Seeking Ancestry in DNA Ties Uncovered by Tests
By AMY HARMON

Alan Moldawer's adopted twins, Matt and Andrew, had always thought of themselves as white. But when it came time for them to apply to college last year, Mr. Moldawer thought it might be worth investigating the origins of their slightly tan-tinted skin, with a new DNA kit that he had heard could determine an individual's genetic ancestry.

The results, designating the boys 9 percent Native American and 11 percent northern African, arrived too late for the admissions process. But Mr. Moldawer, a business executive in Silver Spring, Md., says they could be useful in obtaining financial aid.

"Naturally when you're applying to college you're looking at how your genetic status might help you," said Mr. Moldawer, who knows that the twins' birth parents are white, but has little information about their extended family. "I have three kids going now, and you can bet that any advantage we can take we will."

Genetic tests, once obscure tools for scientists, have begun to influence everyday lives in many ways. The tests are reshaping people's sense of themselves — where they came from, why they behave as they do, what disease might be coming their way.

It may be only natural then that ethnic ancestry tests, one of the first commercial products to emerge from the genetic revolution, are spurring a thorough exploration of the question, What is in it for me?

Many scientists criticize the ethnic ancestry tests as promising more than they can deliver. The legacy of an ancestor several generations back may be too diluted to show up. And the tests have a margin of error, so results showing a small amount of ancestry from one continent may not actually mean someone has any.
Given the tests' speculative nature, it seems unlikely that colleges, governments and other institutions will embrace them. But that has not stopped many test-takers from adopting new DNA-based ethnicities — and a sense of entitlement to the privileges typically reserved for them.

Prospective employees with white skin are using the tests to apply as minority candidates, while some with black skin are citing their European ancestry in claiming inheritance rights.

One Christian is using the test to claim Jewish genetic ancestry and to demand Israeli citizenship, and Americans of every shade are staking a DNA claim to Indian scholarships, health services and casino money.

"This is not just somebody's desire to go find out whether their grandfather is Polish," said Troy Duster, a sociologist at New York University who has studied the social impact of the tests. "It's about access to money and power."

Driving the pursuit of genetic bounty are start-up testing companies with names like DNA Tribes and Ethnoancestry. For $99 to $250, they promise to satisfy the human hunger to learn about one's origins — and sometimes much more. On its Web site, a leader in this cottage industry, DNA Print Genomics, once urged people to use it "whether your goal is to validate your eligibility for race-based college admissions or government entitlements."

Tony Frudakis, the research director at DNAPrint, said the three-year-old company had coined the term American Indian Princess Syndrome to describe the insistent pursuit of Indian roots among many newly minted genetic genealogists. If the tests fail to turn up any, Mr. Frudakis added, "this type of customer is frequently quite angry."
DNAPrint calls the ethnic ancestry tests "recreational genomics" to distinguish them from the more serious medical and forensic applications of genetics. But as they ignite a debate over a variety of genetic birthrights, their impact may be further-reaching than anyone anticipated.

Some social critics fear that the tests could undermine programs meant to compensate those legitimately disadvantaged because of their race. Others say they highlight an underlying problem with labeling people by race in an increasingly multiracial society.

"If someone appears to be white and then finds out they are not, they haven't experienced the kinds of things that affirmative action is supposed to remedy," said Lester Monts, senior vice provost for student affairs at the University of Michigan, which won the right to use race as a factor in admissions in a 2003 Supreme Court decision.

Still, Michigan, like most other universities, relies on how students choose to describe themselves on admissions applications when assigning racial preferences.

Ashley Klett's younger sister marked the "Asian" box on her college applications this year, after the elder Ms. Klett, 20, took a DNA test that said she was 2 percent East Asian and 98 percent European.

Whether it mattered they do not know, but she did get into the college of her choice.

"And they gave her a scholarship," Ashley said.

Pearl Duncan has grander ambitions: she wants a castle.

A descendant of Jamaican slaves, Ms. Duncan had already identified the Scottish slave
owner who was her mother's great-great-grandfather through archival records. But the DNA test confirming her 10 percent British Isles ancestry gave her the nerve to contact the Scottish cousins who had built an oil company with his fortune.

"It's one thing to feel satisfied to know something about your heritage, it's another to claim it," said Ms. Duncan, a writer in Manhattan. "There's a kind of checkmateness to the DNA."

The family's 11 castles, Ms. Duncan noted, were obtained with the proceeds of her African ancestors' labor. Perhaps they could spare one for her great-great-great-grandfather's black heirs? In case the paper records she had gathered were not persuasive, she invited male family members to take a DNA test that can identify a genetic signature passed from father to son. So far, no one has taken her up on the offer. Her appeal, Ms. Duncan said, is mostly playful. Less so is her insistence that the Scots stop referring to their common ancestors as simply "Virginia and West India merchants."

"By acknowledging me, the Scots are beginning to acknowledge that these guys were slaveholders," she said.

Other slave descendants, known as the Freedmen, see DNA as bolstering their demand to be reinstated as members of the Indian tribes that once owned their ancestors. Under a treaty with the United States, the "Five Civilized Tribes" — Choctaws, Chickasaws, Creeks, Seminoles and Cherokees — freed their African slaves and in most cases made them citizens in the mid-1800's. More recently, the tribes have sought to exclude the slaves' descendants, depriving them of health benefits and other services.

At a meeting in South Coffeyville, Okla., last month, members of the Freedmen argued
that DNA results revealing their Indian ancestry underscore the racism of the tribe's position that their ancestors were never true Indians.

"Here's this DNA test that says yes, these people can establish some degree of Indian blood," said Marilyn Vann, a Cherokee Freedwoman who is suing for tribal citizenship in federal court. "It's important to combat those who want to oppress people of African descent in their own tribe."

As the assets of some tribes have swelled in the wake of the 1988 federal law allowing them to build casinos, there has been no shortage of petitioners stepping forward to assert their right to citizenship and a share of the wealth. Now, many of them are wielding genetic ancestry tests to bolster their claim.

"It used to be 'someone said my grandmother was an Indian,' " says Joyce Walker, the enrollment clerk who regularly turns away DNA petitioners for the Mashantucket Pequot tribe, which operates the lucrative Foxwoods Resort Casino in Connecticut. "Now it's 'my DNA says my grandmother was an Indian.'"

Recognizing the validity of DNA ancestry tests, some Indians say, would undermine tribal sovereignty. They say membership requires meeting the criteria in a tribe's constitution, which often requires documenting blood ties to a specific tribal member. DNA tests cannot pinpoint to which tribe an individual's ancestor belonged.

But if tribes are perceived as blocking legitimate DNA applicants to limit payouts of casino money, experts say, it could damage their standing to enforce the treaties conferring the financial benefits so many covet.

"Ancestry DNA tests are playing a part in the evolution of what the American public thinks matters," said Kim Tallbear, an American Indian studies professor at Arizona
State University. "And tribes are dependent on the American public's good will, so they may have to bend."

Under no such pressure, Israeli authorities have so far denied John Haedrich what he calls his genetic birthright to citizenship without converting to Judaism. Under Israel's "law of return," only Jews may immigrate to Israel without special dispensation.

Mr. Haedrich, a nursing home director who was raised a Christian, found through a DNA ancestry test that he bears a genetic signature commonly found among Jews. He says his European ancestors may have hidden their faith for fear of persecution.

Rabbis, too, have disavowed the claim: "DNA, schmeeNA," Mr. Haedrich, 44, said the rabbi at a local synagogue in Los Angeles told him when he called to discuss it.

Undeterred, Mr. Haedrich has hired a lawyer to sue the Israeli government. As in America, he argues, DNA is widely accepted as evidence in forensics and paternity cases, so why not immigration?

"Because I was raised a gentile does not change the fact that I am," Mr. Haedrich wrote in a full-page advertisement in The Jerusalem Post, "a Jew by birth."

Shonda Brinson, an African-American college student, is still trying to figure out how best to apply her DNA results on employment forms.

In some cases, she has chosen to write in her actual statistics — 89 percent sub-Saharan African, 6 percent European and 5 percent East Asian. But she figures her best bet may be just checking all relevant boxes.

"That way, of the three categories they won't be able to determine which percentage is bigger," Ms. Brinson said.