Lis Malone:

It's only two hours. Woohoo. Well, I really look forward to it. I truly hope that I'll be able to attend the 2024 conference as soon as I hear about the dates like everybody else, I'm going to be the first to check my calendar and sign up. So that is exciting news for sure. So now let's talk about our guest for episode seven. Who did you talk to and what did you talk about?

Heather Andolina:

Yes, thank you, Lis. I am very excited to be introducing our next guest. He was a speaker at our past union back in June, and I am happy to introduce Dr. José Pimienta-Bey. And here's a little bit about him; Dr. José Pimienta-Bey is a tenured associate professor of African and African American studies and general studies at Berea College in Berea, Kentucky for the past 15 years. Pimienta-Bey's primary research interest include Moorish history, Black African psychology, comparative religious studies, and African American social and political thought. He is the author of numerous publications, including Othello's Children in the New World, Moorish History and Identity, and the African American Experience published in 2002, and Laboring within the Minefields of Global White Supremacy, which appears in The Osiris papers: Reflections on the Life and Writings of Dr. Frances Cress-Welsing, published in 2019 and edited by Raymond Winbush and Denise Wright. In our season four finale, we explore the legal and cultural relevance of Melungeons and Moor identities within the US history.

Lis Malone:

Well, it sounds like we will be wrapping up season four on a very high note.

Heather Andolina:

Oh, yes. Yes, we will. I am very excited for Dr. José Pimienta-Bey.

Lis Malone:

And we have to do our quick ritual. We are manifesting a season five. Season five.

Heather Andolina:

Come on, season five.

Lis Malone:

Well, thank you everybody for listening for another season, and we will bid everybody a farewell just for now. And now let's take a listen to Heather and Dr. Pimienta-Bey.

Heather Andolina:

Thank you for joining us today. And may I call you José?

Dr José Pimienta-Bey:

Absolutely, Heather. No problem.

Heather Andolina:

I always like to start our interviews off with this question; how did you first learn about the Melungeon people or when did you first hear the term Melungeon?

Dr José Pimienta-Bey:

I think I first heard the term Melungeon when I was actually in graduate school. I was doing my master's in history, and I had come across some reference to the Melungeon community only because it was an article discussing Moorish history. And so the Melungeons were cited in that context.

But I really came to know more about the Melungeon heritage when I got to graduate school and specifically for my doctorate. And I came across some work actually that was from J. A. Rogers, Joel Augustus Rogers, who was a historian, but he was a "amateur historian" but he used a lot of primary sources. He was a member of the French Historical Society, lived in Europe. He was born in Jamaica, but his wife, Helga, was from Germany. And long story short, he dedicated his life in the early 20th century to discussing the connections between African, European, Native American and Asian peoples historically. So it was in one of his articles, I say one of his articles, one of his books, I think it might've been in *Nature Knows No Color Line*, that the term Melungeon was mentioned. And then I kind of followed up from there once I was teaching at West Virginia University in the history department there, and then continued to just read about the Melungeons, again, primarily in the context of the connection to the Moors.

Heather Andolina:

Interesting. So what is your overall assessment and understanding of the Melungeon people?

Dr José Pimienta-Bey:

My overall understanding is that the Melungeons are descendants of African, Native American, and European peoples. I don't like to use the term, but it's a term that sociologists used, and that was tri-racial isolate. Which again, I don't agree with because there are not three races, scientifically speaking, in terms of human beings. There are only humans, the human race or the human species. And then race as a social construct is pretty weak. So I don't use that term, tri-racial. My preference is for either inter-familial or one could say inter-ethnic. But I have issues with the idea of inter-racial per se. But that's my particular position based again on looking at this strictly from a scientific point of view. Which is any species that can produce the offspring is part of the same species. Right?

We don't talk about races of cats, or dogs, or horses. We may talk about breeds, we may talk about families, but we don't talk about a multiplicity of races, strictly speaking. So for me, the Melungeon community represents a community which whether one wants to go to the late 17th or into the 18th century, people had come together in various communities, largely in Appalachia, understood the legal problems around identifying oneself as Mulatto, or Quadroon, or Octoroon, et cetera, because of the limitations that placed upon one within both colonial American society, but certainly within the republic that would become the United States.

Heather Andolina:

What is the connection between the Melungeon people and the Moorish people?

Dr José Pimienta-Bey:

Well, when I had read in N. Brent Kennedy's work, the late great Melungeon historian, I believe he was from Tennessee, he talked about this Melungeon heritage either being Turkish or being Moorish. And for me, knowing the history of Morocco, the diplomatic relationship between the United States and the old Moorish Empire, which goes back to 1786, that was when the US and the Moorish Empire, the present country of Morocco, was established between the nascent, meaning beginning, the new United States and the Moorish Empire. And there was almost no contact involving Turks on any large scale. Now, needless to say, there's evidence of some Turkish settlers coming to the Americas, but the greater presence in the Americas and in the United States would've been people of African ancestry. And the nationality or the term that would've been used for those Africans who had a recognized nationality would've been Moors or Moorish.

And I had discussed, of course during the Melungeon Heritage Association, the connection to the man known as the Moorish Prince, Abdul Rahman Ibrahim al-Sori, who was identified as a Moor, and clearly when you see the portrait of him and the descriptions, looks like, if you will, clearly an African man with dark brown skin and a broader nose and fuller lips etc. and curly hair.

So for me, the rationale for why this community that was made up of diverse peoples from these different ethnic groups or nationalities, if you will, when they came together, and people intermarried and started community, they quickly figured out that if individuals identified themselves by the legal terms of the day, again, Negro, Black, Octoroon, Mulatto etc. that it would limit their political rights within that particular structure. Because the United States was based of course upon the system of chattel slavery, and the notion of Negro laws, or the designations of those who were Negro, were not favorable. People would've been identified as having less political power, even if they were free.

In fact, John Hope Franklin spoke of quasi-free Blacks or quasi-free Negroes. So for me, when I looked at the history of the Melungeons, this Moorish connection, because there were Moors who had settled in the Americas and who had obviously been in a favorable relationship with the United States' federal government because of the treaty, it made sense for people to speak of being Moorish.

Now, why the term Melungeon? And I know there are different designations that are used. Some people say if you look at the Turkish, then it means the cursed people. And it never made any sense to me why somebody would identify themselves as the cursed people. And then another that speaks of one shipmate in Afro-Portuguese. But to me, it always just made more sense that the two dominant languages in the colonial Americas, certainly within what would become the United States, would've been English and Spanish. And then actually, well, I should say the three, would've also been French. So the whole idea of the *mélange* or the mixture to me would've been the better reference or designation than this Turkish idea of being cursed. That never made any sense to me.

Heather Andolina:

How did the laws in America define who was to be enslaved based upon skin tone and who were considered free people of color or "white" Africans?

Dr José Pimienta-Bey:

One of the least understood aspects of US history, I think, is this idea that anybody of known African ancestry would've been given at best second class citizenship or second class status under the law, or at the very worst, was already considered under law to be eligible or to be directly a slave. So either it's African and slave were seen to be synonymous, or that if you were African under the law, you clearly would not have carried any real rights as a citizen. The dissenting opinion of Benjamin Curtis in the Dred

Scott Case. Benjamin Curtis was a Massachusetts-born Supreme Court Justice, who in his dissenting opinion pointed out that at the very founding of the country, people known to be of African ancestry were full citizens.

The other thing that's intriguing is when you look at the earliest references for white, even in the Charleston, as in Charleston, South Carolina, newspapers or registries, white was referred to as a caste, C-A-S-T-E and not a race. And this is why you would have the situation even with Ibrahima al-Sori or the Moorish Prince who would be freed with the assistance of the federal government and Henry Clay of Kentucky because technically he was a Moor. He was not a slave, and he was not a slave because he had a recognized nationality. Right? One of the things that, again, under the law, and this goes back to this idea of the US establishing these principles of we hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal, right?

Legally, and of course we can get into a discussion of what that means in terms of women wouldn't have had the same rights certainly as men because of the patriarchal structure, but it was also understood that obviously a woman was a human being. And if she had a nationality, if she was British, or French, or Italian, or Spanish, or what have you, she was not eligible to be deemed as chattel, which means to be made like cattle, which is the equivalent of then being enslaved. The whole notion of chattel slavery.

So in US law, if one had a recognized nationality ... Recognized by whom? By the federal government, the United States. Because only the United States could make treaties. And I already mentioned earlier the US had a treaty with Morocco since 1786. Technically then, anybody who was a Moor living within the borders of the United States, if they were free, just like you could have somebody who was Irish, who would've been known, say, as a redemptioner, because there were folks who were under not chattel slavery, but under indentured servitude. So you could be a European and still not be completely free, right? But it was always for a term of years, indentured for a term of years.

What makes things unique for African people is because African people being brought from the continent basically as a result of the conflict going on the continent, and people being brought to the Americas, various ethnic groups, or some might say tribal groups or kingdoms et cetera, they didn't have a recognized nationality. Because the US government didn't have a treaty, say, with someone who was Wolof or someone who was a Khan or someone who was Poule, or someone who was Hausa, et cetera, if you get my point. According to the Law of Nations, and I mentioned also Emer de Vattel who was the famous Swiss jurist who talked about this idea since the 1750s of the Law of Nations, international law. Nation. International law.

One's nationality once recognized meant that under the United States, according to the founding principles of the country, could not be treated as chattel, right? Could not be designated with animals. I'll use the example, an enslaved person, if they were sexually assaulted, it would be called trespassing. It would not be called rape. And the reason is because chattel means that the person didn't have personhood. That may sound crazy, right? We're talking about the law, right? How the law functioned. So in short, "white Africans" would've been those recognized Moors who made it clear in the areas that they live, because they look just like most any other Africans living in places like Charleston, South Carolina and Louisiana and other parts, I mean Virginia, I mean all over, right? In areas of New England, et cetera. They wanted people to know they were not to be designated as Negroes, Blacks, or Colored, to avoid being subject to the designation under the law, which meant they would've had no real rights as full citizens.

Heather Andolina:

Would you tell us more about how "white" is more of a political case instead of a biological race construct in relation to the obvious difference between the treatment of African Moors and those of other African nations?

Dr José Pimienta-Bey:

Well, again, probably the first thing to do is just look at the designation, right? The fact that people are using the term white. Several years ago, a Harvard lecturer by the name of, a historian, Noel Ignatiev wrote a book called *How the Irish Became White*. And in his book, he points out that Irish, especially Irish Catholics, were not in accordance with US customs, if you will. And I don't mean customs like the customs agent, but I mean US social custom, tradition, view and the legal perspective that was largely inherited of course from the British, and by British, it would be predominantly English-controlled, were not considered white.

The same applied to people who were Italian. The same applied to people who were Greek, that the idea of white was understood in the popular mind, you could say in terms of *de facto*, right? Versus *de jure*, which means under the law, the idea that white under the law, and I go back to what I said earlier, white under the law meant somebody who had full access to political power under any given structure or system.

It's a term that's often associated with positions of power. So that one can look at the conflict between going back to England and the British, the War of the Roses, the Red Rose and the White Rose. You then had the conflict during the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia between the White Russians and the Red Russians. The White Russians were the royalists associated with the Tsar. The Red Russians of course were those associated with the rising of the Bolshevik powers and the Communist Party. And there are a few other examples, the Bulgarians, there was also the same idea of using these designations.

Well, that exists also in colonial America and then in the us. So white was meant to reference those who under the social system had the greatest access to power and the ones who were in positions of power. The idea that certain African groups weren't given that right to be designated as white relates to what I said earlier. It depends upon one's awareness, of course too, of the law and customs in the country in which they reside. Right? So Moors living in the Carolinas or living in other parts of the country knew that they needed to make sure that people knew they were Moors. That also creates this idea of a kind of gilded cage where you then stay in your community, because you know in that community everybody knows who you are.

The situation with Joseph Ben Ali in Sumter, South Carolina, sometimes, again, same thing, the Sumter Turks. Well, they used to be called the Sumter Moors. I would say that the movement away from Moors to Turks is because people started to figure out that being a Moor was clearly indicating you had African heritage, right? Because everybody knew historically Moors were Africans. A Moor is not an Arab, although there are Moors who have Arab ancestry. But there there's a clear distinction. Moor when you look at art histories, when you look at early dictionaries, defining what it is, people understood that these were African people and maybe even some cases they would be more specific and say that they were Berbers or Amazigh, right? Or specifically Amazigh which is actually the proper name. So that would've been the reason, right?

Think about it, somebody who was taken and enslaved, captured on the continent of Africa, doesn't speak the language, doesn't know anything about the place they're being brought to, finds himself now under this system of enslavement, they are put in a position where they are broken and encouraged to follow basically what they were told to do. What are the odds that they're going to come into contact

with Africans who were here in the Americas, in the United States, under different conditions? Who understood the law, and knew what was going on, right? And if they did, it would've been a challenge to really convey to someone who was not yet aware and educated enough, what's happening with the legal system, right? Or what's happening with the political system. Which is also why a lot of people would understand why teaching folks to read and write would've been particularly dangerous, right?

And the idea of trying to break someone of any previous knowledge. In the case of Abdullah Ibrahima al-Sori or al-Rahman, the Moorish Prince, this is someone who accepted his enslavement in Mississippi, because he was in a community where he was like, "Nobody knows me here. I'm in a strange land." Fate intervenes, and he meets an Irish ship surgeon who happened to have met him back in West Africa in Futa Jallon, and he then takes steps to free him, because he's saying, "This is wrong." And the federal government agrees, and Secretary of State gets involved, and why? Why would the Secretary of State get involved? Because of the treaty between the United States and Morocco. But what's most important here is, again, his phenotype was clearly no different than the phenotype of hundreds of thousands or millions of African peoples who would've lived in the Americas. But no one was going to run around and out to everybody, "Hey, if you can assert and defend your national status, that you have a national name, you're not Negro, Black and Colored, you can't be held as a chattel slave anywhere." Right?

And this goes back to why, I would argue, the various restrictions the Colored mariners in the ports of South Carolina to try to prevent, if you will, free-born African people getting off the ships. Cause there were sailors that would've been coming into these ports, and not just from, say, North Africa or West Africa, but coming from European countries that were French citizens, or that were Spanish subjects, or that were British subjects, and you don't want them getting off the boat in the port and sharing their understanding with enslaved people in South Carolinian towns and cities. And I'm not picking as well on South Carolina, but I mean that's just specific to this particular port, the law that I referenced earlier.

Heather Andolina:

That is so fascinating. José, is there anything else you would like to share with our listeners about the Moors?

Dr José Pimienta-Bey:

I think probably the most important thing to share is people should really take time, especially, I would say in the African American community, but in the European-American community or just the American community at large. Because typically so many of us born and raised in the United States don't understand the profound impact and legacy of the Moors, both in the development of Western societies, Western Civilization. And by Moors, I'll be specific again, Moors would've been predominantly African from North and West Africa. Most of them would've been Muslim. They would enter or invade the Iberian Peninsula, what's now Spain and Portugal in the eighth century, and spread the scientific knowledge of the East as well as the scientific knowledge preserved from the Greeks and the Romans, as well as the ancient knowledge preserved from Ancient Egypt, Persia, India, China, because of the breadth of the Islamic Empire.

But it would be the community of people known as the Moors who would convey this ancient knowledge in mathematics like algebra, and advances in medical science, and would go to places like Crete in Greece, and to Italy, to Salerno, and even to Oxford University in terms of the books that would've been translated and brought up into the developing academic institutions in the Western world. And again, all I'm saying is the foundations for what we know as the university system or higher education, owe a tremendous debt to what's happening amongst the peoples known as the Moors, which is also why I argue with the rise of slavery and, if you will, the denigration of the African continent

as a whole and African peoples as a whole, that awareness of that profound chapter in Western history of, again, Moorish impact.

Washington Irving even talked about it, famous American literary giant and figure and other works that would come out discussing the profound impact of the Moors. So what I would say is study the Moorish legacy. But I also have to warn people so to speak. You have some folks who've tried to either give too much credit to the Moorish influence or tried to Misrepresent the Moors as being Arabs or misrepresent the Moors as not being African people. Cause that would also be kind of needed in order to address the justification for what would happen. Right? Because the United States has a very complex and challenging history, and we see how it's playing out now around issues of identity and so forth.

If we were honest about our history, the good, the bad, the ugly, we would be talking about the profound influence that the Moors would have for almost 800 years, contributing to the university system, higher education, along with people who are Arabs, along with Europeans, along with people from Asia, right? And even then understanding what information and knowledge would've come in through ancient peoples like the Aztec or the Incas, I mean, all of that. And we haven't done a very good job of conveying that. And when it comes to "Black people" in particular, the tendency is to try to separate what it is to be African or Moorish from the designation of Black. And this contributes to this kind of alienation and identity crisis that I try to deal with in my book *Othello's Children in the New World*.

Heather Andolina:

Yes. And I was going to point that out. I have it right here, José. Our listeners can learn more about the Moorish people from your book. Can you tell our listeners where they can find your book to purchase?

Dr José Pimienta-Bey:

It's actually available either from Author House Publishers, which is the publisher, and it can also be purchased on Amazon. And I should say that the reason I wrote the book was because my family, since the early 1950s, have been a part of an organization known as the Moorish Science Temple of America. Now, there are different groups or sects, S-E-T-C-S that exist. But the one that my family adhered to was the one that emphasized the teachings of a man named Timothy Noble Drew Ali, who set up the Moorish Science Temple as an organization to raise awareness about everything that I've just shared, or most of the things that I just shared in terms of the historical significance. So I actually have to say that the catalyst really for me looking more deeply at the importance of Moorish history and its connections, say, to the Americas and specifically the United States, was a result of Noble Drew Ali and the Moorish Science Temple.

Now, there are some other groups that are offshoots, that have a different understanding or perspective that I can't cosign on, let me just say that. And just like anything, right? You have diversity in different religious communities, and it's important to know essentially what the stance is of a particular group. So that's a way to be able to get some insight. And then of course, using my bibliography, there are any number of other sources. And I'm actually working on an updated edition, which is directed more towards the general, although I write this in a way to be accessible. But I wrote this really for laypersons who were specifically connected to the Moorish Science Temple organization so that people would have a reference source to explain the context for what is part of traditional, if you will, Moorish science teachings.

Heather Andolina:

Awesome. I can't wait to read that one as well. Is there a way for our listeners to contact you or follow you on social media?

Dr José Pimienta-Bey:

Well, I can be contacted at Berea College in Berea, Kentucky, very easy to find. I'm listed, I'm a full professor of African and African American studies and general studies at Berea. As far as social media, for the most part, I tend to avoid it, to be quite honest with you. I do have a Facebook page, although I don't spend much time there. And so the best way would just be to reach out to me through my email they can find at the Berea College website, as well as my office phone number.

Heather Andolina:

We want to thank you José for speaking with us and sharing your incredible knowledge on the Melungeons and more identities. Thank you so much.

Dr José Pimienta-Bey:

You're very welcome, Heather. I enjoyed the opportunity to speak at the conference, and I also enjoyed and appreciate this opportunity to speak with you during this podcast.

Heather Andolina:

Yes. And we should see you at next year's conference as well.

Dr José Pimienta-Bey:

Yes. Yes. I plan on being there.

Heather Andolina:

All right! Thank you, José.

Dr José Pimienta-Bey:

You're welcome. Thank you, Heather.

Lis Malone:

You've been listening to the Melungeon Voices podcast. On behalf of myself, Heather Andolina, and the entire MHA Executive Committee, we'd like to thank all of those who participated in making this episode possible. For more information, you can visit them on the web at Melungeon.org. That's M-E-L-U-N-G-E-O-N dot O-R-G. The information, views and opinions expressed in this podcast episode do not necessarily represent those of the MHA. Melungeon Voices is presented by the Melungeon Heritage Association. All rights are reserved.