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In Buenos Aires, Researchers Exhume Long-Unclaimed African Roots

The results won't be analyzed until later this year. Diego Masello, a professor with the National University of the Third of February, said the thorniest challenge of the census has been eliciting honest answers -- or any answers at all.

"In some cases, the census-takers reported that residents who visibly had some African traits, even some who appeared completely black, absolutely refused to participate," said Masello, who is helping direct the census.

Gomes said such responses have been frustrating, but illustrative.

"Without a doubt, racial prejudice is great in this society, and people want to believe that they are white," Gomes said. "Here, if someone has one drop of white blood, they call themselves white."

But personal definitions do not count when analyzing DNA, which is what a group of scientists from the University of Buenos Aires and Oxford University in England did earlier this year. After collecting blood samples at a local hospital, they searched for genetic markers that indicate African ancestry. The results, to be published this year in the American Journal of Physical Anthropology, suggested that 10 percent of those who identified themselves as white were, in part, descendants of black Argentines.

"A lot of people were very surprised by this," said Francisco R.



Miriam Gomes, right, interviews Freda Montana, a resident of Buenos Aires, for a study to determine how many Argentines consider themselves black. (By Silvina Frydlewsky For The Washington Post)

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Carnese, a geneticist at the University of Buenos Aires and co-author of the study. "When you walk around Buenos Aires, you don't see signs of African ancestry. But you see it in the genes."

Carnese said there was also a growing desire among Argentines to figure out their heritage -- one reason that multiple studies are trying to shed light on the same thing, he said. For most Argentines, that means delving into the cultures of Italy, England and Germany, but Africa also deserves consideration, he said.

The near-invisibility of black culture and roots in Argentina has been a striking contrast with neighboring Brazil, which once imported millions of African slaves and has a large, high-profile Afro-Brazilian community.

Africans had a strong hand in shaping Brazilian culture: samba music, the Lenten festival of carnival and African religions that have melded with Roman Catholicism to form hybrid systems of faith. Even the national dish, a black bean staple called *feijoada*, is popularly credited to 16th-century slaves.

In Argentina, partly in response to the new research, black interest groups have started promoting what they say is a strong African influence on some of the traditions most closely associated with Argentina. There was little slave trade with Argentina; many Africans who ended up there had originally been imported to Brazil.

"The first paintings of people dancing the tango are of people of African descent," Gomes said.

The *asado* -- the traditional Argentine barbecue that includes glands, livers and other organs from cows -- also was influenced by blacks who collected the parts that the Argentine cowboys, or gauchos, threw away, according to Masello.

The census-takers hope their work will inspire the government to include African ancestry in its next census in 2011 -- a decision that Gomes said she believed would go a long way in acknowledging the role of Africa in today's Argentina.

"If we're not counted," she said, "there's no way to really convince people that we actually exist."

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