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BBC delves into Brazilians' roots

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BBC Brasil

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Neguinho da Beija-Flor's stage-name indicates his skin colour; in Portuguese, Neguinho means Little Black.

In this year's Rio Carnival competition, he sang a song celebrating Brazil's African roots in a performance that won his samba school the title.



The BBC project analysed the DNA of nine famous Brazilians

But having learned to be proud of his African ancestry, he was shocked to find out that about 67% of his genes are European and only 31% African, according to an estimate based on an analysis of his DNA.

"People will think I'm joking if I tell them this", said the singer, who knew very little about his African ancestors but nothing at all about his European ones.

Neguinho da Beija-Flor was among nine celebrities who were tested for a project, called Afro-Brazilian Roots, by the Brazilian Service of the BBC.

Brazil has more people with black ancestry than any other nation outside Africa, and its mix of Indians, Africans and Europeans gave rise in the past to the claim that the country was a "racial democracy".

But it is also a country where black people remain socially disadvantaged.

The results of the DNA tests surprised many by showing that skin colour does not necessarily reflect the ancestry of a person's genetic make-up.

Sergio Pena, professor of biochemistry at the Federal University of Belo Horizonte, who led the genetic analysis, explained the apparent contradiction.

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"Only a few genes are responsible for someone's skin colour, which is a very poor indication of ancestry. A white person could have more African genes than a black one or vice-versa, especially in a country like Brazil," he said.

Soap opera actress Ildi Silva found that matches of the Y chromosome in her family are common in northern Europe, and that 71% of her genes are European and 19% African.



Actress Ildi Silva says she is seen as neither black nor white

"I knew I had a Dutch ancestor from my mother's side, but I didn't know there was an European link in my paternal line as well," she said.

Genealogist Carlos Barata, co-author of the Dictionary of Brazilian Families, notes that as well as the Portuguese, immigrants from many European nations - including France, Ireland, the Netherlands, England and Germany - sought a new home in Brazil.

"The surnames might have disappeared by today's generation, but genetics can bring their contribution back to light," he said.

Controversial quotas

Musician Seu Jorge found that although 85% of his genes are African, the rest are European, confirmation that he is, as he put it "also the son of the guilty ones" - a descendant of the European slave-owners who had children with their African slaves.

"You need to be black to understand what it is like to get on a bus and see people getting off, afraid of you, or calling the police," he said.

"My daughter, who has a privileged education, came home one day telling us that her colleagues at a ballet class didn't want to hold hands with her. She will have to grow with this pain."

The BBC Brasil series has had an impact in Brazil, where the issue of racial quotas is highly controversial.

About 40 universities in the country have set aside places for black students.

Manolo Florentino, head of the Social History Department at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, said the results

"show race is a failed concept in Brazil".

Referring to the university quotas, he added: "Policies that 'racialise' this country, following the example of the US, create hate and tension and will make the situation worse."

But for organisations that defend the quota system, genetics should not be used to attack anti-discrimination policies.



Seu Jorge: Proud of his African heritage

They argue that genetics might prove that all Brazilians are very mixed in terms of their racial ancestry, but it is naive to believe that society will consider all equal.

"I've never seen a policeman asking for a genetic ID before stopping someone. In Brazil, discrimination is based on appearance, not on genes," said David dos Santos, a priest who co-ordinates a scheme to prepare underprivileged Afro-Brazilians to go to university, and who was himself tested for the series.

'Face of the future'

Musician Sandra de Sa said that despite its racial tensions, Brazil could teach the world how different races can integrate.

She was happy though to find out she was about 93% African.

"I can't believe I'm almost 100% African. I usually jokingly say that I can still feel the chains around my ankles," said the singer.



Footballer Obina was not aware of his indigenous roots

The ancestry of the nine celebrities revealed other surprises.

Obina, a football player in Flamengo, the biggest team in Brazil, had 25% indigenous genes, the highest percentage in the tests.

His Y chromosome was traced back to the Middle East, possibly an indication of a Jewish ancestor among the many escaping persecution in Portugal and Spain some 500 years ago.

"No-one is pure in Brazil. That's why the country has the face of the future," said Harvard Professor Henry Louis Gates Jr, co-ordinator of a similar project in the US.

The mixing of races so evident in Brazil will become more prevalent around the world, Professor Gates believes, with people originating from a sole geographical area becoming increasingly rare.

Two readers of bbcbrasil.com chosen from among more than 2,000 who applied to have their DNA tested will have their results published this month.

Their story will focus on how genetics is revealing black ancestors long excluded from family history because of racism.

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