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How My Ancestry Has Shaped Me Today

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Abstract:

Genealogy can tell one a lot of information about their ancestry and who they are today. Researching my own heritage and lineage has always been a point of interest for me. However, it was often quite difficult for me to be able to gather information about my ancestry as my great-grandparents and their ancestors did not use or save many records. I had to rely on information being passed down verbally through the generations to gain insight about my family roots. There is no way to fact check these claims unfortunately as there are no detailed records. However, I was able to find some old pictures of my great-grandparents which is the oldest piece of evidence I could find of my family.

The 23andme results were able to reveal more about my genetic composition. My genetic tests showed that I came from the maternal haplogroup M4c. The results showed that I was 100% Southern South Asian. More specifically, I was 100% from the Malayali subgroup. All this information was not new to me, however seeing all my DNA relatives was interesting. I was able to look further into these relatives and see that they even carried the same family name, Pullappally.

The most interesting things I found out about my family is how we followed Knanaya tradition for hundreds of years. My grandfather was the first one to break this custom and marry outside of the established culture. I can still see the positive and negative effects of his actions today.

My research enabled me to dive deeper into my family history and learn more about my past than I ever thought was possible. The information I collected can be backed up by the results from my genetics tests.

Maternal Ancestors:

My 23andme results showed that my maternal haplogroup is M4c. Haplogroup M split from L3 after humans started to travel outside of Africa. Members of this group were seen to migrate across the coast of India. Haplogroup group M continued to expand into Asia and split into smaller groups. My maternal haplogroup, M4c, can be traced back to a woman who lived less than 12,500 years ago! I was not surprised by this information because I knew that my ancestry could be traced back to India. My family has never moved out of India until our parents made the journey to America.

Regarding my maternal ancestry, unfortunately not much is known as my mother is not close with that side of the family. The information that I was able to gather was that my great-grandparents had one son, my grandfather, named Abraham. Abraham was married to Mary and they had two daughters, Sindhu and Manju. Sindhu was born on July 25th, 1975. She moved to America with her husband in 1991.

Paternal Ancestry

Pullappally Side of the Family

Fortunately, there are some more records about who my paternal great-grandparents were and what they did. My great-grandparents were Kurian and Mariam Pullappally. In the late 1930's, my great-grandfathers bought a thousand acres together in northern Malabar. They then went to build the ancestral home in Thodupuzha. I have seen firsthand the ancestral house and was able to gain insight of how they might have lived in those days. My great-grandparents had 9 children. The oldest was Jacob Pullappally. He died when he was 20 from meningitis. 3 days

before his death, Jacob had met a girl and was getting an arranged marriage. The girl he was supposed to marry was heartbroken when she found out he had passed away three days later. John Pullappally, my grandfather, was the youngest of all the children. He married Eli and had two children: Roy (my father) and Raji. Roy was born on July 21st, 1971 in Thodapuzha, India.

Knanaya Culture

For hundreds of generations, the Pullappally family has maintained the endogamous tradition of the Knanaya people. The tradition of the Knanaya people started when they migrated to India from the West in 345AD. It is said that these people migrated to India with St. Thomas of Cana, who is now seen as a religious and traditional figurehead for celebrations. The Knanaya people were Jews who converted to Christianity and joined the Catholic Church. India had previously been exposed to Catholicism with the arrival of St. Thomas in Kerala. Once the Knanaya people moved into this area too, Christianity became a more regularly practiced religion. As a result of this evangelism, Kerala is one of the few places that refers to Jesus as “Eshoa”, the actual Aramaic name given to Christ. Knanaya traditions have been preserved today by enforcing members to marry within the community and other Knanaya members.

My paternal ancestors all claim to have followed Knanaya traditions. This means that they have all married other people of Knanaya descent. Thus, it was not really a surprise when my genetics results showed that I was 100% from the Malayali subgroup. I knew since my ancestors followed this tradition, that most likely they had to marry other Malayali people to preserve the culture. I also was not surprised when I showed my father my genetic relatives and

he recognized many of them to be of Knanaya descent. This makes sense as my paternal ancestors followed these traditions for several generations.

My great-grandparents were strict followers of the Knanaya practices. They successfully married 7 of their children to other Knanaya men and women. However, their youngest son, John Pullappally (my grandfather), was the first to break this tradition and marry a Syro Malabar woman. This caused great distress within the family as breaking away from the Knanaya community meant that you are no longer a pure Knanaya of original descent. This meant that my grandfather was not allowed to participate in many Knanaya social events anymore and was seen as a disgrace to the family. My grandmother, Eli, felt the repercussions of this. In the beginning, she was often ostracized from the family because she was not Knanaya. However, my grandfather's actions impacted all the generations after him. My grandfather marrying out inspired the following generation to speak up to their parents and marry for love instead. This resulted in many more family members marrying outside of the Knanaya community. Today, family members that are still Knanaya are not forced to marry within the community as our family has evolved past this tradition.

The Journey to America

My grandparents and father all lived in Kerala but sought a better life. They wished for the American Dream and soon this became a reality. Jose, the eldest living son of Kurian and Mariam, came to America on a work visa. Once he got settled in, he applied for visas for the rest of his brothers and their sons. My father thus came to America in 1990 when he was 20. He

changed his last name from Pullappally to John in order to fit in better. The name John was selected in honor of his father (John Pullappally).

My father immediately began working small jobs at fast food chains such as Dunkin Donuts and more. I always knew that immigrant families struggled when they first came to America. It was no surprise to me that my father came to this country with little knowledge of the English language or customs. However, it shocked me when he explained to me, he struggled for several years to become accustomed to the American culture. One interesting story he revealed was that when he first boarded the plane to America, the stewardess placed a coke can in front of him. He had never seen a can like this before and had no idea what it was. My dad said he simply just stared at it for the entire plane ride because he did not know what to do. Another story he told me was the first time someone bought a burger for him he had no idea how to eat it. He ate it layer by layer starting with the bun. All of this opened my eyes to how much my parents must have struggled to merge into American culture.

My father continued to work for one year before he applied for a visa for my mom and she came to live with him in 1991. They stayed in Chicago for 5 years with the rest of the family. Then both my parents received good paying job offers in Florida. They moved to Tampa where Sindhu (my mom) immediately began working as a pharmacist. Roy (my father) started working as an x-ray technician at a local hospital. He also started a partnership and bought a convenience store with his friends. Over the years, he realized how successful the store was and quit his job as a technician and went to open another convenience store. Sindhu continued to further her education and even started her own long-term pharmacy. They had their first daughter, Ashley on February 4th, 2001. They then continued to have two more children, Jesna and Dana, who were born on March 26th, 2002 and March 28th, 2005, respectively.

My parents have made every decision based on how it would affect their children's education. Everything they have done is to provide for us and ensure that we are able to receive every opportunity possible. My dad always says that if you work hard, you can do anything your mind is set to. I see him live this philosophy every single day. He came to America knowing very little English and worked several jobs in order to learn and become the incredibly successful businessman he is today. I can only hope to follow in his footsteps and become half the honest, successful person he is.

Conclusion

My ancestry has shaped my life today. I can see this in my culture, the people I surround myself with, and my family. My 23andme results showed nothing that was surprising, but this project enabled me to dive deeper into my family history and culture. My parents hard work and dedication to achieving the American Dream has encouraged me to always work my hardest and follow my dreams of becoming a dentist. My ancestors and family have shaped the path for me to live an incredibly blessed life and follow my dreams.

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