

Refusing the ancestry test: Malagasy Ethnic Identity and Genetic Testing

Sarah Rakotonirina

714590@alumni.soas.ac.uk

Author bio

Sarah Rakotonirina is British-Malagasy, whose practice is dedicated to expanding interdisciplinary and postcolonial approaches to Madagascar. Sarah studied at the University of Leeds, graduating with a BA in Liberal Arts. Her dissertation centred the urgency of decolonising philosophy, with specific focus on locating Enlightenment racial taxonomies in the contemporary. Sarah recently finished her MA in Postcolonial Studies at SOAS. She specialised in native agency, resistance and liberatory practices in postcolonial Madagascar. Her final project addressed the entanglement of French colonial constructions of ethnicity in the nationalist project of the Second Republic of Madagascar.

Abstract

Through navigating personal and socio-political planes, this essay problematises the use of genetic testing in the Malagasy context, and in its invocation as a form of identity formulation that privileges scientific rationality over storied histories. Through considering the social roles of genetic data, this piece interrogates how DNA fails to acknowledge ethnic variation, ancestral histories and storied identity formulation in Madagascar.

Keywords: Auto-ethnography, Madagascar, DNA, ethnicity, race, ancestry, identity

Recently, someone asked: would you ever take a DNA ancestry test? I responded- internally, silently- with a visceral 'no'. My mother is white British, and my father is Malagasy, a composition that I have regaled countless times to inquiring strangers. Why seek such answers on the genomic level when I already know my ethnic background? And yet, my resolution sits in defiance of an immutable existential inquiry surrounding identity and belonging as a mixed individual of Malagasy heritage living in the UK. The question invited me to interrogate the entanglements between the social reality of race and biological technologies that are incapable of measuring it; and how we go about delicately prizing them apart to make sense of the complex tapestry of identity formation. Through considering the social function of DNA, I contest that genetic information interferes with lifelong processes

of identity formation, on the individual and collective level, and fails to reflect relational and lived experience.

I always felt that my whiteness is boring; and a profile that only complicates my identity claims. I have considered whether this is an internalised form of exoticisation of ethnic difference from the majority. In one study of the impact of genetic ancestry on identity, this sentiment was identified amongst white participants¹, and although my positionality is complicated through experiences like othering, the impulse to utilise genetic data to present as unique demands consideration. More confusing was the fear that genetic information about my Malagasy side would further alienate me from a culture that, for reasons related to diasporic experience, I already feel dislocated from.

The role of DNA as socially functioning data might seem counterintuitive to the seemingly benign nature of genetic information, but it is important that we do not isolate DNA as neutral data and instead map how DNA traverses' different realms of the socio-political space. The role of genomic information in identity formulation is difficult to track due to its relative infancy as a technology. Depending on demographics, genetic data holds a different currency which is intertwined with an individual's socio-political experiences of race and ethnicity. White individuals are more likely to integrate DNA tests into personal identity, often based on their aspirations.² In other demographics, studies have found that individuals from communities understood already to be genetically admixed (e.g. Latinx individuals), DNA results gesturing towards 'new ancestries [did] not challenge their previous identities'.³ Key here is the idea that DNA makes an intervention into identity formulation that present a new kind of metric for measuring identity- one that is scientific, rather than testimonial, but that operates on the same social plane that racialised experience has historically existed within. Nelson articulates a framework for the social levels that DNA operates on, identifying them as follows: "the *social power*...[and] the *social life* of DNA".⁴ The social power of DNA lies within the information in itself- it refers to the credibility assigned to genetic

¹Wendy D. Roth and Biorn Ivemark, "Genetic Options: The Impact of Genetic Ancestry Testing on Consumers' Racial and Ethnic Identities," *American Journal of Sociology* 124, no. 1 (July 2018): 152, <https://doi.org/10.1086/697487>.

² Roth and Ivemark, "Genetic Options," 150–184.

³ Roth and Ivemark, "Genetic Options," 152.

⁴ Alondra Nelson, *The Social Life of DNA: Race, Reparations, and Reconciliation after the Genome* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2016), 3.

information, and the subsequent power of genetics to assert claims of identity; Nelson proclaims that DNA in this sense is “the final arbiter of truth of identity”.⁵ Counterposed to this, Nelson defines the social life of DNA as “diverse ends and aspirations...sought with and through the use of genetics”.⁶ Nelson’s conception of social life refers to how this data is used, and it is a confluence of both the social power and life of DNA that render it “suitable for making political claims”.⁷

With the social roles of DNA in mind, how are we to understand conceptualisations of ethnicity within the Malagasy context, a society of a historically racially admixed population? Genetic testing in the region emphasises foundation populations and tracks genealogies of migration and integration. When we speak of Malagasy ethnic groups, we can generally point to eighteen officially recognised groups⁸, but this acknowledgement is a colonial hangover generated by the 'politique des races' of French imperial strategy.⁹ Realistically there are more ethnic groups in Madagascar, but sources fail to identify a more comprehensive estimate, and such demarcations are unlikely to figure in ancestry tests. Ethnic groups instead are represented by the foundation populations of the early settlements of the island. Primarily Bantu and Southeast Asian profiles are found in genetic testing of Malagasy populations, with varying percentages of each, and these two categories dominate data on Malagasy genetic composition.¹⁰ The research around Malagasy ancestry predominantly emphasises Southeast Asian influence on the contemporary population. Whilst this is likely to do with questions surrounding oceanic patterns of migration to Madagascar and linguistic commonalities, I am uneasy about the interest in Southeast Asian influence and the minimisation of Bantu influence- particularly given the significant genetic variation across the island- that may signal a desire to chart a proximity to ‘whiteness’, and distance the Malagasy from Africanity. This concern exists alongside a troubling awareness that the group I descend from, the Merina people whose genetic ancestry contains some of the highest

⁵ Nelson, “The Social Life of DNA,” 4.

⁶ Nelson, “The Social Life of DNA,” 8.

⁷ Nelson, “The Social Life of DNA,” 15.

⁸ Lesley Alexandra Sharp, *The Possessed and the Dispossessed* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 53.

⁹ Daniela Tovonirina Rakotondrabe, “Ethnic Groups, Nation-State and Democracy in Madagascar,” *Transformation: Critical Perspectives on Southern Africa*, no. 22 (1993): 18.

¹⁰ Denis Pierron et al., “Genomic Landscape of Human Diversity across Madagascar,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 114, no. 32 (August 8, 2017): E6498–6506, <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1704906114>.

percentage of Southeast Asian DNA because of ‘high endogamy’,¹¹ continue to occupy a space of ethnic privilege within a loaded social taxonomy.

The problem with DNA studies in Madagascar, when considered through the lens of Nelson’s social life and social power paradigm, is its capacity to reify long existing social hierarchies surrounding ethnicity in Madagascar and obstruct a sense of unified Malagasy identity.

Whilst to ignore such racialised taxonomies is to conflate and ignore existent ethnic divisions¹², the possibility of genetic information being used to consolidate intentionally political identity claims requires scrutiny. Additionally, genetic information ignores the long history of culture and identity formation that took place in the millennia that has passed since the island's settlement, which is “...at odds with the doctrine...of change over time, of becoming”.¹³¹⁴

I have been acutely conscious of the role of race in identity formation, largely because I am of mixed heritage. Since race is a signifier, and racialisation is the process by which signification takes form, how do we understand how race is operationalised when the subject is racially ambiguous? Racial identity for mixed race individuals is simultaneously prescribed and agentive, in that external assignments and assumptions are made alongside internal and community based racial self-identifications. The introduction of DNA to this incredibly loaded process becomes problematic.

According to Roth and Ivemark, there are two paradigms through which we can understand how genetic ancestry results are used in constructing/reconstructing identity that are useful in expanding the social functions that Nelson delineates: “identity aspirations”¹⁵ and “social appraisals”.¹⁶ The former is the instrumentalisation of genetic results to either support desired racial identities and the latter concerns what is perceived to possess the most social capital.

¹¹ Harilanto Razafindrazaka et al., “Complete Mitochondrial DNA Sequences Provide New Insights into the Polynesian Motif and the Peopling of Madagascar,” *European Journal of Human Genetics* 18, no. 5 (December 23, 2009): 577, <https://doi.org/10.1038/ejhg.2009.222>.

¹² Sharp, “The Possessed,” 53-4.

¹³ Kim TallBear, *Native American DNA: Tribal Belonging and the False Promise of Genetic Science* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 6, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/soasebooks/detail.action?docID=1362022>.

¹⁴ Pierron et al., “Genomic Landscape,” 6502.

¹⁵ Roth and Ivemark, “Genetic Options,” 152.

¹⁶ Roth and Ivemark, *ibid*, 152.

By extension, there can be a fluidity to racial identity even in light of genetic information, both in how it is assigned and how it is claimed. Race as a signifier operates on the social level¹⁷, and is not always informed by internal visions of racial identity. Fluidity in identity claims is considered particularly prominent amongst individuals with mixed heritages but fluidity around DNA ultimately speaks to racially anchored privilege, especially in relation to colourism.¹⁸ It is also important to consider how fluidity can be harnessed by white people to either deny or affirm admixture in their personal genetic information to bolster identity claims.¹⁹

Some scholars suggest that genetic ancestry tests might lead to a more complex and nuanced understanding of race²⁰, because of the likelihood that nobody is truly monoethnic. However, the idea that DNA could transmute how race functions socially does little to unwork the significations of race and invests genetics with greater power than other forms of identity building. In a study on white nationalists and DNA, genetic information was utilised in the “rethinking of the boundaries and hierarchies of whiteness”.²¹ DNA can have almost no bearing on self-identification- much self-identification happens *in spite* of genetic ancestry rather than because of it and its meaning-making capacity exists outside of raw data.²² In a study on DNA and identity, “75% of participants believe that society will not see them differently based on new DNA information”.²³ DNA testing reifies race, a social construct and signifier, whilst having almost no effect on lived experiences of race.²⁴

¹⁷ Stuart Hall, “What More Is There to Say about ‘Race’? [1997],” in *Selected Writings on Race and Difference*, ed. Paul Gilroy and Ruth Wilson Gilmore (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), 362, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1hhj1b9.23>.

¹⁸ Bessie Lawton and Anita Foeman, “Shifting Winds: Using Ancestry DNA to Explore Multiracial Individuals’ Patterns of Articulating Racial Identity,” *Identity* 17, no. 2 (2017): 72, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15283488.2017.1303383>.

¹⁹ Aaron Panofsky and Joan Donovan, “Genetic Ancestry Testing among White Nationalists: From Identity Repair to Citizen Science,” *Social Studies of Science* 49, no. 5 (2019): 657, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0306312719861434>.

²⁰ Lawton and Foeman, “Shifting Winds,” 80.

²¹ Panofsky and Donovan, “Genetic Ancestry Testing,” 676.

²² Anita Foeman, Bessie Lee Lawton, and Randall Rieger, “Questioning Race: Ancestry DNA and Dialog on Race,” *Communication Monographs* 82, no. 2 (2015): 283, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03637751.2014.972966>.

²³ Foeman, Lawton, and Rieger, “Questioning Race,” 286.

²⁴ Nelson, “The Social Life of DNA,” 15.

DNA as raw data can be leveraged to serve any politicised identity statement. It can be imbued with, and distorted by, identity claims that render DNA a malleable resource in personal history, all before a backdrop of seemingly impenetrable credibility. In the age of genetics, we limit the soundness of testimony and family history in processes of self or group identification.²⁵ My own refusal to take a genetic ancestry test is another method of formulating identity, instead based on storied constructions of identity. My positionality, as a dual heritage Malagasy-English individual, represents several intersections of identity formulation that challenge the veracity, purpose and efficacy of genetic testing. A richer landscape is drawn when I acknowledge my place within a nexus of cultural, social and historical realities. In refusing an ancestry test I find agency in denying colonial tropes of the superiority of science over oral and familial histories, and through rejecting the consumerism intrinsic to ancestry testing.²⁶ In refusing an ancestry test, I acknowledge how DNA fragments my Malagasy identity, inflecting it with a distant past that is separate from contemporary Madagascar. And in refusing, I recognise that I don't want another narrative to juggle- a narrative with the same level of impartiality as any other statement about my ethnic identity.

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²⁵ Nelson, *ibid*, 3; TallBear, *Native American DNA*, 6.

²⁶ Nelson, *ibid*, 25.

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