

There is little basis for viewing migrants in the Mediterranean as a threat to the ‘indigenous’ population of Europe

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*Figures released in June by the International Organisation for Migration estimate that over 100,000 migrants have made the journey across the Mediterranean since the start of 2015. **Christopher J. Ayres** argues that while some actors have sought to portray this situation as a case of ‘indigenous Europeans’ coming under threat from large-scale migration, there is little to justify this narrative in practice. He writes that Europeans should do more to appreciate the human dimension to the crisis, particularly given their own ancestors once pursued the same route from Africa.*



Thousands of migrants are dying in an attempt to reach Europe from Africa by sea. Alongside the public policy debate over irregular migration, however, it is worth remembering that this is a route the ancestors of modern-day Europeans once took themselves. Europeans, when they initially migrated from Africa to Europe thousands of years ago, faced numerous difficulties including wild animals, terrain and climate issues rather than stormy seas. The path our European ancestors took has been confirmed in recent years by scientific analysis of old and current DNA, forming what are known as ‘haplogroups’.

Haplogroups reveal movements of peoples by establishing ancestry through three types of DNA, mtDNA (mitochondrial), YDNA (Y chromosome) and aDNA (ancient). The first is discernable only through the female line, YDNA through the male, and aDNA drawn from ancient human remains. When there is any variation however slight in DNA structure (a mutation) it is carried through to all descendants. Thus, as [recent research](#) from Daniel Fairbanks has shown, we see in Europeans those mutations that conclusively establish the migratory path from whence they came – Africa.

Unlike today’s seafaring migrants who are dying in droves in the Mediterranean sea, the former migrants did not in the early going face resistance from other humans and the laws of nation states. Yet DNA establishes that past and present migrants share common ancestors – they are relatives in the direct, genetic, biological sense of the term. All Europeans carry the haplogroup markers known as L, mainly L-3. Today’s seafaring migrants coming out of Africa [carry](#) the same DNA as ancestral and present day residents of Europe.



Meanwhile, [current migrants](#), finding themselves restricted from migrating overland the way their ancestors did (owing to a long stretch of nation states and their laws) have taken to the sea. And just as they are migrants, so too are all of us in Europe. Indeed, no resident of the European Union – not one – can claim to be indigenous.

For some, being indigenous confers a claim to occupancy if not ownership. Unfortunately groups we normally refer to as indigenous (incorrectly now that the DNA data is in), Aborigines, Amazon tribes, America’s first peoples, East Asian islanders and the like, have historically benefitted not at all from being “original” peoples when it comes to land

and cultural claims. Oddly, they too are migrants as studies of their haplogroups have revealed. Actual indigenous peoples would thus have to be descended from hunter-gatherers who developed into farmers and **remained** where they started, i.e., sub Saharan Africa.

For all that, those who occupy the same DNA genetic ancestry – our own relatives – face such formidable obstacles in following their ancestors' migratory path that they are prepared to capsize in dubious vessels and die. They die in part because legal migration offers them next to no opportunity for movement. Remaining in situ for would-be migrants can mean poverty, war, torture, insecurity and death. This leaves harsh choices, made more so by resistance from the migrants' own European relatives.

Regretfully, if there is a worse off group today, people facing even more hardship than seafaring migrants leaving African shores to cross the Mediterranean, it is people who don't even have the means to flee the wretched conditions that set their more mobile brothers and sisters in motion. Both groups warrant more consideration than they are ordinarily given by Europeans.

Europeans may have forgotten that when they learned what *they* could do with ships, they “reverse-migrated” to colonise Africa at the point of a gun. They arrived with far more rapacious intent and deadly results than those dying to leave Africa today.

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