

Reconstructing Narratives

Exploring the Significance of Descent and Ancestry for People of African Descent

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Abstract *This article examines the relationship between “descent” and “ancestry” within the context of people of African descent. It explores the emergence of the term “people of African descent” as a significant political category and its recognition by international political institutions. By analyzing the meanings and implications of descent and ancestry from a sociological perspective, the article asks how these terms intersect or diverge to shape the meaning and narrative of people of African descent. Additionally, the article discusses the usage of ancestry DNA testing and its role in validating historical narratives. This analysis uncovers the connections between these terms and their influence on understanding collective identity among people of African descent.*

Introduction

Alex Haley’s groundbreaking book *Roots*, published in 1976, marked the beginning of a new trend in exploring individual ancestry. In his captivating narrative, Haley traced his African ancestry back through numerous generations to the African continent. The success of *Roots* made him a pioneer of literature genre dealing with the search for identity. Haley’s influence inspired a wave of subsequent literature. This was followed by novels such as *The Twelve Tribes for Hattie* or *Americanah*, which deal with the search for an African identity. The increasing popularity of these works underscoring the common desire to not only understand personal identity, but also to connect to the past and cultivate a sense of belonging. For many people of African descent, however, this journey is clouded by a difficult reality—the virtual absence of knowledge about their personal ancestral history. The lingering effects of enslavement forced migration, and in particular the transatlantic slave trade have severed connections to origins and obscured family histories, leaving a void that needs to be explored.

While the term “African descent” emerged as a population descriptor only in the early twenty-first century as a comprehensive designation encompassing a diverse range of individuals in the African Diaspora worldwide and predominantly referring to the de-

scendants of enslaved Africans, the term has also come to encompass recent migratory movements.¹ Recognized as a political designation in international politics, mainly through the efforts of the United Nations, it aims to address the global community of people of African descent and advocate for their rights.

In the realm of lineage and genealogy, descent derives from the French and Latin *descendre* which combines *de* (down) and *scandere* (to climb). Indicating a progression or movement from a higher position to a lower one, it specifically refers to the successive generations that follow an individual, representing a downward movement from ancestors to their descendants. In contrast, the term *ancestry*, commonly used in genetics, focuses on the biogeographical origin of individuals, and involves tracing back lineage from the current individual to their ancestors. This process entails a retrospective movement from the present to the past, establishing connections between individuals and their ancestors, which can be seen as an upward movement. Both concepts, *descent* and *ancestry*, connect present individuals to their ancestors, albeit in different directions. In doing so, they represent a flow of time, although in opposite directions (Abel and Schroeder 2020, 202; Zerubavel 2000, 363). In the context of people of African descent, the separation from their ancestral roots due to historical circumstances has fueled a growing desire to explore and trace one's ancestry. Commercial companies such as African Ancestry, Afroroots, or AfricanDNA that offer consumer DNA tests have identified people of African descent as a distinct target audience, offering them the possibility to gain insights into their genetic, geographic, and even ethnic origins.

In the current era, DNA testing spills over well beyond the medical domain, as it intertwines with the politics of identity at an individual level, contributing to the politics of belonging and supporting claims related to political rights (Brubaker 2015, 74). Consequently, reliance on these tests raises questions about the social meanings and implications of intertwined notions of ancestry and descent. The intertwined concepts of ancestry and descent serve as a foundation for this article to explore the relationship between these terms. The article examines the influence of political institutions on the terminology used to refer to people of African descent collectively at a global level. In particular, it asks why the United Nations uses the term “descent” and what meaning it has for this group. At the same time, the article examines the role of individual ancestry, as evidenced by DNA testing, in validating the political narrative associated with the collective identity of African descent. It explores how the concept of descent intersects with or diverges from the concept of ancestry, and it deciphers the interplay between political discourse and individual identity in this context.

To that end, this article is divided into three parts. The first part discusses the emergence of the term “people of African descent” as a political category and a category of persons. Special attention is placed on obtaining insights about the various meanings of the term within international political organizations, especially the United Nations, and the specific range of meanings associated with the idea of descent. The second part provides a more nuanced analysis of the relationship between ancestry and descent. This analysis

1 For example, in the background paper published by the Commission on Human Rights in 2003, entitled “Identification and Definition of People of African Descent and how Racial Discrimination is Manifested in Various Regions” (UN Doc. E/CN.4/2003/WG.20//WP3).

focuses on consumer genetic ancestry testing, emphasizing its significance in relation to people of African descent. The third and final part summarizes these findings. This examination explores the possible reasons behind the employment of the term “descent” by political institutions such as the United Nations. It highlights the implications for the term of African descent and how the concepts of descent and ancestry are intertwined.²

The article is anchored in a qualitative content analysis of various text documents from different UN bodies (Human Rights Council, General Assembly, Economic and Social Council, Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, OHCHR), including resolutions, decisions, declarations, recommendations, reports, minutes of debates and background papers. In a first step, I identified all documents dealing with people of African descent or the term “descent” and its use, which comprised about 297 documents. In a second step, I drew a sample from the collected corpus according to predefined criteria related to the research question. The documents were then coded and subjected to a structured content analysis.

People of African Descent as a Population Descriptor in the Political Context and Meaning of Descent

It is essential to understand the underlying principles governing categorization in order to delve into the implications of what it means to be of African descent or who qualifies as falling within the category. In this context, two central processes, lumping and splitting (Zerubavel 1996), play a crucial role. Lumping involves grouping individuals based on a shared characteristic while downplaying differences and thus simplifying complexity (Starr 1992, 271). For instance, a person is considered old when they reach a specific numerical age, say eighty numerical years. In this case, an old person is defined by the common characteristic of being old regarding a specific age, regardless of the person's gender, whether male, female, or another gender identity. Consequently, gender identity becomes less important in the context of age. Here, the focus is on highlighting the distinctions from other categories. Using the previous example implies that an individual categorized as old is inherently distinct from—and cannot simultaneously belong to—the category young. Consequently, the emphasis is placed on underscoring the disparity or contrast between the young and old classifications. Therefore, lumping and splitting represent two opposing yet complementary procedures within the categorization process (Zerubavel 1996, 421).

Considering this understanding, let us focus on the categorization concerning individuals who fall under the designation of people of African descent by reconstructing the lumping concerning the category. The term “people of African descent” is relatively new³

2 Since my interest lies in the social subfield of international politics and international law, I focus specifically on the naming practices in political documents and less on their use in (locally) situated everyday practices or individual self-understandings.

3 It is crucial to note that the term African descent was coined by Pan-Africanists such as W.E.B. Du Bois and George Padmore in the early twentieth century. The usage of the terminology “Africans and People of African descent” in the Final Declaration of the conference reflects this connection.

and has only recently emerged as an important designation in international politics. It goes back to the UN World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance held in Durban, South Africa, in 2001.⁴ At the Durban Conference, the United Nations officially adopted the concept, which generally refers to individuals in the African Diaspora. The conference's primary objective was to identify specific groups that experience disproportionate levels of racism and racial discrimination. Although individuals of African descent in every part of the world have faced racism and discrimination for centuries (Jean Emigh, Riley, and Ahmed 2015; Magubane 2017; Mills 1997; Rodney 2000; Schramm 2016; Turner 2002), historically, categorizations tended to be fragmented along local or national lines, such as African American, Afro-Columbian, Afro-Latino, or labels based on status of citizenship (e.g., refugee, migrant, migration background). One notable characteristic of the term African descent is its global scope. By incorporating the notion of descent, it encompasses individuals from diverse geographical and cultural backgrounds, albeit with African lineage.

The Durban World Conference and its final Declaration introduced the term people of African descent with a specific framing that is constitutive for the category. This framing emphasizes the shared characteristics of those it designates, namely, individuals of African descent who have historically faced particular vulnerability to racism and discrimination

One shared characteristic among individuals within the category is their historical experience as victims of (mainly transatlantic) slavery and its consequences. In the spirit of the Durban Conference, the term "African descent ... refers[s] to Africans living in the diaspora, particularly those who, because of the slave trade, were enslaved and taken to various parts of the world, mainly the Americas" (UN HR/MEX/SEM.1/2002/BP.2, 17). Further, the Durban Declaration and program of action acknowledge that:

Slavery and the slave trade, including the transatlantic slave trade, were appalling tragedies in the history of humanity ... especially their negation of the essence of the victims, and further acknowledge that slavery and the slave trade are a crime against humanity and should always have been so, especially the transatlantic slave trade and are among the major sources and manifestations of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia, and related intolerance and that Africans and people of African descent ... were victims of these acts and continue to be victims of their consequences. (UN A/CONF.189/12, para 13)

4 The term "African descent" is derived from the Declaration of the Preparatory Conference of the American States held in Santiago de Chile (UN Doc. A/CONF.189/PC.2/7). Here, mainly the Latin American and Caribbean countries pushed for the recognition of the term "people of African descent" (Afrodescendiente). Latin America and the Caribbean have the highest population density of people of African descent since most of the enslaved Africans were brought to Latin American countries and the Caribbean during the transatlantic slave trade. Unlike in the United States or even today in many parts of Europe, the term Black has long not been established as a term of self-identification and empowerment. The term "African descent" was intended as a political term to replace the naming practices [terms of Blackness] that had negative connotations in many of these countries (Paschel 2013; Reiter and Simmons 2012; Telles and Paschel 2014; Tsri 2016; Torres and Whitten, Jr. 1998).

The designation of people of African descent involves here a temporal universalization of the shared characteristic of the historical experience of enslavement due to its ongoing consequences into the present; it also underscores the notion of forced migration. Individuals of African descent live within a diasporic context because of the historical events of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade. Emphasizing the diasporic context highlights the global nature of the category, as individuals are dispersed across the world as a consequence of the slave trade and its repercussions. In other words, implementing the category of African descent aims to make visible—and therefore politically addressable—the historical events of slavery, colonialism, and their enduring consequences, particularly the past and present racism and discrimination faced by individuals of African descent.

Examining the formation of the category through the lens of lumping reveals how the concept of descent operates to unite individuals from diverse backgrounds under a collective identity. In this sense, the term is intended to promote a sense of cohesion and common belonging between these people. The concept of descent therefore recognizes and accommodates the diverse experiences and identities within this category. It is important to note that descent had already been recognized within international law as grounds for discrimination prior to the recognition of people of African descent in the 1960s (Keane 2005; Keane and Waughray 2017). Moreover, it is legally protected as a ground of discrimination through international human rights treaties. As a discrimination criterion, descent is identified in the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD), the first binding human rights instrument to address racial discrimination. As Article 1 of the ICERD states, racial discrimination

shall mean any distinction, exclusion, restriction, or preference based on race, colour, descent, or national or ethnic origin which has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment, or exercise, on an equal footing, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural or any other field of public life. (UN A/RES/2106[XX], 2)

Strikingly, the term “descent” was not initially included in the draft of the Convention but was subsequently added to clarify certain ambiguities arising from terms such as *place of origin* and *national origin* (UN CERD/C/SR.1531, 5). It is important to note that descent has its own meaning and should not be confused with those concepts (UN CERD/C/58/Misc.17/Rev.3, 3). While descent can be understood in the realm of social inheritance, the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) explicitly clarifies in its statement that the term should not be interpreted in a biological sense. Politically, descent refers to the social implications of belonging to a group experiencing discrimination. Descent serves to establish affiliations between individuals, not through genetic connections or biological lineage, but rather through the shared experiences of discrimination and marginalization (UN CERD/C/SR.1531, 4). As such, descent is predominantly influenced by social and cultural factors rather than geographic-biological determinants.

In summary, in the political context⁵, the term “descent” points to social implications, to the fact of explicitly belonging to a group of individuals who are subject to discrimination or its consequences. The notion of descent becomes relevant in political discourse when associated with experiences of discrimination, serving as a defining criterion for the categorization of marginalized groups and the discrimination associated with them. The ascription of an individual to a marginalized group arises out of descent (UN E/CN.4/Sub.2/2003/24, para 45).⁶

The term “descent” serves a political purpose and is crucial in constructing collective identities by establishing a temporal continuity. From a genealogical standpoint, descent signifies the connection between individuals and their various ancestors (Zerubavel 2000, 362). It functions as a means of identifying a common lineage. The focus lies in individuals positioned within a temporal line with their ancestors, accentuating their ties to the past. Consequently, it is not only that this lineage connects individuals to their historical roots, but also that a shared descent creates a deep sense of belonging and collective identity among the individuals in the present (*ibid.*). Regarding the political discourse, the term “descent” is intricately tied to Max Weber’s social constructivist interpretation of how social groups relate to ethnicity. Weber describes ethnicity as a group of people founded on

[t]he belief in group affinity, regardless of whether it has any objective foundation, [which] can have important consequences especially for the formation of a political community. We shall call “ethnic groups” those human groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical type ... or because of memories of colonization and migration; this belief must be important for the propagation of group formation; conversely, it does not matter whether or not an objective blood relationship exists. (Weber 1978, 389)

Following Weber, commonality and membership in a group is primarily based on the subjective belief in a common ancestry based on racial and cultural differences. Thus, it is primarily a matter of self-identification regarding a shared ancestry: “persons who identify themselves in terms of who they believe their ancestors to be, whether they act on this basis or not” (Jackson 1982, 5). The decisive criterion for belonging to a social group in this sense, then, is the belief in a common ancestry, and not an actual common ancestry in the sense of kinship, but “in the sense of a presumed common past” (*ibid.*).

By incorporating the notion of descent into the framework of the term “African descent” one establishes a profound connection to ancestral roots, mainly enslaved Africans, and emphasizes the historical narrative of slavery and enslavement. Consequently, descent is a conduit that connects historical events with contemporary

5 Between 2001 and 2004, a comprehensive discussion on the meaning of descent evolved in international political debates. This debate led to various outcome documents, including the formulation of General Recommendation XXIX on Article 1(1) of the Convention (on descent) (see also Keane 2005; Keane and Waughray 2017; UN Doc. CERD, General Recommendation XXIX).

6 Descent is acquired by birth, but only in the sense that the individual is born into a certain social group from which they cannot step out because the marginalized status is bound to this group (UN E/CN.4/Sub.2/2003/24, para 45).

manifestations of racism and racial discrimination. The social implications of descent encompass the development of a shared present that fosters a profound sense of interconnectedness (Zerubavel 2000, 362). For example, people of African descent in both the United States and the United Kingdom face racism despite their diverse ancestral backgrounds from different geographic regions. Nevertheless, they share a collective sense of belonging. Thus, the historical context becomes a powerful basis for developing a sense of commonality among people of African descent across the globe.⁷

Consequently, the recognition of a shared past provides individuals with a collective present, thereby fostering a sense of unity (Zerubavel 2000, 363). Furthermore, it creates the notion of social solidarity (Durkheim 1933) among individuals of African descent and, in this sense, emphasizes the importance of shared consciousness and connectedness, evoking or enabling collective action. Within the categorical framework of African descent, which encompasses a collective history of slavery and its descendants, a deep sense of unity can foster a stronger collective identity. It contributes to the stability of the category globally. In the political sphere, the term “descent” also reflects the tendency to emphasize cultural aspects more strongly. Culturalization emphasizes social and cultural characteristics in general (Geertz 1973) and in specific categorical descriptions of people (Bennani and Müller 2018). It is worth noting that this increasing emphasis on cultural aspects is also due to the participation of social scientists in these discourses and debates. This participation shapes the meaning of concepts and terminology used in political discourses.

Unraveling “African descent” in Politics: Understanding the Meaning and Usage of Ancestry Tests

To better understand why the term “descent” is used by political institutions such as the United Nations and how it is interwoven with the concept of ancestry, it is essential to examine the meaning and use of the term ancestry. While descent places considerable emphasis on the centrality of the present individual, the term ancestry in contrast, is commonly used in life science and refers to a genealogical link to the past transmitted through various generations. Although it is often not well defined, in the biomedical context it refers to a fixed characteristic within an individual genome (Byeon et al. 2021, 2215; Dauda et al. 2023, 2). It is frequently used in scientific research and literature to describe genetic lineage and biological differences among human populations and thus to categorize and describe populations. A shared ancestry encompasses the connection between individuals based on factors such as DNA, population affinity, and geographic origin, establishing a genealogical link which traces their familial or ancestral relationships (Dauda et al. 2023, 6). In this regard, individuals with the same ancestry have a common genetic heritage, indicating their affiliation with others and their families.

7 It is important to note that the category of people of African descent, as a global category, does not replace national or local categories and concepts or self-identifications, but rather exists in parallel.

Due to the curiosity of individuals about their family histories and ancestral linkages, consumer DNA tests have emerged as a popular avenue for people who are interested in exploring their (personal) family histories and ancestral linkages, complementing the scientific and medical applications of genetics. Companies who offer these tests advertise with the promise of enabling individuals to dive into their familial history in terms of geography and even infer their ethnic and racial origin (Nelson 2008, 761). These tests seem to allow individuals to set out on a personal genetic quest, seeking a deeper understanding of their roots. Advancements in genetics and the increasing prevalence of genetic technology have contributed to the high demand for these tests (Abel 2018, 6; Brubaker 2015, 69–73; Nelson 2008, 759). The African Diaspora has been identified as a specific target market for companies serving this demand. This can be ascribed to people of African descent seeking knowledge of their preslavery or precolonial origins and a desire to reconnect with their lost heritage as well as to fill in the gaps in their identities (Abel 2018, 23; Baylis 2003, 143; Hacking 2006, 87; Jackson and Borgelin 2010, 76; Nelson 2008, 764). These circumstances arise since individuals seeking to trace their African ancestry beyond the nineteenth century present significant challenges due to the lack of written documents and records from the era of the slave trade (Nelson 2008, 764). However, with the promises made by consumer DNA testing companies to unveil the “missing pieces of one’s ancestors puzzle,”⁸ individuals are offered an opportunity “to find the missing pieces of your identity ... [and] reconnect with Africa [to] find their lost heritage.”⁹

The procedure for consumer DNA testing typically involves several steps. The test taker orders a test kit from the company, which is then delivered to their home. The individual then takes the test by collecting a sample, for example through a swab taken from the mouth and throat region.¹⁰ Subsequently, the collected sample is returned to the testing company for analysis. The company compares and examines the DNA sample with the existing DNA profiles in their database. DNA testing companies use various methods to determine the ancestry of their customers. I will highlight three types, distinguished by the information they provide and their social significance, particularly regarding African ancestry as outlined by Nelson (2008, 765). Ethnic lineage testing utilizes the Y-chromosome, passed down from the paternal side to males, and the mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA), passed down maternally to both male and female offspring and exhibiting a higher level of variation. By analyzing the Y-DNA and mtDNA, the testing company can make inferences about nation-states or ethnic groups. Suppose an individual’s submitted sample matches a minimum number of genetic markers in the database: in this case, it can be stated that the person shares distant maternal or paternal ancestors with the individual who provided the reference sample for the database. This process enables the identification of genetic similarities between individuals, such as determining whether the two sample providers share, for instance, genetic ancestry with the Yola

8 <https://www.afrorootsdna.com/lets-stay-in-touch>.

9 <https://africanancestry.com>.

10 Some companies also use saliva samples for DNA testing that is done in a test tube (see, for example, <https://support.ancestry.com/s/article/Collecting-a-Saliva-Sample>).

People residing in Sierra Leone. Spatiotemporal testing, by contrast, can identify an individual's ancestral and geographical roots and the timeframe in which they exist. For example, the haplogroup obtained from mtDNA can indicate that their ancestors lived in Africa approximately 60,000 years ago. Thus, it determines the depth of time to which the lineage's ancestry can be traced back. The third method that comes into play can be referred to as racioethnic compositive. This is performed by analyzing autosomal DNA, which is unique to each individual and determines their genetic makeup. It provides information about an individual's ancestries in terms of admixtures. There are four standard categories: African, Native American, Asian, and European. Through this testing, a test taker can learn, for example, that they are 80 percent African and 20 percent Native American (Brubaker 2015, 72; Nelson 2008, 765; Skinner 2006, 460; Via, Ziv and Burchard 2009, 4).

These three types of ancestry tests generate distinct insights concerning ancestral origins. Despite their differences, they all share a common objective of tracing ancestral lines into the past, albeit from varying perspectives. This process establishes a connection between present-day individuals and their historical roots. Notably, this has significant implications for individuals of African descent. The validation of African descent through ancestry testing encompasses social dimensions. Zerubavel (2000) emphasizes that the validation of descent, exemplified by these tests, can foster a sense of identity. Because

[w]hen such "descent" can be articulated in biological terms, especially in terms of blood. In other words, social reproduction is even more symbolically effective when it involves elements of actual biological reproduction. The symbolic significance of blood ... establish historical continuity is most pronouncedly evident in essentialist narratives that try to portray the contact between past and present objects as more "real." (Zerubavel 2000, 361)

For individuals of African descent, knowledge of ancestry plays a crucial role in this regard, going beyond a narrative that addresses issues of personal identity, such as *who they are* and *where they come from* (Brubaker 2015, 69; Hacking 2006, 88). It also fosters a connection to the historical narrative of slavery, enslavement, and forced migration of Africans from the African continent. Moreover, ancestry tests have the potential to destabilize "taken-for-granted identities" (Brubaker 2015, 69). For instance, when an African American person learns about their African roots belonging to a specific ethnic group, they may adopt and integrate aspects of that culture or even change their name to claim their African identity (Brubaker 2015, 74; Schwartz-Marín and Wade 2015, 897; Skinner 2006, 460). In this context, ancestry is socially constructed as individuals actively choose which ancestral line to explore or express (Roth and Ivermark 2018). For instance, individuals who discover that they possess 30 percent Asian, 10 percent American, and 60 percent African ancestry, could also equally choose to identify themselves primarily as Asian. Thus, unlike in the scientific or medical fields, these tests provide room for interpretation and personal choice, granting them a more subjective character (Nelson 2008, 69). In addition, ancestry testing has political implications, particularly in relation to

claims for citizenship or other political rights.¹¹ In the case of people of African descent, in particular, proof of being the descendants of enslaved people could be a potential tool in legal actions to seek reparations. The growing prominence of reparations movements advocating for legal reparations based on slave-descendant evidence may underscore the political importance of these tests in validating claims for reparatory justice.

The legal and political relevance of DNA ancestry tests for consumers has become increasingly clear since they came onto the market. Plaintiffs and activists have used these tests to prove their ancestry from enslaved Africans, e.g., in *Paellmann v. FleetBoston*. This landmark slavery trial took place in 2002 against FleetBoston, the seventh largest bank in the United States, which played a significant role in the institution of slavery. Deadria Farmer-Paellmann sued the company on behalf of her ancestors, who were forced into the slavery from which the company profited, for conspiring with slave traders and knowingly committing a crime against humanity (*Farmer-Paellmann vs. FleetBoston Financial Corp.*, 2002).

This case represents a milestone in using genetic ancestry testing as evidence. The plaintiff, Farmer-Paellmann, turned to the company African Ancestry and used their test results as evidence in court. The DNA results provided by African Ancestry indicated a direct link: “The plaintiffs’ filing declared that ‘DNA testing proven beyond a doubt’ that there was a fiduciary relationship between the plaintiffs’ ancestors and the defendants’ companies” (Nelson 2016, 131). Moreover, this case is part of a broader historical-political trend: the plaintiffs were able to rely on the international human rights laws which were available after the formation of the United Nations. This legal framework, which declared slavery as a crime against humanity, was central to the Farmer-Paellmann case (Nelson 2016, 108; Loth 2020, 197).

In 2004, another significant case emerged when the descendants of enslaved Africans filed a lawsuit amounting to one billion dollars against the British company Lloyds of London. The company insured enslaved Africans as part of the ship’s cargo. In addition, much of Lloyd’s business also included grain such as wheat and rice, industrial crops such as cotton or rubber, luxury foods such as sugar, tea, coffee, and tobacco, and minerals such as copper and gold, produced by enslaved and unfree people.¹² Black leaders and activists who were involved in the case used DNA technology to link themselves to the recorded slave ships.¹³

Another example is the case of Georgetown University, which sold 272 enslaved persons to plantations in the Deep South. Georgetown, which was run by Jesuit priests, held hundreds of enslaved people. The Harvard Slavery Remembrance Program and the

11 The relevance of DNA testing goes beyond African descent and includes various other groups. These include Native Americans in the United States, where such tests can be important in determining tribal affiliation. For the concept of indigeneity, moreover, DNA testing transcends political claims. It includes attempts to reconstruct prehistoric migrations and settlement patterns. In India, identity claims are closely intertwined with discussions of origin and antiquity, which is further complicated by the complexity of caste systems (Brubaker 2015, 78–79).

12 <https://www.lloyds.com/about-lloyds/history/the-trans-atlantic-slave-trade/lloyds-marine-insurance-and-slavery>.

13 <https://www.theguardian.com/money/2004/mar/28/insurance.usnews>.

Georgetown Memory Project identified more than 10,000 descendants of enslaved people related to Georgetown University.¹⁴ The project used two methods to identify the descendants of enslaved Africans from Georgetown. The first method used genealogy research in which family trees were built based on birth certificates, death records, and other documents. The second method employed DNA ancestry testing, where potential descendants underwent a DNA ancestry test and discovered that they may be genetically related to other descendants of the Georgetown enslaved people.¹⁵ Consequently, Georgetown University established a Reconciliation Fund, which awards 400,000 dollars annually to community-based projects that “directly impact Descendant communities whose ancestors were enslaved on the Jesuit plantations.”¹⁶ The use of ancestry testing for legal claims is, nevertheless, only one possible motivation. The primary motivation for individuals who take these tests is often to explore and gain insight into their family history.

Conclusion

This article examined the term “people of African descent” and explored its meaning within the context of political debates. Additionally, it analyzed the specific discourse surrounding the concept of descent and its relationship to ancestry, demonstrating that “people of African descent” emerged as an international population descriptor only at the beginning of the twenty-first century to characterize individuals in the African Diaspora. The unifying characteristic lies in the dispersion of people of African descent across the world due to historical circumstances such as enslavement, colonization, and the slave trade. Furthermore, individuals of African descent worldwide share the common experience of racism and racial discrimination.

Despite variations in ancestry, geographical origins, and cultural diversity among people of African descent, their shared historical experience of enslavement and forced migration fosters a sense of belonging that binds them together as an imagined community (Anderson 2006; Kent, Ventura, and Wade 2014). This connection is established based on individuals’ subjective belief in a shared past, aligning with Weber’s characterization of a social group. Using the concept of descent by political institutions such as the United Nations serves a specific purpose. It highlights the historical circumstances of forced migration and disconnection from a specific region or homeland. Furthermore, the term “descent” has been a long-standing element of political discourses, employed to address and describe social groups vulnerable to discrimination and marginalization.

This remains relevant because institutions such as the United Nations are “specified agencies” (Strang and Meyer 1993, 499) that provide, in their fight against racism and the associated semantic structure, concrete behavioral scripts embedded in a specific language. These scripts serve as orientation patterns for the global community. In this

14 <https://ethics.harvard.edu/people/richard-j-cellini>.

15 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/social-issues/they-thought-georgetown-missing-slaves-were-lost-the-truth>.

16 <https://www.georgetown.edu/slavery>.

way, they not only reproduce certain terminologies and definitions, but also constitute them. The negotiation process from which the term emerges is anchored in linguistic discourses, legal texts, and political documents and is also disseminated through them. Furthermore, social scientists have played an important role in the debates from which the term “descent” has emerged, and it is particularly relevant in political discussions, especially when it comes to people of African descent. Descent underscores the collective historical events of slavery, enslavement, forced migration, and the shared experiences with racism and racial discrimination that have profoundly shaped the lives of individuals of African descent.

While descent emphasizes the historical circumstances, ancestry represents a more individually centered concept. Ancestry is relevant among people of African descent in the sense that DNA ancestry testing can help to clarify the narrative and history of their ancestors using genetic analysis (Abel 2018). Furthermore, it is also a tool not primarily aimed to determining geographic origin, as many test takers already have assumptions about or knowledge of their roots on the African continent (Nelson 2008, 771–775). Instead, it validates narratives of enslavement, slavery, and forced migration. The concepts of ancestry are intermingled with the category of African descent with regards to identity exploration. However, the determining factor for belonging is not necessarily actual ancestry: that these tests are so popular suggests that what is being sought is not actual (genetic) unquestionable ancestry but more a confirmation of a shared history, and thus, DNA tests can function to support social affiliation.

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