



A SCIENTIFIC ARGUMENT FOR ANCESTRAL MEMORY

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PASSED DOWN THROUGH OUR GENES

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Epigenetics' and the latent information passed down through our genes.

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That 'ancestors' bear great significance in the lives of their African descendants is evident throughout African anthropology and theology. They are deemed to be, "patrons of society" that hold incredible power over human destiny (Shorter, 1991). They are the guardians of a descendant's fate, and as many key African scholars have found – in traditional societies descendants obey and observe the rituals of their ancestors dutifully (Ayttey, 1991). In addition, ancient Dogon oral tradition informs that our maternal ancestors are responsible for our futures, as paternal lines control our bloodline. It is through venerating both sides that African descendants can avoid misfortune in life.

Even outside indigenous African customs, one's lineage is considered to be of immense importance. In Chinese culture ancestral worship is found to have a "ubiquitous" position (Lakos, 2010). In his comparative analysis of Hindu, Islamic, African and Chinese legal systems Professor Werner Menski makes a compelling case for the analogous bearing that these cultures give to their ancestors (Menski, 2009). Even less known are the many European communities such as the Slavic and Finno-Ugric groups; who enjoyed a well-rooted observance of lineal rituals (Honko, 1999). In these groups their ancestors are

not viewed as the latent beings in the ground, “they very much dwell in the natural world” (Ozukum).

Today there are a growing number of people using DNA tests to uncover their precise genetic makeup and geographical lineage. The desire to learn of ones origins and ancestry dwells strongly within. Through genetic testing and family tree records these investigations offer deep insights into who we are. According to testimonials from ancestry.co.uk, taking a genetic test can broaden an individual’s worldview (AncestryDNA, n.d.). Test results encouraged people to travel to parts of the world that host their newfound heritage, for some it even connected them to distant living relatives (ibid). These discoveries ignite a greater and deeper knowledge of self.

The psychological benefits of a strong sense of self have been extensively theorised. From Henri Tajfel’s social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) to Benedict Anderson’s Imagined Communities (Anderson, 1991), psychology and sociology consistently contend that we construct ourselves in comparison to others. These theories argue that “group membership,” offers an individual a strong basis for identity and self-esteem. However, it is when one views these theories in combination with broader conceptions such as Maslow’s theory of self-actualisation that the overall benefits of self-esteem and belonging are better understood (Maslow, 1943). For Maslow, every individual has an innate desire for self-fulfilment, to experience the ‘actualised’ versions of their potential. He contends that this desire varies from person to person, but fundamentally it is our highest human need. A need which cannot be met unless or until an individual satisfies their lower need to belong to a social grouping.

The question then is, what if, as traditional societies believed; an individual’s ability to actualise could be helped or hindered by their ancestors? What if one’s ancestors continued to pass down latent information through genes, dreams or other mediums. All to ensure their offspring had a chance to become the greatest version of self. This concept, interchangeably termed ancestral or genetic memory is one that has aroused

psychological interest for over a century. In the words of pioneering classical psychologist Carl Jung, there lies a fascinating hypothesis on ancestral memory. In his conceptualisation of the “collective unconsciousness” Jung argued that there is a “psychic system of a collective, universal, and impersonal nature which is identical in all individuals. This collective unconscious does not develop individually but is inherited” (Jung, 1953). Jung based this theory upon psychoanalysing a number of patients and took particular interest in their dreams. There, he argues, one can assess the “pure products of nature not falsified by any conscious purpose”. It is there the inherited memories may lie. Outside of this, to add credence to Jung’s model, noted doctor Darold Treffert has examined individuals who suffer from Savant Syndrome. A state describe by Treffert as the “rare but remarkable condition in which persons with developmental disabilities have some spectacular “islands of genius” that stand in marked contrast to overall limitations” (Treffert D). Sufferers of the syndrome are able to demonstrate extraordinary ability in areas they have never studied, especially in the arts. To Treffert, ‘savants’ ability stems from them accessing their dormant ancestral (genetic) memories. He also suggests ancestral memory can explain incredible phenomena such as the Rain Man (Treffert, 2014).

Whilst Treffert’s research goes some way to verifying Carl Jung’s concept, his work too, can appear abstract and speculative without empirical support. Many argue that the idea that individuals (not just savants with limited functionality or individuals who have suffered trauma) can access enhanced inherited information is implausible, however, recent scientific developments have testified to its validity. One such development was a study by Brian Dias and Kerry Ressler, who found that altered DNA and brain structure in mice could pass down an aversion to smell from generation to generation (Dias & Ressler, 2013). This led other researchers to suspect that “we will not understand the rise in neuropsychiatric disorders or obesity, diabetes and metabolic disruptions generally without taking a multigenerational approach” (Gallagher, 2013), and that ancestral memory may have a vital role in the diagnosis and treatment for psychological

and physical ailments. In fact long before this study, genetic and neuroscientists began to find evidence of ancestral memory in human DNA. Starting with Marshall Nirenberg in 1968, the scientist credited with cracking the DNA code, and identifying the biological matter responsible for genetic memories. He mapped out a clear biological case that an individuals understanding and experiences are innately formed, humans were not, as previously believed, blank slates (Nirenberg, 1968).

Perhaps more significantly, the empirical evidence suggested that specific skillsets, such as mathematical aptitude (Butterworth, 1999) are likely to be gifted from our ancestors; while at the other end of the spectrum parents and grandparents' negative life experiences can alter the expression of genes in the brain to. In another landmark study, Aharon Razin found that the action of genes could be modulated by structures called methyl groups without a mutation to the DNA code itself, that attached methyl groups cause long-term heritable change in gene function" (Hurley, 2013). These changes are called epigenetic (as opposed to genetic) because they stem from environmental influences rather than mutation of the genes themselves. Building on Razin's research, Meaney and Szyf found that epigenetic changes present in children that have suffered the trauma of early separation of their biological parents were more likely to pass this down to their children.

More revolutionary also, is Rachel Yehuda's discovery that the holocaust induced epigenetic changes in its survivors. The trauma of the holocaust altered the "*Fkbp5*" gene, resulting in PTSD, hypertension and obesity (Yehuda, 2016). This research would seem to substantiate a seminal theory by Dr Joy De Gruy Leary on Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome; and although De Gruy does not explicitly reference these biological studies, their findings have wide implications for her ideas. The view that African-Americans inherited negative traits like vacant self-esteem and aggression from their enslaved ancestors (Leary, 2005) has polarised opinions. On one hand it has found great support, but as Sana Butler contends, it overlooks the responsibility of slave descendants to

correct their destructive behaviours (Butler, 2008); even if the research of Yehuda and others make a strong biological case for intergenerational trauma (Yehuda 2016). In brief, as Farah D Lubin has argued, the historical trauma that impact the African-American community (i.e slavery, Jim Crow) “continues to influence their descendants through both social and genetic (epigenetic) mechanisms”. So the suggestion that black people can simply “get over” these historical traumas are “naïve” (Love, 2016).

Where does this leave us? Simply plagued by the generational curses of our ancestors? In short, no. Epigenetics highlights how environmental changes can create genetic propensities to behavior traits. These can be positive attributes, such as mathematical aptitude, or susceptibilities to illness, addiction, and even post-traumatic stress. As modern science evolves it has become increasingly difficult to refute the influence of ancestral memory. Science seems to have proved the wisdom of the ancients. One’s ancestors can and do affect how we flourish, not only in an abstract sense of belonging and history, but also in a very real and tangible way. One’s ancestors have an inviolable position in our lives.

To conclude, the search for African ancestry is more complex and global, this is for sure. Africans however, would do well to revere our “patrons of society”, understanding that a history’s power to inform our future is in natural order of the physical world.