

Lifting, Pushing, Squeezing and Blending The Dynamics of Ethnicity and Globalization

BY BRAD GILL

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An emphasis on “people groups” has become a common way to map our mission to the world. It was not always so. When Donald McGavran emerged from caste-ridden India in the 1960s, evangelicals were confronted anew with the strategic role of social and cultural boundaries in world evangelization. The persistent individualism at the core of our Western gospel made many nervous at the idea that large, ethnically homogenous peoples could move so quickly and powerfully towards the gospel. The idea of group conversion remained suspect. Then, in 1974, when Ralph Winter used this controversial idea to map a new demography of “unreached” peoples, the idea of “people groups” began to find its place in mission vernacular.

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But the concept of people groups has always met with “friendly fire” from missionaries and mission anthropologists who have served among these unreached peoples. Their profound critiques call us to reassess whether the social and cultural boundaries that define people groups will persist in today’s shrinking world. The recent publication of Paul Hiebert’s last two books provides one of the most comprehensive frameworks for this reassessment.¹ His rich, eclectic and nuanced anthropology probes the way modern social processes impact the distinctive boundaries of peoples across the world. And “people group” thinking is maturing as it absorbs these modern trends.

This topic reminds me of a conversation I had on the edge of the Sahara Desert. I rode with the son of a 90-year-old camel driver who had led caravans 11 times across the Sahara to Timbouctou. This son was raised with the same set of skills, but he had learned English amidst the burgeoning tourist industry, and he had recently married a European tourist. He was on his way to Europe, where she awaited. I happened to mention that I had made friends with some from his “Berougi” (people from the desert) years earlier when I worked in a city adjacent to his region. He immediately seemed uncomfortable and corrected my use of this ethnic term “Berougi.” His people were not just from the desert, but they were exclusively from a prestigious lineage in the

¹ Paul Hiebert, *The Gospel in Human Contexts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, 2009.

desert. He and the “Berougi” were very reluctant to visit these cities where I had worked because of all the prejudice they had experienced there. Forced by the crisis of drought to leave their desert trade, it was easier for them (and for him) to access another part of the globe than to contend with a cultural firewall a few hundred miles away.

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This young man represents the massive migrations and dispersions of peoples across the world. In the “push and pull” of this young man’s story, I notice the interface of two social realities: ethnicity and globalization. The mixture of these two contested concepts is a new focus of many mission anthropologists, for together they seem to provide a new way to exegete the complex field of relations in and around people groups. Ethnicity refers to culture, a peoples’ corporate sense of tradition, of shared value, belief and habit. Globalization, on the other hand, addresses the context of global change, and one’s sense of place in the flow of it all. The convergence leads to the new “glocal” reality, and I could see it in this young camel driver’s story. He carried both an ethnic identity with his people and a new relational link to a globalized world.

Everybody’s trying to get their arms around this idea of globalization. Thomas Friedman calls it that “inexorable integration of markets, nation-states and technologies” that enables us “to reach around the world farther, faster, and cheaper than ever before.”² It flattens our world. Fareed Zakaria of *Newsweek* suggests it’s a “Post-American World,” where the processes historically identified with “the rise of the West” now include “the rise of the Rest.”³

² Thomas Friedman, *The World is Flat*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, N.Y., 2005.

³ Fareed Zakaria, *The Post-American World*, W.W.Norton, N.Y., 2008.

The original Western carriers of education, media and technology have been decentralized into initiatives from other parts of the globe. Whatever the definition, globalization gives us a sense that modernity has shifted into overdrive.

So, do the ethnic boundaries of people groups persist, or does globalization rupture and flatten people groups into another social reality? I’d like to exegete four processes or effects of globalization on peoples of the world. They’re tossed around by social scientists, but we see them all the time. They can be highly theoretical, so let me begin with another snapshot.

I can recall my initial idea of the Muslim people group I entered years ago: tribal, noble, a corporate sense of destiny and a coherent sense of religious tradition. My mental map held for a few weeks before adjustments began. I was rummaging through the old marketplace one day when I came across an ancient-looking gateway. Over the threshold it said, “Dior Shyukh” (the Houses of the Sheikhs). I discovered that 60 years earlier this had been the seat of government for the entire tribal confederation. Now it was run-down, forgotten and not even a tourist stop. My wife would tell me that all the women at the public bath knew where judgment was now handed down. They would gossip the latest intrigues from across that mountain town, and inevitably it all fastened on either the new courthouse or city hall. Modern institutions had grafted themselves onto this “people group.” What initially seemed culturally solid, bounded and corporate was actually looser, fragmented and conflicted.

Lifting

First, there is a hint here of what Anthony Giddens calls the “lifting out” of local relations.⁴ The global reach of modern systems is pervasive; these systems begin to subtly redirect the trust persons have traditionally placed in local face-to-face commitments. Making a call on a cell phone, getting water from the kitchen sink or going to the bank are all actions which imply a realignment of trust towards modern, global systems. Consequently,

⁴ Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, Blackwell, U.K. 1990, p. 21.

trust in traditional relations slowly surrenders its grip to faceless and anonymous global systems. One is gradually lifted out of what was once a more inclusive sense of people group.



Pushing

Second, there's the "push down" effect.⁵ Globalization doesn't just pull you up and out, it presses down and creates new demand for ethnic autonomy. It makes the boundaries of people groups become more salient. This downward pressure has been a major catalyst in the astounding revival of local ethnic identities in recent decades (which really surprised mainline social science). When the lid comes off, as it did in Yugoslavia with the collapse of the Soviet Union, it exposes the reality of this "push down" effect. The nature of the ethnic explosion between Serbian, Croat and Bosnian Muslim is manifest in similar ways across a swath of nations in recent decades.

I could see this downward pressure in the Kurdish region I visited. Here's an entire region of displaced Muslims who had to flee the genocidal onslaught of Saddam Hussein. A "no-fly zone" granted them

security, and they had come out of the hills to reestablish their worlds. Amidst the displacement and fragmentations, there was a resurgence of ethnic identity. Boom-town cities were expanding, with new high-rise buildings everywhere. I noted that one tribal group of 20,000 had relocated and settled together in a suburban area, keeping intact their sense of tribal identity and traditional tribal leadership after 25 years of exile. Their ethnic autonomy isn't melting down.



Squeezing

Third, globalization can "squeeze sideways." Amidst the pressure of global systems, a single meaningful aspect of a peoples' identity can move laterally and link itself with others who share the same aspect. Economists note this in new economic zones, but by far the most vital aspect of identity that squeezes sideways is religious. The religious core of ethnicity intensifies and moves sideways, galvanizing large religious association. We've seen how the recent radical "Islamic jihad" forges together Muslims from all over the globe. What fuels this? It could be that abstract and impersonal global systems fail to provide the psychological reward that comes with personal face-to-face ties. Religion becomes the means by which people "re-imbed" themselves in meaningful relations. We see the markers of this broad ethno-religious identity almost everywhere.

⁵ Anthony Giddens, *Runaway World*, Routledge, N.Y., 2009, p. 13.

How else can one explain the teenage Muslim girl at our local high school whose head is fully covered, but who wears a halter-top and tight cut-off shorts and who hums to the cadence of a heavy metal Middle Eastern tune on her iPod?



Blending

All these effects contribute to a fourth, “blending” effect, what social scientists call “hybridity”, or “hybridities” since we see it in many forms and combinations.⁶ In mission circles this subject of hybridity began with the observation that large people movements for Christ happened in rural settings, not in urban settings. In the city the inclusive categories of family, clan, and tribe were more complicated as people joined, attended or aligned themselves with modern institutions and associations. The religion and culture of people groups is intersected by new educational and vocational affiliations. And it’s in the urban environment that people feel the hyper-effects of global “lifting out,” “pushing down” and “squeezing sideways.” Ethnicity doesn’t necessarily disappear, it just gets compartmentalized as people construct their identities.

So what are we to conclude? Do these effects add up to anything we can calculate or map out? I’m not the one to prognosticate, so I won’t. But on the field, I have found that understanding these processes and effects helps me to better understand the intentions and reactions of Muslim peoples among whom I’ve served. So allow me to venture just three modest observations.

First, I think we can expect that ethnicity will have a new intensity in light of globalization. It will hold, but among many peoples it will hold differently. Ethnicity will be held more deliberately, more defensively, even more defiantly. In the congestion and pressure of globalization, peoples will continue to construct their social boundaries, but even more so. The forces of globalization may continue to be successful in assimilating traditional worlds to modern life. But should we anticipate a kick-back effect, where people recreate a lost ethnicity in reaction to the psychological homelessness of modern life?

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Second, I concur with Robert Priest that it’s not a time to relax our anthropological analyses. On the contrary, more sophisticated tools are needed to inform mission practice.⁷

Third, let’s remember that our motive for sifting and sorting mankind is to honor and obey the God who created every people, “who determined the times set for them, and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us” (Acts 17:26,27).

⁶ Ted C. Lewellen, *The Anthropology of Globalization*, Bergin & Garvey, 2002, p. 98.

⁷ Brian Howell and Edwin Zehner, *Power and Identity in the Global Church*, William Carey Library, 2009, p.185.