Where in Africa does Africa start? Race, genetics and African Studies across the Sahara

Scott MacEachern

Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Bowdoin College, Portland ME, USA
[smaceach@bowdoin.edu]

Race

Where in Africa does Africa – or at least African Studies – start? Historically, the boundaries of the discipline remained comfortably fixed at the shores of the continent, with periodic extensions into Diasporic communities across the seas. The northern limits of this enquiry into 'Africa' as a cultural/historical subject are more vaguely located, placed somewhere between the Mediterranean coast and the southern Sahara when thought of at all. This imprecision in the northern frontiers of 'Africa' is related to traditional conceptions of race on the continent, and especially a distinction between 'Negroid' and 'Caucasoid' histories.

Western scholars traditionally associated the Mediterranean Basin and the cultural advances that took place there in antiquity with 'Caucasian' populations, beyond the capabilities of Africans living south of the Sahara. Such racialist conceptions of a trans-Saharan historical divide have been undermined by research on the continent, but their residues continue to affect Western understandings. 'Africa' the concept is isolated from the outside world, from both history and modernity, in a way that Africa the actual continent manifestly is not. Cultural relations between North Africa, the Sahara and sub-Saharan Africa remain a somewhat contentious issue in African Studies (and Africanist archaeology), and the former regions remain ambiguous, neither wholly part of 'Africa' nor divisible from the continent in any realistic way.

Genetics

Recent advances in human genetics have supplied researchers with powerful tools for the investigation of West African history. The problem orientations of these studies have ranged from explorations of disease factors to historically focused research on the genetic relations between African populations. One common factor in many of these studies is, however, relations between populations within West Africa and with populations in other parts of the Old World.

A number of these studies are relevant to considerations of ancient relations across the Sahara. Some West African populations have traditionally been considered 'racially' mixed, like the Fulbe. Genetic data indicates complex biological relationships between different Fulbe groups and other West Africans (Rossi *et al.* 1991, Allsopp *et al.* 1992, Corbo *et al.* 1994, Watson *et al.* 1997) , but these are hardly 'racial' in nature. There are similarities in specific genetic features between specific Fulbe populations (in Senegambia and Burkina Faso, for example) and North African and European populations – but at the same time other Fulbe groups resemble their African neighbours in these same features (Modiano *et al.* 2001), and these genetic similarities are not consistent across the Fulbe populations sampled. Moreover, these resemblances do not appear to follow phenotypic variability within Fulbe groups (Cerny *et al.* 2006: 20). Wolof and Serer populations, linguistically related to the Fulbe but considered sub-Saharan in biological affiliation, also display similarities to North African groups in mtDNA systems (Cerny *et al.* 2004).

The situation with Afroasiatic populations is similarly complex. Tuareg populations' genetic affinities fall between those of other Berber-speaking populations and various West African and Northeast African groups (Cavalli-Sforza *et al.* 1994:172, Rando *et al.* 1998, Cerny *et al.* 2004), to a

degree mirroring their intermediate position between North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa, even though Tuareg populations have often been considered Hamites and/or 'Caucasoids'. Ancient mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA) recovered from mid-Holocene archaeological sites in the central Sahara, in areas now occupied by Berber populations, yielded similar results (Babalini *et al.* 2002, di Lernia 2006).

Equally striking is genetic research on Chadic-speaking populations of the southern Lake Chad Basin. These groups have frequently been identified as backward *paléonigritiques* (Froelich 1968), isolated and apparently autochthonous inhabitants of the region. However, genetic research demonstrates significant connections between these groups and populations in West Asia, the Nile Valley and Northern Africa (Cruciani *et al.* 2002, Cerny *et al.* 2004, Coia *et al.* 2005), as well as with other, sub-Saharan populations (G. Spedini and Destro-Bisol 1988, G Spedini *et al.* 1999). These relationships exist in mtDNA, non-recombining Y-chromosomal (NRY) and autosomal features. NRY data indicate substantial frequencies of a West Asian-derived haplogroup among Chadic-speaking populations, implying a significant male contribution to local gene pools (Cruciani *et al.* 2002). There is less evidence in the mtDNA data for such a contribution by immigrant women (Coia *et al.* 2005), which might suggest an asymmetry in mating patterns between immigrant and indigenous populations. Among other Chadic-speaking groups, mtDNA data indicate genetic relations with West African, Saharan, Nile Valley and East African populations, but no significant evidence for North African contacts (Cerny *et al.* 2004) – a demonstration of the complexity and variability of genetic relations in this relatively small area.

Studies from the Sahelian and Sudanic zones have yielded evidence for inter- and intraregional genetic diversity, as well as evidence for relationships with populations at long distances, in sub-Saharan Africa, the Sahara, North Africa and beyond. These data do not support conceptions of racial boundaries in the Sahara: populations intermediate geographically tend to be intermediate genetically, and there is abundant evidence for substantial genetic interchange at long distances and across geographical barriers.

Arabs and Africans in Darfur

In 2006, racialised conceptions of identity remain central to Western popular perceptions of the conflict in Darfur. In the media, this is interpreted as a conflict between 'Arabs' and 'black Africans' (Stanton 2004, Brinkley 2005, Moore 2006, but see Wax 2006), with 'Arabs' understood as equivalent to Near Eastern Arab populations. It is thus seen, particularly in the USA, as a conflict between oppressing 'whites' and oppressed 'blacks', a moral relationship central to American history. Religion is invoked to heighten the contrasts between the populations involved, as in 'Muslim Arabs' versus 'black Africans'; some writers assume that the 'black African' populations in Darfur are Christian, conflating the conflict with the civil wars in southern Sudan. These portrayals ignore the complex ethnic relations between those Arab groups and other Darfur populations over much of the last thousand years (Haaland 1998 (1969), de Waal 2005). They are constructed according to Western race models of human variability in Africa, with moral assumptions of race transferred from American history to modern western Sudan. This is true even though the Arabs and non-Arab ('African') parties in this conflict are physically indistinguishable.

This confusion over racial identities in the Darfur conflict is not simply of academic interest. Racialised models of that conflict underestimate the complexity of relationships between different parties in the region. At the beginning of the 21st century, as genetic and archaeological data offer us unprecedented insight into ancient and modern population relations south of the Sahara, it will be unfortunate if obsolete racial concepts inform Western policy toward an area where local people have suffered greatly in recent years, and where sophisticated understandings of local situations are needed.

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