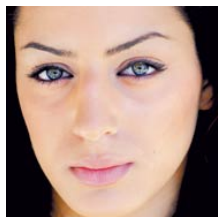


12 May 2008

By: Stefan Anitei, Science Editor

A Druze girl
Times Online

[Genetics Track Down the Origin of the Druze People](#)

It is highly diverse

The Druze people are a religious community from the Middle East. Initially, it started as an offshoot of the Ismaili sect of Islam, but also incorporated Gnostic, neo-Platonic and other philosophies, a fact that made Islamic scholars regard it as a non-Muslim sect. A new research, published in the journal PLoS ONE, shows that the Druze people of Israel have a wide array of ancient DNA lineages which, in turn, would explain more of the history of this esoteric sect. The team of researchers analyzed mitochondrial DNA, which is transmitted exclusively from mother to daughter, revealing the ancestry of a person. "Altogether we sampled 311 different paternal households from 20 Druze villages in Northern Israel, and 208 surnames were identified," wrote the team led by Karl Skorecki from the Technion-Israel Institute of Technology. Today, this close-knit religious community numbers a maximum of 1 million individuals, located mainly in the mountains of Syria, Lebanon, Israel and Jordan. The team found an unusual high frequency of a genetic marker called haplogroup X, which is rare but encountered in various populations around the world. The Druze are a compact community that discourages outside marriage. Usually, first cousins marry one another, and conversions are impossible. This religion emerged in 1017, as founded by a group of ethnically diverse people. This new research confirmed this. "The populations with the smallest genetic distances to the Druze were: Turks, Armenians, Iranians and Egyptians," wrote the authors. Such diversity could enable scientists to study how various types of mitochondrial DNA are associated to specific diseases. "You can look at 150 kinds of mitochondrial DNA within one group with a similar environment, and be able to see the specific contribution of these variations. Since they are comprised of so many distinct lineages, genetic disease may vary from clan to clan and village to village," said Skorecki. The same team had found that Jewish priests called Kohanim have a single common male ancestor, confirming the Biblical legend that they descend from the high priest Aaron. The team also showed that 40% of Ashkenazi (European-origin) Jews originated in 4 European "founding mothers" who lived one millennium ago.