

'DNA Nation' misrepresents our past and turns Indigenous people into a palaeo-theme park

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Hadzabe (Hadze) men returning from hunt. Credit: Wikimedia commons, CC BY-SA

Australians have become oddly obsessed with our ancestry. Something in

our collective psyche as a nation seems to be turning a healthy curiosity about the past into a deep yearning to belong.

What's fuelling this obsession? Our history as a nation of displaced immigrants?

A nation still grappling with its history of dispossession, theft, murder and cultural appropriation of Indigenous people?

Or, a culture that seems to have lost its way with respect to the environment, driven by an obsession with owing 'stuff', regardless of the true cost?

To be sure, we need to own the past and tell an honest account of our nation's history. We owe it the First Australians; for genuine reconciliation is impossible without it.

And, we need to face up to the fact that this moment in time is critical for the future quality of life for all of humankind, and other species, on the planet.

Especially at a time when the emerging middle classes in countries like India and China look to countries like Australia as a model for the lifestyle they want as well.

But the current nostalgic obsession with our ancient collective history - the Palaeolithic - is producing casualties: Indigenous people, our budgets, our health, science, and longer term, possibly even the planet itself.

A good deal has been written about the real implications and damaging effects this [modern palaeo-obsession](#), translated into fads like the palaeodiet, is having.

It seems to meet a yearning we have as a culture for a past where people lived in a kind of innocence normally associated with the Garden of Eden.

But this palaeo-delusion takes us down an old familiar path, where Indigenous people are viewed as the past in a kind of stasis; a stage of human evolution unprogressed; untouched by the worldly ways of sophisticated Western civilisation; people who have not left the Stone Age.

This is Rousseau's eighteenth century concept of the [Noble Savage](#). It's how James Cook, Joseph Banks and other European navigators at the time viewed the Indigenous people of Australia and the Pacific; with nostalgia and yearning.

And we all know what happened next, despite the sentimentality.

Today, in Australia, we're uncritically repeating history, and seem blissfully unaware of the possible consequences of doing so.

A new show on SBS - [DNA Nation](#), which premiered last Sunday night - has taken this nostalgic obsession to new heights. And, all under the guise and credibility of genetic science.

Now, we've only seen one episode in this three part program. But, it was enough to irritate the heck out of me.

Three famous Australians from very different backgrounds have their DNA heritage read to them by a leading geneticist as they go back and 'trace the evolutionary journey of their ancestors' from Africa back to Downunder.

We learned that they are the first people in Australia to undertake such

an exercise. Actually, commercial DNA testing has been around for more than a decade and thousands of Australians, including me, have already had their ancestry read by a DNA lab.

Like our three characters, and everyone else alive today, I too have African ancestors. I guess that makes me human as well.

But what really bothered me was the trip our three celebrities took to Africa to meet their ancestors; we were told they were stepping back into the past to the beginning of humankind; to experience what life would have been like 200,000 years ago; with people who spoke what might be one of the original languages of humankind.

I get really sick of hearing this tired old, thoughtless, trite. And it's one that abounds in the media, often peddled by scientists themselves.

The Hadza hunter-gatherers - the people visited by our three characters in their fly-in fly-out evolutionary journey - are genetically one of the oldest populations alive today.

And, they do practice a form of economy-ecology that was practised by everyone's ancestors in the ancient past. But, here's the catch; they are not a Stone Age people frozen in time. They are not our past.

Rather, they are part of the extraordinary diversity of human cultures, economies and ecologies that exist around the world today.

Sure, we might have something to learn from them about attitudes and cultural practices towards power and community participation, relationships, food and the environment. But, the same could be said about many cultures and people.

The United Nations estimates there are 370 million Indigenous people in

the world living in 70 countries. Only a small fraction of whom are hunters and gatherers.

Some contemporary people were hunters and gatherers until very recently; others were previously farmers and turned to hunting and gathering out of necessity to survive.

Also, I'm not sure who briefed our characters on what to say about say about the science of [human evolution](#), but there were some real zingers in the show.

We learned from one of our characters that our brains got larger because of meat eating when hunting started through to the invention of farming. This, we were assured, allowed us to accomplish great things.

Did they mean things like smart phones that allowed our stars to ring home when they felt a bit homesick? Or the muesli bars they probably ate when the hunter-gatherer diet was bit chewy?

Their comments were often factually inaccurate. But also, a statement like this one begs the question: is it because they aren't farmers that the Hadza haven't achieved great things? Is this why they're stuck in the Palaeolithic?

According to [the United Nations](#), Indigenous people like the Hadza have some of the highest mortality rates, lowest life expectancy's and worst opportunities for economic development anywhere in the world.

Many of the 50 million Indigenous people in Africa are faced with dispossession of their lands, territories and resources, forced assimilation into the way of life of socially dominant groups, marginalisation, poverty and illiteracy; [the list goes on](#).

We trivialise them and their culture, and the extraordinarily difficult lives they lead, by treating them like an exhibition in a palaeo-theme park.

I would image they were paid to be in the film, and so they should be! Really well too, I hope, so they can send their kids to school or buy much needed mosquito nets or medicine. Things most Australians take for granted.

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