RESEARCH IN PROGRESS

AFRICAN ANCESTRY IN BRITAIN

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For obvious reasons, interest has been growing recently in the history of individuals in Britain of Black African extraction and of the Afro-British 'community' in general. A fundamental aspect of the inquiry is demographic, starting with the question of how many such persons lived in Britain at particular periods. Most of the statements on the history of Blacks in Britain so far in print derive from Black Studies sources and tend to be polemical, for instance, in presenting seemingly wild over-estimates of total numbers. Although the search for 'Roots' in Africa initiated by the misleading claims of the late Alex Haley is largely an impossible exercise, the search for family roots within Britain is practical and one to be encouraged and assisted. Here, at Liverpool, for instance, families with African forebears go back some four or five generations.

Census returns and parish registers are the normal sources for such studies. Two Liverpool theses on topics relating to Blacks in Britain include investigations of a sample of parish registers for the critical period 1700-1850.1 Before 1700 it is highly unlikely that any significant number of 'Blacks' was to be found in Britain. The number increased and became significant during the eighteenth century, and then probably declined after the abolition of the British slave trade in 1807. Thus, the Liverpool families mentioned above do not, in my view, go back to slave trade days but were founded by African sailors and other arrivals who stayed in Britain after 1850. (At Liverpool the picture is not complicated by Caribbean arrivals until the present century). Whether there was continuity elsewhere between the pre-1807 'black community' and the present day Afro-British one is controversial and needs to be explored. It is, however, plausible that in the early nineteenth century a considerable degree of genetic assimilation occurred and that, while the 'black community' virtually disappeared for a time, the genes of pre-1807 Africans were dispersed in the general white population, from which it would follow that a slight degree of African ancestry is widespread in Britain today.

To date investigations have, to the best of my knowledge, been limited to London and Liverpool. While it is unlikely that references to Blacks occur in the registers of rural parishes, the registers of many other sea ports and urban centres could reasonably be searched. Family reconstitution studies covering several generations might be particularly revealing. The purpose of this note is merely to stimulate interest and begin a discussion. There may well be existing local studies I have overlooked, and if so this indicates the need for a preliminary bibliographical inquiry. Is there a volunteer?
NOTES

1. Some indication of what can be learned from parish register studies can be found in Stephen J. Braidwood, 'Initiatives and organization of the Black Poor 1786-1787', Slavery and Abolition, 3, 1982, pp.211-27. This article was part of a larger study which is now in preparation for publication, and a more recent study (of blacks and criminality) also using parish registers, by Dr Norma Myers, is currently under consideration for publication.

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