

Discussion

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Contributions of genetics to the reconstruction of human history in Africa

Genetics as a discipline played a crucial role in creating authentic information on human history in Africa, where the humankind originated. Variations in the human physique between different people from different geographical locations have been one major aspect of such studies (MacEachern, 358). In paleoanthropology, genetics made new inroads into the hitherto hidden areas of human evolution and the relationship of present day humans “ with other hominids” (MacEachern, 358). This has been achieved through “ gene sequencing” (MacEachern, 358). The “ genetic relationships” between modern day human groups have also been analysed (MacEachern, 358). The tendency to justify certain notions of race supremacy based on genetic research on different human groups has been reversed in the due process and instead all claims of correlation between genetic features and race have been proven faulty (MacEachern, 358). A “ continental genetic tree of African populations” has been prepared by Cavalli-Sforza, Menozzi, and Piazza (MacEachern, 364). It was also proved through such studies that climate and latitude essentially had an effect on “ different gene frequencies” seen in African populations (MacEachern, 364). The revelation that environment has a determining impact on the genetic make up has great political implications and provides hope for uniting humanity in a moral and cultural sense. Another discovery regarding the people of Africa by geneticists showed that the present day African people had in their genetic make up, traces of “ Caucasoid” people of Europe and South West Asia as a result of “ imported genes” (MacEachern, 364). On the other hand, it has also been proved, the European people with their white skin emerged from African populations under the influence of the different environmental

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conditions and a number of different population groups with specific genetic characteristics existed in between these two groups (MacEachern, 365). In this manner, genetically there existed “two-way relations” (MacEachern, 365). An interesting thing to note with respect to African human gene pool is that “the high level cluster of sub-Saharan African populations contains 33 of the 49 populations of the phylogenetic tree” (MacEachern, 365). This again led to more clarity regarding a universal genetic make up of human kind. Researchers like Cavalli-Sforza, Thomas, Turnbull, Mbuti and Biaka have contributed in confirming the gene admixture involved through their studies on the genetic characteristics of different populations in Africa (MacEachern, 365). MacEachern has also added to these insights, his own observation that rather than “tribal” typologies”, the “deme concept” could be more helpful in generating authentic data and findings in this field (MacEachern, 371). Here deme is small human subgroups which have more resemblance among their members than with members of other demes (MacEachern, 365).

It is also pointed out that the genetic data so far obtained in Africa is of a very limited nature given the complexities of the different aspects involved (MacEachern, 371). Still it is clear that the “patterns” observed so far point to close “cultural interaction in the past” (MacEachern, 371). The need for multidisciplinary research is also stressed (MacEachern, 371). The genetic research conducted in Africa has also been instrumental in correcting the previous over-simplified notion about ethnic groups. It has been proven beyond doubt that ethnic identities are also heterogeneous and has to be examined from that perspective (MacEachern, 371). The use of genetic data to study languages is another contribution of African genetics research

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(MacEachern, 372). In this manner genetic data generated from Africa has given us a whole new insight into understanding the history of human evolution.

Works Cited

MacEachern, Scott, Genes, “ Tribes and African History”, Current Anthropology, vol. 41, no. 3, 2000, p. 357-384. print.