

Who do you think you are? How we perceive our ancestry and that of others is heavily influenced by sociological factors

In this provocative book on the sociology of ancestry, **Eviatar Zerubavel** re-examines our notions of relatedness, family, race and nationhood. **Turi King** finds it to be engaging and thoroughly enjoyable book, perfectly timed against the surge in interest in tracing family history.



Ancestors and Relatives: Genealogy, Identity and Community. Eviatar Zerubavel. Oxford University Press. January 2012

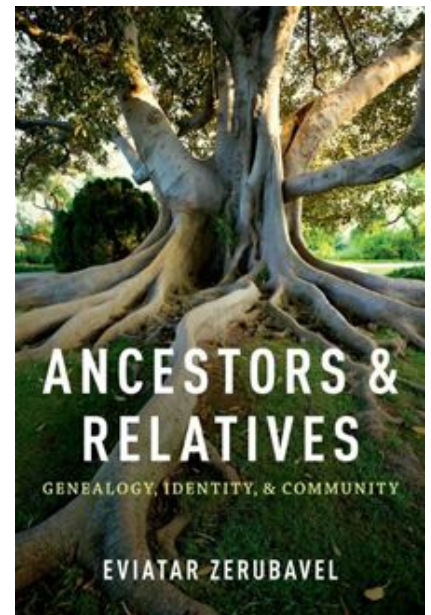
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As a geneticist whose work revolves around surnames, genealogy and ancestry, I have been struck time and again by how profoundly the genetic information I provide can fit into a person's narrative of their own identity and who they are today. During my studies examining the genetic legacy of the Vikings in the current population of the north of England I have been surprised by the fervour with which many (though certainly not all) people want to claim Viking ancestry. 'Can you tell me if I'm a Viking?', is a question I am commonly asked, as if Vikings are still routinely pitching up in their longboats and wandering around wearing their horned helmets (which they didn't wear, they're a Victorian-bestowed accessory).

Despite my pointing out that in my research I am looking at just one of their many genetic lineages and that as everyone on earth is related we will all have Vikings in our family tree somewhere, this is not enough for many people. They want genetic proof, perceiving this to be the ultimate verification of their Viking ancestry. In each case I could be confirming or, perhaps more distressingly for some, shattering an idea of who they are or, as they often put it, where they belong.

What has become clear to me is that something else is at work here which has nothing to do with the science but has everything to do with the social and cultural aspects of ancestry and it is this which Eviatar Zerubavel examines in his widely-researched and absorbing book, *Ancestors and Relatives: Genealogy, Identity and Community*.

His opening line, which takes the form of a question, 'Why do we consider Barack Obama a black man with a white mother rather than a white man with a black father?' (when clearly both his mother and father have made equal genetic contributions), takes us to the heart of his argument: that how we perceive our ancestry and that of others is heavily influenced by sociological factors. Drawing on numerous sources and disciplines his book is a treatise on the transhistorical and transcultural elements which are fundamental to how individuals, communities and even nations perceive and construct narratives of the past and identity.



This book could not be more timely. As Zerubavel, a Professor of Sociology at [Rutgers University](#), points out we need only to look at the popularity of television shows such as [Who Do You Think You Are?](#) and the shelves of newsagents and bookstores generously stocked with magazines and books on how to research your family tree to see that there is a tremendous interest in genealogy. Indeed there is a word for this obsession with ancestry: progonoplexia. Though this is not a new phenomenon, as readers of the Bible with its collections of genealogies can tell you, it is the case that the ability to trace and draw up large family trees was once largely the preserve of the upper classes. The advent and rapid growth of digital repositories of records of many kinds, particularly births, deaths, marriages and censuses, and the introduction of low-cost genetic genealogy, has led to the democratization of tracing one's ancestors and contemporary relatives and an explosion of activity in this area.

The book starts by examining how we as humans, because we have language, can be aware of ancestors long dead, allowing us to create links into the past. Our use of hereditary surnames and suffixes such as 'the Illrd' reinforce this. Zerubavel then moves on to look at the multidimensional nature of relatedness starting with the family tree and how we assess degrees of kinship in terms of genealogical distance. Given that we are all related, it is we who put in the boundaries between who we feel are our close relatives and who are not. Zerubavel deftly takes us through the ways in which this 'extended family' can be used by groups to construct communities (even at the transnational level) with visions of common origins in the form of clans and tribes, broadening further to encompass even nations constructing myths of common descent from founding fathers.

Zerubavel discusses how individuals, communities and nations have used biology to essentialize and politicize relatedness or ancestry such as the historical 'one-drop' rule in the U.S. (just one drop of 'black' blood in a family tree was enough to classify someone as 'black') and how genealogies can be stretched, braided, pruned or split to suit personal and political whims, such as defining the criteria for Jewishness such that it allowed some Nazis to conveniently clip out Jewish ancestry from their own family trees. Techniques of DNA analysis now offer people the opportunity to trace ancestry up either the paternal or maternal lines, or have their genome fractionated as having derived from putative ancestral groups.

Genealogical terminology and thinking, Zerubavel convincingly argues, pervade our everyday lives and have seeped into other disciplines: we speak of something happening five generations ago, we talk of chimpanzees as being our distant cousins, I have a 3rd-generation mobile phone, Alec Jeffreys is known as the father of DNA fingerprinting – a technology on which my research relies.

In a book that covers areas in which the author is not a specialist, it is perhaps inevitable that some small errors will creep in. For example, there are inaccuracies in some of the discussions of genetics but these are not enough to detract from his argument as a whole in what is an engaging and thoroughly enjoyable book.

Dr Turi King is a Research Fellow in the Department of Genetics and Project Manager on The Impact of Diasporas on the Making of Britain project based in the School of Historical Studies at the University of Leicester. She read Biological Anthropology at Cambridge before completing an MSc in Molecular Genetics and then a PhD at the University of Leicester. Her PhD research concentrated on the link between British surnames and the Y chromosome and this forms part of her current research: applying this link in the fields of forensics, epidemiology and population histories. She is currently leading a project examining the genetic legacy of the Vikings in the north of England. [Read more reviews by Turi.](#)

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