

Does being mixed race mean being mixed up?

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By Deborah Gabriel

A documentary made ten years ago which explores issues of cultural identity for mixed race people is being broadcast on the Community Channel on Wednesday March 20 at 8.30pm. But to what extent have attitudes changed in a decade?

Caste in Half was made ten years ago "When people didn't want to talk about issues of mixed race," said its producer, Tina Attoh, who herself is of Ghanaian and Dutch heritage. The documentary centres on "the effects of denial...not just of one generation but several generations and how it affects a person who is of mixed race," Attoh told Black Britain.

The documentary is told through the perspective of people of mixed race through a series of interviews. Geraldine, a mature woman with children of her own grew up in care not knowing her parents and is very bitter about it: "I do feel my mother denied me my right to my identity," she said. Asked how she identifies herself, Geraldine replies: "I portray myself as black at heart, but on the surface I'm quite versatile to it all. I keep as many white friends as I do black and so do my children."

David, 30 is half Jewish and half Nigerian but grew up never knowing one half of his family, because his father kept his existence and the existence of his wife and other children a secret from David's grandmother. The rest of the family colluded with the denial. Of his identity, he says:

"The cultural influence I've got is Hampstead and public schools." But as is often the case with people of mixed heritage, society may regard them as black. "When I was 13 I remember going into a toilet and scrawled in front of me in big letters was 'Dave Ruben is a yiddy nigger. That was a shock. I guess that gave me a lot of my identity,'" he says in the programme.

Lionel's father is Jamaican born and his mother is English. But when he was eleven months old, his father took him to Jamaica to raise him. Lionel said: "He never really spoke to me about it but from what I've heard from other people, he did not really think my mother was the right person [to raise me]."

Lionel believes that this was more to do with the fact that he was the first son and his father thought he would have more discipline being raised in Jamaica. Speaking of his father's decision, Lionel says: "I'm very glad he did because I find I have the best of both worlds."

Lionel's story

Lionel's father it seems was not necessarily proud of his own mixed heritage: "He wanted to deny his roots and he is even lighter than me. His father was a black man..." Asked whether he feels being black is about skin colour, Lionel resolutely replies that it is not: "Black is something inside of you. To be honest, a lot of people that I see in England who claim to be black, as far as I'm concerned, they're black outside and white inside."

Lionel also talks about the hostility he has sometimes received from black people over his mixed identity: "I've had people curse me and say that they are black and being oppressed and I can pass as white. The thing is, I don't want to pass as white. I make no effort to pass as white."

Lionel is happily married to June, a dark-skinned black woman and they have a son. Although she accepts that Lionel sees his identity as black, she believes that it is important to raise mixed race children to understand and respect both cultures: "He's one of these people that gets very upset when he is described as coloured. He wants to be called black."

Attoh told Black Britain that she most identifies with Lionel: "I know the way in Jamaica that Lionel was brought up. He had problems but it didn't seem to affect his personal life as much as the others," she said. Attoh was brought up in Ghana and feels that her upbringing is partly "why I don't have issues. Race was the last thing on anybody's mind," she said. After ten years, Attoh feels it is time to re-examine identity issues surrounding people of mixed heritage. Her interest is in how people are affected today: "What I'm going to explore next time is... who moves on and why that is very important."

Black Britain spoke to 36 year old Carli Douglas (who is not connected with the documentary) about her experience of growing up in Britain as a mixed race person. Her paternal grandfather was a black Trinidadian and her grandmother was mixed race. Her father was born in the UK and her mother is English.

Douglas asserts that because dual heritage has been a factor in her family's history for several generations: "It stopped becoming an issue." But she admits that growing up in Essex in the seventies, she was "very aware" of an ambivalent attitude towards people of mixed race.

Carli's Story

"Because of where I lived you could count the people of colour on one hand, so I felt different and stood out," she said. "At school there was name-calling and things...sometimes it would upset me, there were some really horrible names."

Douglas feels that because there are more mixed race people in the UK now, things have changed a great deal, but admits "it probably depends where you live." Douglas now lives in Manchester, a multicultural city: "So I don't feel different," she told Black Britain.

Douglas has friends from different backgrounds and said "most of the time I am not conscious of my colour, I just get on with my life." But she admits that as both of her grandparents have now passed on, she feels less connected to the African Caribbean community. "I feel as if my link to that heritage has gone...that makes me sad that I didn't learn as much as I should have done from them."

Douglas told Black Britain that she would like to go to Trinidad to meet her family: "because I want to hold onto that." Of her interaction with the African Caribbean community, Douglas said:

"When I was younger I sometimes attracted attention because I hung around with lots of white people, so I would get comments. As I've got older, I don't so much feel excluded, just that I have not immersed myself in black culture... I'd like to, but I don't feel I have

the opportunity.”

Douglas said that despite the term ‘mixed race’ being adopted to replace the more offensive term ‘half-caste,’ it is just as problematic: “It doesn’t describe me. Mixed race could mean I’m half Irish, half-Chinese...it’s too broad a term, like, just chuck everybody in there who’s not one or the other.”

The recent obsession with tracing one’s ancestry as evidenced by the popularity of programmes such as the BBC’s *Who Do You Think You Are* coupled with matriarchal DNA testing, often reveals that white people are sometimes not as white as they believe. Last year a group of white men in Yorkshire were tested as part of a research project and the findings revealed that the men, who shared the same surname, have African genes.

Douglas said: “If you go back in history, everybody has always been migrating and invading, so there’s always been a mixture. I don’t put myself in a category...I’m proud of both sides.” Attoh told Black Britain: “We are all of one race, the human race and when people stop pointing fingers then we know we’ve reached a certain level.”

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