PEOPLE GROUPS: WHY BOTHER? NO, I REALLY DO MEAN IT!

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The notion of ethno-linguistic groups (especially unreached ones) is not a particularly useful one for mission strategy. This doesn't mean that vast amounts of energy aren't poured into it though.
Category: Mission

You know what? I'm far from convinced that the idea of ethno-linguistic groups is a useful one for most Christian mission thinking. Before you call in the missio-heresy police, let me explain.

In a recent post on Mission in the 21st Century (which I unpicked here) Al Mohler made the following statement:

> *The new vision for world missions is directed toward the reaching of people groups rather than nations. Missiological focus upon the nation-state is a remnant of the nineteenth century, when nations were conceived as singular units and national identity was paramount. This paradigm was long out of date by the end of the twentieth century. Christians now recognize that there are thousands of distinct people groups, each identifiable by culture, language, and social structureâ€"and they are not always divided neatly by political boundaries.*

The problem for Dr. Mohler, is that the paradigm of people groups was running up against its "sell by date" Â by the end of the twentieth century. He has discarded one long out of date paradigm to replace it with one that is (at best) on its last legs.

Firstly, the notion of people groups identifiable by culture, language and social structure is far too simplistic. You can't divide people up this way any more than you can divide them into neat, homogeneous nation states. Let's take a nice easy example, the Kouya of Ivory Coast; there are only about 14,000 of them, so things can't be too complex, can they?

There are twelve or thirteen Kouya villages, but in three of them very few people speak Kouya; mostly they speak the neighbouring language, Gouro. Then around 10% of the Kouya population live away from the area in cities and towns where the linguistic and cultural situation is extremely complex - we will return to this. Even within this small group you can identify at least three language and culture groups. Things get even more complex if you try and classify bigger groups as having shared language, culture and structure. Sorry, it just doesn't happen.

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Secondly, such homogeneity as Â does exist is being eroded by urbanisation. Over 50% of the world's population now live in cities where ethnic and linguistic identity is thoroughly up for grabs. I have Kouya friends who are married to people from other ethnic groups and who are bringing up their children as French speakers. The kids' "mother tongue" is not actually the language of their mothers. This sort of thing happens over all the world; cities are melting pots where ethnic and linguistic identities are lost and redeveloped within generations. The classic case of this is the "melting pot" of the United States; it is strange therefore that it tends to be Americans who propagate the idea clearly defined ethnic groups.

OK. I realise that I have overstated my case somewhat. Despite the pressures that I have mentioned, it is still possible to identify a Kouya as a Kouya; at least in the rural areas. It's also true that some ethnic groups manage to maintain a distinct identity despite living in a large, multicultural setting. That's why I said this paradigm is *near* it's "sell by date", it hasn't quite got there yet.

What does this mean for mission strategy? It seems to me clear that Bible translators will always need to have some sort of linguistic criteria to work with; but BIble translation is a fairly specialised - not to say unique - sort of mission work. It isn't typical.

One of the sadder things that I come across in mission literature are the check lists of 'unreached people groups' (or UPGs). These purport to be lists of every ethno-linguistic group on the planet, with information on whether there is a Christian witness in those groups, often accompanied by the implication that when every box is ticked, Jesus will return. So what's the problem?

- As I showed above, the classification of the groups is blurry at best.
- The information about which group has been "reached" is incomplete at best. I remember seeing one list which described a particular group as having 'no Christian presence' which was a surprise as Sue was working on Scripture translation with the local church at the time.
- More importantly, by fixating on 'ethno-linguistic' groups, we are likely to miss the spontaneous urban "tribes" and new groupings which arise in different settings. Martin Lee of Global Connections wrote this:

> *I personally have a huge problem with how some people deal with the issue of unreached people groups and Â the focus on ethnicity as if that is the only problem. Yes this is Â important but middle class Buddhists in Japan have few Christians among them, middle class Hindus and Sikhs seem almost impossible to reach. We need something more nuanced now people are mixed up in an urbanised world. I leave in leafy Leamington Spa and we have one of the largest Sikh temples in Europe. Yet I personally have little contact with them. (read the whole presentation)*

A paradigm which thinks only of "people groups" doesn't deal with our rapidly changing, rapidly urbanising world. Sadly, there is a vast mission industry devoted to promoting this way of thinking. We need to break out of the box.