

## A RE-EVALUATION OF PEOPLE GROUP CATEGORISATION WITH 'BORANA' AND 'WOLOF' CASE STUDIES

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### Cite this article in APA

Maclean, A. (2022). A re-evaluation of people group categorization with 'Borana' and 'Wolof' case studies. *Journal of philosophy and religion*. 1(1), 77-85, <https://doi.org/10.51317/jpr.v2i1.281>



A publication of Editon  
Consortium Publishing (online)

### Article history

Received: 05.08.2022

Accepted: 08.09.2022

Published: 17.10.2022

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online



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### Abstract

The current Missiological methodology for classification of people groups has focused on ethno-linguistic factors that were appropriate and useful for motivating a new generation of missionaries to venture out for the glory of their lord. Presently that methodology needs to be adapted to make it relevant to the every changing field of anthropology. The torrent of changes and modernisation brought about by the global mass media, generation Z and mass urbanisation has accelerated normal levels of worldview shift. The extent of this phenomenon is that the smartphone generation of Borana and Wolof Muslims share more worldview assumptions with their urban townsmen, of varying ethnicities, than they do with their ethnic rural kinsmen or even family members. This phenomenon requires new methods of group classification for a new generation of people groups who don't fit into the old group categories used to describe their forbears. Starting with a study of the unreached people group movement in Lausanne 1974 and examining case studies from the Wolof people of West Africa and the Borana of northern Kenya, this paper examines a wayforward in this important anthropological discussion. The discussion will be pertinent to anthropologists looking to form emic group classifications, missiologists seeking appropriate outreach methodology for emerging people groups and students of God's wordseeking to understand the great commission and its application to us today.

**Key terms:** A re-evaluation, people group categorisation, Borana, Wolof, case studies.

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

The historical method of classifying people groups has focused on ethno linguistic factors that were appropriate and useful. However, the rapid changes of modernisation have brought about mass urbanisation and rapid worldview shifts that require new methods of group classification for a new generation of people groups who don't fit into the old group categories used to describe their forbear. Looking at the history of the People group movement and case studies among the Borana and Wolof, this paper examines a way forward in this important anthropological discussion.

## 2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

### A Short History of People Group Classification

From biblical times, people have been grouped, identified and classified by various means varying from the simplest 'us and them' definitions, such as Jews and gentiles, to more nuanced classifications by geographical location or kinship, such as Egyptians or Benjaminites. Historically distinguishing factors such as ethnicity, geography, language, or religion have formed the basis of group differentiation.

His seminal study on ethnicity referred to the 'founding principle of anthropology—that discrete culture-bearing units, true to their original cultural state (i.e., "traditional"), with specific names and occupying specifiable territories, exist for our inspection and analysis (Eller, 1997)'. This founding principle has, at times, been ignored by missiologists seeking to gather data on a global scale. Rather than looking for the 'culture-bearing units' and letting them express their boundaries, anthropologists have imposed upon people their etic views of what constitutes the group. For example, in my previous research on the Borana people of Marsabit town, I was guilty of breaking this founding principle. I assumed that being ethnically Borana and living in Marsabit town constituted a culture-bearing unit.

Hays demonstrates this founding principle in his discussion of Egyptians in his detailed study of a biblical theology of race (Hays, 2003).

"Egyptians defined themselves not by physical appearance but by 'residence in the Nile Valley, by language, by religion and by the general culture (Hays, 2003)."

In this quote, we can see that Hays allows the ancient Egyptians to define themselves, prioritising the emic group classification over an etic classification. So the 'ethnicity' of the ancient Egyptians could be described as geographical-linguistic ethnicity. Similarly, Eller states,

"Any part, no matter how small, of a group's trait list can make a perfectly adequate ethnic marker. What is more, for any one group, the parts of culture which it chooses and uses may vary over time, from religion at one stage to language at another (Eller, 1997)".

So this demonstrates how diverse group classification can coexist because of the founding principle that culture-bearing units exist and can be inspected. We must allow people to define their people groups or classify their boundaries, however big or small. Often anthropologists arrive on a field with a prefabricated set of etic groups that they then use to classify people. If it is important to allow insiders to give an emic description of their worldview, it is equally important to allow insiders to draw the ethnic boundaries of their people group. We will discuss the problems of not allowing this below.

In the author's own academic and professional experience, the Borana people of northern Kenya and the Wolof people of West Africa have been categorised on an ethno linguistic basis. But we need to examine where our modern definitions of people groups come from.

## 3.0 DISCUSSION

### The Influence of Ralph Winter

In the last 40 years, mission agencies have taken up the mantra of 'reaching the unreached and those they define as unreached are a specific category of people, namely 'unreached people groups. This idea was introduced to the mission world by Ralph Winter at the Lausanne conference in 1974. He argued against the growing idea that cross-cultural missionary outreach was outdated due to the existence of a church in nearly every nation. This was in the wake of closing mission agencies, with some positing that the great commission in Matthew 28 was now solely the work of the national churches. Winter suggested the distinctions Jesus made between Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth were cultural degrees of separation, not distance. Looking at Matthew's great commission passage, he claimed that the Greek word *ethne* (ἔθνη) was wrongly translated as nations. Preferring the translation 'people groups'. Winter suggested that all the groups mentioned were politically part of the Roman Empire, so they were not distinct political entities. From here, Winter argued that we need to categorise people not by their nationality, Indian or Chinese, but by their particular people groups, such as Bengali Muslims or Hui Buddhists. Winter argued that it could be just as difficult for an Indian Christian from one caste to reach a fellow countryman from another caste who spoke another language as it is for a foreigner to come from outside of India and reach them.

In a subsequent paper published in the newly minted International Journal of Frontier Mission (IJFM), Winter defined an Unreached People Group as a group among which there is no indigenous community of believing Christians able to evangelise the people group (Winter, 1978).' In his 1974 public address at Lausanne, Winter laboured the numerical imperatives of the unreached people of the world: 'But we must have radically new efforts of cross-cultural evangelism in order to effectively witness to 2387 million people (Winter, 1978).' For this reason, he argued for each people group to have its own indigenous church, which met in their own language and was shaped by their own distinctive culture. The existence of a national church did not, for Winter, constitute any measure of reached-ness to a people group that, for various reasons, wouldn't set foot in that national gathering. This address by Winter was an immensely helpful wake-up call to the global church to prioritise cross-cultural mission work.

### Missional Applications of People Group Ideology

Winter's challenge to take up afresh the baton of international cross-cultural missions was heard by the western world, and a series of missionary organisations were founded by Ralph Winter and his wife Roberta, such as U.S. Centre for World Mission (now Frontier Ventures) (Winter, 1974) and the International Society for Frontier Missiology. Winter was also instrumental in establishing the International Journal for Frontier Missiology (IJFM) in 1984 (Winter, 1974). The Joshua project has been part of Frontier Ventures since 2006 and is leading the field 'in gathering, integrating and sharing people group information to encourage pioneer church-planting movements among the least reached people groups of the world (Winter, 1974).' Those following Winter's group classification methodology have typically been those organisations and individuals focused on strategic church planting. Examples include CMP, DMM, Serving in Mission (SIM), Global Frontier missions, Pioneers and beyond. Edward Dayton recorded the Lausanne Strategy Working Groups' initial definition of a people group as,

"A significantly large sociological grouping of individuals who perceive themselves to have a common affinity for one another." From the viewpoint of evangelisation, this is the largest possible

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community who can access the gospel without encountering barriers of understanding or acceptance."

From the second half of this definition of people groups, we can see that the focus was on the barriers to understanding or acceptance. These barriers included linguistic (understanding) and cultural (acceptance) factors that would make sharing the gospel more complicated.

Other missiological group classifications have been more limited in their methods of division. Organisations such as Wycliffe Bible Translators and SIL rightly operate on a linguistic group classification system. This fits their linguistic work of translating the Bible. In order to standardise communication regarding people groups across mission agencies, a standard of vocabulary and a comprehensive list of people groups has been developed. The Registry of Peoples (ROP) is a tool developed by Harvest Information Standards (HIS), a 'cooperative venture of organisations that share a desire to facilitate the task of taking the gospel of Jesus Christ to all the people of the world (Reapsome, 2012).' The registry of people is becoming a standard means of intra-mission communication concerning people groups. It thus represents a standard, and it is ethno linguistic in its categorisation with the ability to categorise clusters of certain people groups located in other geographical locations, such as Bengalese Muslims in London.

Recent Missiological group classification employs linguistic, ethnic and geographical criteria for their classification of people groups. Much of the ideological rationale for this development in group classification comes from the thinking of on the Homogenous Unit Principle in his book on church growth (McGavran, 1970). The basic idea is that people don't like to cross-cultural or ethnic boundaries, and so we shouldn't require them to do so in order to join a church. This church growth methodology was adopted by many in the mission world and can be recognised in diverse church planting strategies.

## Why have People Group Classifications?

The terminology of people groups and particularly unreached people groups, licalis now commonplace in the vocabulary of mission academics. But why do we need to group people together in the first place? This is a valid question and needs biblical answering biblically before we continue. The aim of classifying people is to group people with certain commonalities together so as to understand them/reach them with the gospel more effectively. Paul himself describes his ministry strategy as variegated depending on which people group his conversation partner comes from, 'to the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews (Winter, 1974).' So people group distinctions exist in scripture, but what about unreached people groups? And to what extent does the language of unreached people groups serve the church's divine calling to obey the great commission? Again Paul shows a deep desire to proclaim the gospel to the un-evangelised: 'thus is make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else's foundation (English Standard Version, 2001).' Paul is about to introduce to the Roman recipients of his letter his desire to go to Spain. Paul seems to be targeting a geographical area, not an 'unreached people group' by modern anthropological standards. This highlights the biblical importance of geography in missionary strategy.

## Borana Muslims in Marsabit Town: A case Study

It was a combination of geographical and ethno linguistic group classification that led me to conduct a thesis study on 'the Borana People of Marsabit town. In the research stage, I came across numerous cases

where Borana Muslims residing in Marsabit town had more in common with their urban Rendile or Gabra townsmen than they did with their rural dwelling Borana kinsmen. Some Urban Borana youth spoke more Swahili than they did Borana, and many Borana interviewees had married Gabra or Rendile women. While Borana people are historically known for their distinctive white breed of drought-resistant cattle, few urban Borana dwellers mentioned cows at all in my ethnographic interviews about their aspirations in life and their worldview.

Another interesting factor from my research was the widespread intermingling of different so-called 'people groups'. The intermingling was both socially and linguistically. The vast majority of under-50-year-olds were Swahili or Borana speakers, whether or not they were ethnically Borana. When interviewing groups of men in Marsabit, I had to ask the awkward question: 'what tribe are you from?' This question often seemed jarring in such a multi-ethnic context where historical divisions had been laid down for the sake of harmonious relationships. Bringing up the question was an ethnic imposition on their harmony and derived not from the actual existence of culture-bearing units such as 'Borana Muslims in Marsabit town' but from my ethnic assumptions about the existence of such a group. So you can see the falsehood of my ethnic assumption of the existence of a readily identifiable group, descriptively called the Borana Muslims in Marsabit town.

A purer anthropological study would have involved taking the time to allow culture-bearing units that already existed to define themselves for me and then to proceed to examine the worldview of that amicably defined culture-bearing unit or people group. Further studies could be improved by examining a cross-section of urban dwellers in Marsabit town and holding the multi-ethnic strands of data together for long enough to see if they share a common worldview, despite the divergence of their grandparents' worldviews.

## **Wolof Urban Muslims in West Africa: A case Study**

For a few years, we have been living in West Africa and have had the privilege of getting to know many Wolof-speaking residents of the town we live in. Historically our mission agency has sought to serve the largest people group in this country. This has been seen as a strategic ministry in light of the categorisation of these people as unreached. Dwelling among members of this people group for the last two years has led to some interesting anthropological questions. Can the urban members of this people group be classified as the same people group even though their culture, language, and religious practices differ greatly from rural members of the same group? One Wolof informant expressed: I share a common history with my grandparents, but my lifestyle is closer to my Pulaar roommate.

This phenomenon of geographical dissimilarity can be observed linguistically as well. Urban Wolof people speak Wolof in their everyday life constantly, but the Wolof language and the Wolof that is spoken in the village are not the same. Of the 15 urban Wolof interviewees, not a single one knew the original Wolof word for the colour green (*nëtëx*). They all used an adapted French word, *Vert*. Contrast this with the deep Wolof speakers of the villages in the north of the country, and many urban Wolof speakers will readily state that they don't speak that language. In contrast to their rural kinsmen, urban ethnically Wolof people speak a very similar Wolof to urban Sereer or Urban Pulaar. So linguistically and culturally these urban dwellers have more in common with each other than they do with rural West Africans, even though they share a common history with them.

Another factor that is increasingly obvious is the influence of technology on both the urban and the young populations. As is common across the world, youth will go to granny Google rather than ask their real grandparents if they have questions about the world. The influx of western Television and social media is having a profound effect on the people of West Africa. An awareness of the world outside of West Africa has led to a radical shift in the worldview of tech-savvy Wolof people. The changes are arguably significant enough to require the classification of a new people group.

## **Re-evaluation: The Extent to which People Group Ideology Serves to Fulfil the Great Commission**

This leads us to reconsider the importance of Geography and age in defining a people group. Because of the rapid worldview shifts occurring in urban centers across the world, we need to re-evaluate group boundaries. Old people group classifications have quickly become outdated and need updating to consider new barriers or gospel spreading. Including geography in our determined group classification and, subsequently, our strategy for outreach unsurprisingly has advantages and some drawbacks. One advantage includes the ability to model the biblical removal of barriers such as cultural and ethnic prejudice as new believers are encouraged to love one another, whatever their cultural or ethnic background. In his critique of Winter's seminal paper, delivered at the same Lausanne 1974 conference Dr Perez argues 'that cultural differences are not to be perpetuated in the churches, but also that the counter-cultural characteristic of Christianity cannot, again, be ignored (Lausanne, 1974).' Winter responded to this critique of his homogenous indigenous church model by saying it would slow down the acceleration of gospel advance and, in turn, stop us from fulfilling the great commission in our generation.

But that leads us to another question: Was the great commission a task given to the church with the expectation that they could complete it? There has been a history of rallying calls to world evangelisation. In 1886 'the student volunteer movement for foreign missions' adopted the slogan: 'the evangelisation of the world in this generation. The Edinburgh '80s mandate was: "A Church for Every People by the Year 2000 (Lausanne, 1974)!" In 1988 Ralph Winter was answering the question, 'can the great commission be fulfilled by the year 2000 (Winter, 1974)?' In the year 2000, Luis Bush called on people to consider how to 'fulfil the unfinished task in our generation (Winter, 1974).' In 2017 the Lausanne movement published a paper called 'Finishing the remaining (29%) of World evangelisation'.

As we can see, motivational slogans have been used in recruitment for cross-cultural mission work for well over a century. If we compare this to the status of global Christianity mid-2022 publication, we see they estimate 400 million evangelical Christians out of a global population of 7.954 billion. That is (5%) of the world's population who are evangelical Christians. Include Pentecostal and Charismatic, and you get (13%). That leaves much more than 29% of the population. All these statistics are fairly meaningless, but they serve to show the futility of raising people's hopes by changing the goalposts of the global commission. The scriptures promises nowhere that we would be able to fulfil the great commission this side of Jesus' return.

Take a different command that we find in God's word, for example. We are told to live such good lives among unbelievers that they 'see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation (Reapsome 2012). This is not often taken to be a task that we can complete 'in our generation' or before the year 2030. But the great commission, with the worthy aim of mobilising Christians to action, gets broken down into manageable tasks to be completed and checked off a list. But as Paul Akin put it, 'missionary

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engagement doesn't equal completion of the missionary task (Reapsome, 2012). So even if a people group has moved up from the unreached to partially reached list, that doesn't mean the global church has fulfilled its obligations to that people group. The unreached people group ideology has proven to be a very good motivating strategy for cross-cultural missions. But Duewel argues that these statistics developed in America, should not be allowed to dictate mission strategy on the ground:

'Strategic warfare for Christ and against Satan is best guided by those God is using in leadership in the battle out on the front lines, not by people thousands of miles away trying to decide on the basis of theory and incomplete information what should be done (Reapsome, 2012).'

Duewel highlights some serious concerns about the methodologies of these new missiological ideas and calls us back to a simpler definition of faithful and effective outreach:

'To me, the important questions are: How many unreached are you reaching? How much church planting are you really involved in? What percentage of your people are personally involved in evangelism or church planting (Reapsome, 2012)?'

So the unreached people groups ideology introduced to the world of missions in 1974 has an obvious motivational advantage Praise God for how it has been used to mobilise the church for a mission to those furthest from any access to the good news of the kingdom of God. But whilst being a great motivational tool, it is found lacking when it is converted into a mission strategy. Rather than interpreting the great commission as being the general command from Jesus to his church to make disciples of everyone they meet on their way, the unreached people group ideology dangles the unbiblical carrot of 'completing the great commission in x number of years before the worldwide church skewing its vision from making disciples of everyone to targeting the people groups not yet ticked of Jesus' hit list. This hit list mentality is self-deceiving; for example, one village that has never heard of Jesus happens to be part of a people group which is considered reached, so the village, in turn, is categorised as reached despite never having heard about Jesus and perhaps having significant barriers that inhibit gospel sharing. Other drawbacks include an artificial grouping of people who wouldn't consider themselves a group, certainly not a group within which the gospel can easily spread. This is often the case because groupings are based on outdated anthropological studies. This artificial grouping leads to faulty strategies such as the use of archaic language, suitable in a rural context, for outreach to urban speakers. Words such as accelerating and rapid multiplication are commonplace in this ideology. This need for speed leads to mission strategies that are unbiblical, such as giving leadership to new believers and is in danger of promoting a disregard for leadership and deeper discipleship. Lastly, this ideology glorifies the hardest-to-reach 'people groups', minimising the importance of reaching unreached families where we are based or in more open societies. The excitement of 'finishing the task' takes away from the equal importance of those not working among 'unreached people groups to obey Christ's command to make disciples. People who gather at the foot of the cross stand on level ground, no matter what degree of the unreached people group they hark from.

The biggest problem comes when these motivational ideologies become missiological strategies. With reference to the total number of people groups listed by the U.S. Center (23,300) and those considered unreached (16,750), Reapsome concludes, 'it is too simplistic and confusing to be of much value in planning missionary work (Reapsome, 2012).'

It is perfectly acceptable to allow motivational statistics about people groups to motivate our mission endeavours, but we mustn't let them define our outreach methodologies.

## 4.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

**Conclusion:** By leaving behind the old anthropological definitions of people groups and taking the time to listen to people afresh, we can discover the new emerging groups in the rapidly urbanising world of today. Allowing this emic discovery of groups to replace the etic imposition of the group by tribe or historical factors, we can better describe people and so be better prepared to reach them with the gospel in a culturally sensitive way. Take, for example, the classic people group classification of a young man born and raised in a city sitting on his motorbike browsing the internet on his phone in the lingua franca. Classically he would be classified as part of the same people group as an old lady of his grandmother's tribe sitting on a broken plastic chair in a village sifting rice for stones. At the same time, a young woman standing behind a patisserie counter waiting for customers, browsing the internet on her phone in the lingua franca, would be classified as yet another group. These two youngsters share far more in common with each other linguistically and culturally than they do with their grandparents. So changing our group classification methodology will help us reach the new urban groups that currently don't fit into our people group models.

**Recommendations:** This has profound implications for the field of anthropology. Rather than assuming the ongoing existence of a particular 'people group' and proceeding to carry out our research on them, we must first do the hard anthropological task of surveying the geographical area we wish to research and allowing the people we meet to define their groups from within.

For missiology, this has simple but wide-reaching implications. We need to turn away from simplistic slogans that do not reflect reality and carry out our God-given task of disciple-making for the glory of our father, how much or little impact we see on global statistics boards. Rather than exclusively seeking a rapidly multiplying movement to Christ in our generation, we need to focus our efforts on being faithful witnesses to anyone God puts in our path. And if God does choose to bring a movement to himself in our part of his harvest field, then we can quietly praise him and strive hard to read the Bible with them and mentor those who come into our sphere of influence.

**Suggested Improvements for Group Classification:** Rather than sticking with the dated Ethno linguistic group classification methodology, the church should move back to the biblical model of geographical identification. Hence the church of Ephesus, or Antioch. This latter church had a multi-ethnic congregation, reflecting the city in which it was situated. Rather than interpreting the Greek word ethne (ἔθνη) as people groups, as Winter argued, we should see that Jesus' command 'points to a worldwide scope for their mission (Leon, 1992).' We should read Matthew 28:19 in conjunction with Revelation 7:9, where the great multitude is from 'every nation, tribe, people, and language'. These are not checklists for the church to tick off by visions of the future certain reality of Jesus' global promise in Acts 1:8.

Rather than going with dated group classifications done by previous anthropologists, we need to take a fresh look at how to group people and allow that to shape the groups that we seek to study anthropologically and to reach with the gospel missiologically. By loving our neighbour as ourselves, we will see any lost soul with whom we have some form of proximity (physical or linguistic) as deserving of our efforts to reach out to them with the good news of Jesus' kingdom.

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