

THE PEOPLE GROUP PUZZLE

■ How would you weave together the various concepts and definitions in this journal if you only had one page in which to do it?

By Paul Filidis

Human cultures and associations are extremely complex and fluid, making them difficult to pin down exactly.

How Many Peoples And People Groups?

As an early attempt to shed light on this complex question, David Barrett's 1982 *World Christian Encyclopedia* listed 5 races and 432 *macropeoples* (major peoples) by name. Further research since then has resulted in an actual list of names of about 11,500 *peoples* (ethnolinguistic groups). These were derived at by dividing the population of each country according to its ethnic and linguistic affiliation.

Taking a closer look at ethnolinguistic peoples, one quickly uncovers further possible subdivisions. Some call them *minipeoples*, and define them according to dialects and tribal lines. Their number is estimated in the tens-of-thousands. A partial but substantive list of names exists at the research level, but may not be published for some time.

The term *people group* is also frequently used to denote an ethnolinguistic people. However, *people groups* do not just represent population segments based on ethnicity or language, but primarily those based on sociological factors. There exist, for example, political, economic, religious, cultural or geographical people groups. Some of these, in fact, could be multi-ethnic. Because the phrase *people group* serves more generally as an all-inclusive umbrella term, it is virtually impossible to ascertain the names and number of all people groups in the world; the number would run into the hundreds-of-thousands, or more.

Different evangelistic initiatives appropriately focus on different levels of human units. While some ministries (Christian broadcasting, for example) will find it sufficient to concentrate on a major language group that stretches across political borders, others (e.g.,

church planting efforts) will need to define the perimeters of a smaller subgroup. The latter probably focus on minipeoples, a certain caste or people groups isolated by geographical barriers.

Unreached Peoples, People Groups

The current estimate of *unreached people groups*, promoted by the Global Statistics Task Force, the U.S. Center for World Mission and others, amounts to 12,000 (on the minipeople level). Although similar in number to the above mentioned "11,500," it refers to a different list.

How do they relate? Examination of the 11,500 people enabled researchers to rank them according to their Christian status and level of exposure to

the list of the approximately 2,000 *unreached peoples* (ethnolinguistic groups) in 1990.

Critics correctly pointed out that some of these 2,000 peoples number in the millions of members, and consist of distinct subgroups. Each of these, it was argued, need to be evaluated and targeted separately—especially for church planting purposes. Looking at it this way, the 2,000 *known* peoples may well end up consisting of and confirming the 12,000 *estimated* people groups.

Nevertheless, for the first time, a significantly comprehensive list of actual names of unreached peoples is about to be published. It will give an unprecedented boost to *Adopt-A-People* programs, whereby churches, prayer groups, and agencies from all over the

"A people group is a significantly large grouping of individuals who perceive themselves to have a common affinity for one another because of their shared language, religion, ethnicity, residence, occupation, class or caste, situation, etc. or combination of these. For evangelistic purposes it is the largest possible group within which the gospel can spread as a church planting movement without encountering [unnecessary] barriers of understanding or acceptance."

Christianity. It revealed that some 2,000 of them were sufficiently unevangelized so as to be categorized as unreached or least evangelized. *The 12,000 refers to minipeople subdivisions of these 2,000 unreached ethnolinguistic peoples*, and is an estimate that researchers are confident to substantiate during this year.

The lack of a list of names for the estimated 12,000 *unreached people groups* up to this point had been the weak point in promoting the otherwise valid concept of the people group approach in church planting (see the definition above). Because of this, researchers and mission leaders, keen on supporting and implementing global evangelism plans by the year 2000, consented at a recent meeting in Colorado Springs (USA) to proceed with first publishing

world will be able to adopt peoples for prayer and strategic planning. In addition, it will prove indispensable in our attempt to measure the progress toward fulfilling the Great Commission during the remaining nearly 11 years of this millennium. ■

Paul Filidis is the Director of Research and Information for Youth With A Mission (YWAM) International. He and his wife Mary with their two children live in Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

This article is first appeared in *World Christian News*, March 1990. If you would like to subscribe to this engaging publication write:

World Christian News
Prins Hendrikkade 50
1012 AC Amsterdam
NETHERLANDS

Airmail subscription: \$14.50 U.S. a year or \$25 for 2 years.