

NOT AN INNOCENT PURSUIT: THE POLITICS OF A 'JEWISH' GENETIC SIGNATURE

KATYA GIBEL AZOULAY

ABSTRACT

This commentary questions the presumption in genetic research that a biological connection exists between populations identified as Jewish. The author emphasises that identifying individuals as Jewish based on biological criteria is a sociological process that can draw attention away from other social mechanisms affecting identity construction. She also encourages critical consideration of the possible racialised thinking behind genetic anthropology studies, and the language used to express genetic findings. In conclusion, she calls for a radical cultural shift in the kind of knowledge valued as significant, relevant, and beneficial to the people on whom genetic ancestry studies are carried out and she asks for attention to the political contexts surrounding all such research.

PREFACE: QUESTIONING THE DISCOVERY OF A 'JEWISH' GENE

As a point of departure, this article recognises that all discussions of *Jewish* identity and identification register varying degrees of concern about inclusion and exclusion. I argue that genetic research that *presupposes* a biological connection between populations identified and named as *Jewish* is prescriptive and therefore that the findings should be meticulously evaluated. The delicate politics of linking issues of identity and identification to the arena of science is profound. The Lemba, a group in southern Africa who self-identify as Jewish, is one salient example of these politics in action.

Identifying individuals as 'Jews', on the basis of purported biological criteria (DNA), is a sociological process in which biology

is invoked as evidence of identity. However, the prestige of a scientific mantle should not privilege genetic studies or distract attention away from the *social* mechanisms that condition the ways individuals and groups form a sense of shared collective identity. These social mechanisms are central to the ways in which Jewishness, as a social identity, helps mediate the kinds of intimate interpersonal relations that evolve into networks of family and kinship. Consequently, reports that scientists have identified a 'Jewish' gene compel questions about the conceptual premises that ground such research projects. As a scholar attentive to the legacy of race-thinking in science, I aim to encourage questions about the presuppositions orienting genetic studies, questions that those of us who are neither biologists nor geneticists must insist be addressed and not dismissed.

GENES AND RACE

The umbilical cord of racial thinking has not been severed from the project of genetic research, and the subtle racial inflection contained within genetic research harbours political implications for questions that are actually socio-biological in orientation. Although genetic evidence indicates the homogeneity of humans as a species, and although the genetic trail insists on migrations and amalgamation, researchers and lay people remain captive to *insignificant* genetic variants of physical appearance – skin colour and hair texture. This fascination is particularly discernible in research on and about the origins and diasporic wanderings of 'the Jews.' When the 'Cohen modal haplotype' (CMH) was identified among some members of the Buba, the Lemba's senior clan who are somewhat analogous to the Cohen priestly clan,¹ there was considerable surprise. The astonishment and curiosity generated by news of a genetic connection to Jewish ancestry was augmented as much by the fact that the Lemba are Black Africans as by the lack of noticeable reference to them in the pre-existing literature.² With the exception of Jews in Ethiopia, portrayals of 'the Jews' have not included black-skinned people in general, or Africans in particular, although their depiction metaphorically as

¹ M.G. Thomas, T. Parfitt, D.A. Weiss, K.I. Skorecki, J.F. Wilson, M. LeRoux, N. Bradman & D.B. Goldstein. Y Chromosomes Traveling South: The Cohen Modal Haplotype and the Origins of the Lemba – the 'Black Jews of Southern Africa'. *AJHG* 2000; 66: 674–686.

² Research on the Lemba and the history of their Jewish identity demands much sympathetic inference from a wide range of data.

'Black' and the linkages made between Blacks and Jews has been well documented by Sander Gilman.³

The persistent representation in the Western media, particularly in the United States, of Jews as white and European contributes to the misrepresentation of Israel as a colonial intrusion into the brown Arab and Muslim Middle East. This *misperception* was shaped by the history of Jewish emigration from Europe to the United States in the 19th and 20th centuries. More recently, media interest in domestic and related international events has overshadowed attention to Afro-Asian Jews, whose appearance, cuisine, languages, dress, and traditions significantly contrast with familiar images of 'the Jew.' Even in Israel, the centre of Jewish diversity in colour and cultural norms, whiteness registers as the dominant Israeli self-image, while dark-skinned Jews appear as novel, rather than as a defining norm of Jewish multiculturalism. One relevant report in *The Jerusalem Post*, the Israeli English daily, focuses on concerns over the ethical and legal vacuum surrounding genetic research, noting that one reason Ashkenazi Jews are so prominent in gene research is that 'a disproportionate number of Jewish doctors has resulted in the intensive study of their own communities and conditions.'⁴ In actuality, given the dispersion of Jews to the proverbial four corners of the world and the post-Independence in-gathering of the exiles, Israel is an excellent site for observing the biological and cultural diversity of Jewish groups and the varying degrees of fusion with their host populations in the Diaspora. Indeed, this diversity could generate genetic research that purposely furthers our understanding of the socio-political histories that result in people mixing, as well in prohibitions of such mixing. The challenge, however, is that as long as the populations 'discovered' resonate as exotic and alien in the Western imagination, as is the case with the Lemba, the mark (or stigma) of being an enigma is magnified, not minimised.

Significantly, the manner in which attention to the Lemba has been articulated necessarily, particularly given the politics of race and racism in the United States, insinuates and instantiates a racial inflection. See, for example, newspaper headlines such as: 'DNA Backs South African Tribe's Tradition of Early Descent from the Jews', 'The Black Jews of Southern Africa', and 'Jewish Roots in Africa.' It is interesting that popular media were (prudently) silent on the absence of evidence for a Cohen genetic

³ S.L. Gilman. 1991. *The Jew's Body*. New York. Routledge.

⁴ L. Eren Frucht. Small Deposits, Big Return: Bad for Jews? *The Jerusalem Post* 10 January, 2003.

Contrasting
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variant among the Jews of Ethiopia given contentious debates over their Jewishness.⁵ Nevertheless, even for Ethiopian Jews, attention to skin colour and their social location as African anticipated racial representations of their public image.

Public pronouncements to educate the general public that race is a bogus concept are implicitly refuted by reports in science journals, forensic commentaries, newspapers, and pharmaceutical advertisements alleging genetic predispositions of named population groups described by physical appearance and geography. Unfortunately, bioethicists and geneticists have now joined anthropologists, whose tendency to cluster people in familiar ways repackages racial differences under the label of *variation*. Finding new names for old configurations does not allow for radically different ways to cluster populations as subjects of study. As sociologist Paul Gilroy observes, 'Whether it is articulated in the more specialized tongues of biological science and pseudoscience, or in a vernacular idiom of culture and common sense, the term "race" conjures up a peculiarly resistant variety of natural difference.'⁶

Despite disclaimers to the contrary, announcements that particular DNA sequences indicate genetic correlation between various population groups appeal to the notion of biological race. At the same time, presumptions of particular ancestral connections orient how DNA is invoked in discussions of collective identity, where the vocabulary of genes displaces earlier metaphors of blood.⁷ In addition, commonsensical ideas about race still register the gross physical features of the body, which serve as templates for the stories and metaphors that compose meaningful difference.⁸ In the past, the ideologies that gave substance to ideas of racial distinction diverted scientists' attention from more durable and immutable variables, such as digestive enzymes and blood types, as criteria for constructing typologies used to study groups of people.⁹ Today, shifting from race to such typologies

⁵ M.F. Hammer, A.J. Redd, M.R. Bonnér, H. Jarjanazi, T. Karafet, S. Santachiara-Benerecetti, A. Oppenheim, M.A. Jobling, T. Jenkins, H. Ostrer, & B. Bonne-Tamir. Jewish and Middle Eastern non-Jewish Populations Share a Common Pool of Y-chromosome Biallelic Haplotypes. *PNAS* 2000; 97: 6769-6774.

⁶ P. Gilroy. 2001. *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line*. Cambridge, MA. Harvard University Press: 29.

⁷ M. Tapper. 1999. *In the Blood: Sickle Cell Anemia and the Politics of Race*. Philadelphia. University of Pennsylvania Press.

⁸ F. Fanon. 1967. *Black Skin, White Masks*. New York. Grove Press.

⁹ S.J. Gould. The Geometer of Race. *Discover* 1994; 15: 64-69.

requires a major perceptual and conceptual transformation among scholars working in different areas of population studies. Instead, socio-political categories of 'race', concealed by the vocabulary of 'ethnicity', still structure research on human populations and human variation. For instance, despite frequent pronouncements that there are no biological races, the precondition to conceptualising 'a Cohen gene' entailed a preliminary assumption that evidence for a common ancestry could indeed be found.¹⁰ This assumption presupposes a belief that the Biblical Hebrews were once a distinct and discrete group and ignores the explicit ways in which the story of creating a collective identity is woven through Jewish Scripture.¹¹

GENES AND LANGUAGE

Genetic researchers articulate their hypotheses in scientific language, which has the semblance of unemotional authority. But as historians of science have elaborated, science as a practice and a discipline is neither objective nor neutral. For example, scientists are not expected to conscientiously foreground the cultural contexts within which their scientific curiosity, observations, and hypotheses take shape when they present their findings and interpretations.¹² Yet, if we take matrilineal descent and conversion as two different routes that both lead to a person being counted as Jewish according to normative rabbinical law, we are immediately reminded that both routes beget a Jewish ancestry although neither results in a tidy genetic signature. Use of the phrase 'genetic signature' as a metaphor in scientific texts anchors culturally grounded social formations to a biological foundation. When articles about genes and Jewish identity deploy this literary trope, they make the correlation between the biological existence and the social existence of Jews seem natural, rather than an analytic formula. Consequently, the notion of genetic signature makes it easy to forget that Jews confound social science constructs.

A more sanguine attitude toward the social interpretations of genetic research is enthusiastic about the 'discovery' of a priestly gene that lends credibility to the oral traditions of geographically disparate groups whose claims to Jewish identity have previously

¹⁰ A. Zoosmann-Diskin. Are Today's Jewish Priests Descended from the Old Ones? *Homo: Journal of Comparative Human Biology* 2000; 51: 156-162.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² P.R. Wolpe. If I Am Only My Genes, What Am I? Genetic Essentialism and a Jewish Response. *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal* 1997; 7: 213-230.

been ignored or dismissed as preposterous. In fact, the discovery that the Y-chromosome may evidence Jewish ancestry has re-ignited positive interest in the mystery of the Lost Tribes and attracted support to communities, like the Lemba, who for some time have claimed and desired a connection with world Jewry.¹³ Judiciously, then, the authority of science can be invoked to silence many sceptics of the Lemba's claims to Jewish ancestry. And yet the attention brought by the results of the genetic studies also predictably invited speculation on whether the Lemba qualify for immediate Israeli citizenship under the Law of Return.¹⁴

The premise of an identifiable Jewish gene is *not* self-evident. This false presumption offers the myopia of biological corroboration to the myths that enable collective identities and inform lived experiences. Such biological corroboration is unnecessary because communities grounded by shared (even when contested) identities are, above all, products of sociology – not biology. Therefore, typologies framing genetic studies on male descendants of Moses and Aaron should not be used to suggest continuity of discrete communities. Furthermore, given the rapid evolution of bio-technology, if researchers widen their pool of subjects they may find additional groups of men who neither identify as nor are identified as Jewish or Cohen but nevertheless test positive for the same Y-chromosome that currently appears among a select group of self-identifying and identified priestly lineages. The so-called *Cohen gene* may have to be renamed.

Unfortunately, the impulse to find a shared Y-chromosome indicating a direct patrilineal line to Moses and Aaron seems to have inhibited less sensational discussions about how 'to think about' the relationship between an apparent genetic signature and demographic movement in general. Indeed, as demonstrated by the headlines cited above, the appeal to public attention accentuated the novelty of finding a shared chromosome among a Bantu-speaking tribe in southern Africa and a statistically significant group of Ashkenazi and Sephardi Jews who carry the priestly surname. Yet the issues raised by DNA sequencing do invite compelling discussions about the social world, where political questions and policies occupy a central role in shaping identities and life experiences. Undoubtedly, in this context,

¹³ H. Halkin. Wandering Jews – and their Genes. *Commentary* 2000; 110: 54–61.

¹⁴ C. Elliott & P. Brodwin. Identity and Genetic Ancestry Tracing. *BMJ* 2002; 325: 1469–1471; P. Brodwin. Genetics, Identity and the Anthropology of Essentialism. *Anthropological Quarterly* 2002; 75: 323–330.

DNA 'evidence' offers 'exotic' communities ('lost Jews') from Guatemala to South Africa a validation – even an endorsement – of oral traditions that frame their collective identity within the narrative of Jewish history. But while science may be invoked in an appeal for their social recognition as Jews, genes are irrelevant in religious deliberations on the question of who is a Jew for the distinct purpose of immediate Israeli citizenship under the Law of Return.

CONCLUSION: LOOKING FOR COHEN GENES

We need to ask, what difference does difference make? What cultural predispositions inform scholarly research that focuses on human variability? And we need accountability on the part of *both* researchers and their funding agencies, who should address the question: why is it important to find a genetic code? For whom is the enormous investment in time, energy, and capital, of significance? Most importantly, we need to ask why determining biological difference takes priority over variations in the quality of life among humankind? Given the racial context that, by default if not intent, frames genetic research, we need to heed Gilroy's compelling appeal for liberation from 'all racializing and racialogical thought, from racialized seeing, racialized thinking and racialized thinking about thinking' as 'the only ethical response to the conspicuous wrongs that racilogies continue to solicit and sanction.'¹⁵

I am not arguing against genetic studies per se, nor do I deny that deciphering genetic patterns may constructively contribute to medical research devoted to the eradication of disease and chronic illnesses. But it cannot be overemphasised that the social categories that scientists have been using are permeable and flexible. While such categories are instructive when examining the socio-political ways in which people identify *and* are identified, responsible scholars need to self-consciously reject the metaphors and conceptual maps that reinforce analogies between national identity, citizenship, and family. We need a radical cultural shift in the kind of knowledge valued as significant, relevant, and beneficial to the people on whom studies are carried out. That invoking the language of genetic signature is politically provocative (and potentially inflammatory) is evidenced, in the case of the Lemba, by spontaneous speculation on how the Israeli government or Orthodox rabbinical authorities would respond if they were to

¹⁵ Gilroy, *op. cit.* note 6, pp. 40–41.

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petition for entry into Israel as *Jews* guaranteed immediate citizenship under the Law of Return.

Scientists need to be hyper-conscious of the metaphors they invent to articulate the results of their research by taking serious note of Nancy Stepan's studies on the central role metaphors play in scientific theory, including the analogies they mediate.¹⁶ Identities only acquire meaning in contexts and these contexts are always political; therefore their confirmation or refutation is easily politicised.¹⁷ So let us not delude ourselves: the deliberate endeavour to identify a shared chromosome among different populations is not an innocent pursuit that can be interpreted outside the politics of identity. For this reason, academics and lay people – those with and without expertise in genetic studies – need to be vigilant in challenging the incorporation of a discourse of genes into the sociological discourse of group identities.

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¹⁶ N.L. Stepan. 1993. Race and Gender: The Role of Analogy in Science. In *The 'Racial' Economy of Science: Toward a Democratic Future*. Sandra Harding, ed. Bloomington, IN. Indiana University Press: 359–376.

¹⁷ K. Gibel Azoulay. 1997. *Black, Jewish and Interracial: It's Not the Color of Your Skin but the Race of Your Kin and Other Myths of Identity*. Durham, NC. Duke University Press.

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DEVELOPING WORLD BIOETHICS is published twice a year in May and November by Blackwell Publishers, 108 Cowley Road, Oxford OX4 1JF and 350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148, USA.

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MICROFORM: The journal is available on microfilm (16 mm or 35 mm) or 105 mm microfiche from the Serials Acquisitions Department, Bell & Howell Information and Learning, 300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106, USA.

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This journal is printed on acid-free paper.

Printed in Europe by The Alden Group, Oxford.

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