



People Group Information in an African Context

BY **GEORGE GUMAH**

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The African Church and the growing indigenous mission agencies are becoming more familiar with global people group lists published online. As we celebrate what God has been doing through data curators, there are still concerns about the accuracy of the lists and the accompanying information. It is worth exploring the various views because many churches and agencies depend on the information presented in people groups lists to inform strategies, prayer, and missionary training. Until the whole Church is mobilized to reach the whole world, our work as researchers is not done.

Why are People Group Lists Needed?

People group lists are needed for ministry tracking, measurement, assessment, and direction. Lists help us identify the people groups with the greatest need for the gospel. The lists bring clear categorization of people groups for focusing missionary work and provide perspective on the magnitude of the unfinished task. There is a need to draw people's attention to people groups that share similar lineage, language, and culture. Until we know what's unfinished, we will not be able to

achieve the purposes of God for all "nations" (Matthew 28:18-20; Revelation 5:9 and 7:9).

People group lists provide very important information which the Church in Africa has not been able to produce on its own, though Africans are needed to finish the task. Until we see the relevance of tracking all people groups, the African Church cannot focus on nor prioritize well which people groups are unreached with the gospel.

Using People Group Information in Ghana

The Ghana Evangelism Committee (GEC) and Ghana Evangelical Mission Association (GEMA) have helped many churches and mission agencies to understand people group lists through workshops, consultations and recently, the mission researchers forum. The outcome is amazing: many churches have adopted and are effectively engaging many unreached people groups (UPGs). Some student groups have also emerged from these initiatives and are earnestly praying for specific UPGs and forming resolute movements. Notable among them is the Chakali Movement, committed to praying for the Chakali people and sending

missionaries to serve among them. In addition, two young missionaries are dedicated to reaching the Fulani as they go throughout West Africa to engage them.

Accuracy of People Group Lists

It is worth noting that the effort and time involved in gathering people group information and the increasingly rapid movement of people, especially rural to urban migration, has a tendency to limit or reduce the accuracy of people group lists and information. Africans consider people group lists fairly accurate, even though there have been cases of differing on-the-ground realities. In some cases, information published is not as accurate as what on-site workers think. These differences are understandable, considering the large amount of data collected and the difficulty of frequent updates. If published figures are estimates or extrapolations, the information will tend to be less accurate. As much as possible, cross-checks and verification ought to be done before information is published.

Are Unreached People Group Lists a Western “Thing”?

People group lists may have started as a Western “thing,” but the Western Church is gradually stepping out of mainstream mission engagement.¹ The West has had the expertise, tools and funds for collecting and cataloguing people group lists which serve the global Church. In the past, people group lists were generated mainly for Western missionaries who were sent to serve the rest of the world. With the surge of the Church in the Global South as a growing mission force, people group lists become more critical for the Global South to fulfill its new sending role.

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The challenge for many Africans is the source of published people group information. If the source is still Western, then we need to quickly rethink how to overcome that. The users of data ought to be the ones determining what

should be gathered.² Therefore, the Global South needs to be well heard and directly involved in developing people group lists so the results are relevant to the Global South context. Based on my conversations with mission leaders in Africa, when the source of information comes from the indigenous people, it is considered more credible and accurate. Curators of global people group lists have sometimes accepted information from sources not on the ground, which has raised eyebrows in some African mission circles. People group information must be validated locally through in-country assessments. The assumption is that you cannot give an accurate update if you are not present on the ground.

Perhaps the question we should ask is: Is the people group list and the accompanying information representative enough of reality? This is where African ministries and missionaries can be of great help. Curators of people group lists from the West are doing the best they can, but they need to work closely with African missionaries and information workers who understand people groups in their context—their cultural dynamics and complexities.

People Group Barriers in Africa

Ethnicity is an innate thing, and it is still very strong in identifying a people group. People groups who travel in-country or across-country rarely deny their ethnic background. For example, new believers in unreached African people groups are requesting literacy materials in their own languages and songs and stories portraying their own cultures. They prefer not to merge with other people groups. The tribal instincts in Africa are still strong among most people groups.

This does not deny the fact that the traditional barriers of some people groups are changing due to globalization, immigration, and urbanization. This change is subtle among some people groups, but rapid in others. The change is in two forms:

1. Movement from their original location: They have become the scattered harvest field. It is still important to look at culture, language and worldviews of people groups. We all agree that the mission field has arrived at our doorstep, and it is not always necessary to travel to their places of origin. They usually live in clusters in their new locations, and that should be tracked.

¹ Gina A. Zurlo, Todd M. Johnson, and Peter F. *Crossing. World Christianity and Mission 2020: Ongoing Shift to the Global South* (International Bulletin of Mission Research, 2020), Vol. 44(1), 9.

² Maurizio V. & Frances R. & Maria João V. R. *The Users of Statistics and their role in the European Society* (Brussels: ESAC, 2015), 2.

2. Changes in their culture and language as a result of intermarriages, trade and educational policies. In some instances, people acquire multiple identities, and others have their culture entirely replaced by another. This is especially true for the younger generation, who have sometimes lost their cultures and languages because of living in urban centers, acquiring new cultures and languages.

These changes do not rule out traditional people groups. But we must adjust to the new changes, find ways of tracking them and develop strategies to reach them. As native languages begin to disappear, people group lists must take into consideration languages that the majority of the people of a particular group speak, and not only their native language. For instance, the Challa may still refer to themselves as Challa, but very few of them can speak their language.

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In the next several decades there will be a major shift. We are witnessing new strands of people groups who are not defined by the classical ethno-linguistic groupings, especially in urban centers. They are usually seen as sub-groups such as “head porters”, “prostitutes”, “transnational truck workers”, “scrap workers”, “money changers”, and “auto mechanics”. There are languages and lifestyles prevalent in these sub-cultures. Some of these groups have redefined the barriers of their culture and formed new ways of life, and they are usually closed to outside influence. Perhaps it might be too much information to handle at the global level, but national or local researchers should be able to identify and track such sub-groups and devise the necessary strategies to engage them. They need insiders to meaningfully make an impact with the gospel since these groups are often neglected. Though they are not ethno-linguistic, these groups have a strong affinity.

People groups lists are important, but we need global collaboration to produce credible, Spirit-led information for mission activities. 

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