



Affinity Blocs and People Clusters:

An Approach Toward Strategic Insight and Mission Partnership

Patrick Johnstone

The Purpose of This Article

The Great Commission is unequivocal: we are to disciple all the ethnic groups in the world! For 25 years we have struggled to define, classify and list the world's people groups. Only in the last six years have we had in our hands reasonably-complete, published lists of the people groups of the world. The results are extraordinary, but complex.

How does one get a handle on the 12,000 or so ethno-linguistic peoples in the 239 countries of the world? The 3-4 extant global lists are similar and related, but have significant differences which cause confusion and endless discussion about validity, nomenclature, level of reachedness, and related issues. This article proposes a two-level categorization and grouping of all the peoples of the world into 15 major blocs and 251 clusters within these blocs so that we may focus more clearly on the broad strategy and partnership necessary to evangelize, disciple and plant churches among every significant people group in every country in which they reside.

The Origin of People Lists

The first ethnic listing in the world appears in Genesis 10! The second is inferred on the day of Pentecost, when there was an extraordinary occurrence: all the disciples praised God in different languages of the time, many being listed. What was the Holy Spirit wanting to say? He was showing that ethnicity and language are both God-created and vital to God's global plan. This Pentecost event was a challenge to the Church: **use local heart languages to communicate the Gospel!** This is in contrast to all the major religions of the world, which are based around a hub, "holy" language (Sanskrit for Hinduism, Arabic for Islam, Latin for Catholics, Greek for Orthodox, etc). Sadly, the Church did not pick up this challenge until the past two centuries of

expansion. Up to the year 1800 only 67 languages¹ had received any part of God's Word – and a number of these were either extinct (e.g., Gothic) or liturgical but little-understood (e.g., Coptic, Syriac, Latin). Yet by 2000 about 2,800 languages possessed at least some portion of God's Word.²

For several decades we have had a good listing of the languages of the world³, but not a comparable listing of all the ethnic groups and their spiritual state. We need such a listing if we are to make sure that all people groups are disciplined. What an astonishing delay of 1,980 years! Now that such a listing is available, what a privilege and responsibility for our generation. We have no excuse for delay! We must do our part to see that every tribe, language, people and nation⁴ is represented before the Lamb's throne.

The intense effort to compile this global people group listing over the past three decades is a largely untold story. Many strands of research and many individuals have been involved. The two most important of these:

1. **Wycliffe Bible Translators** and the publication of successively more sophisticated volumes of the *Ethnologue* – the latest being the 15th. The *Ethnologue* contains the most authoritative listing of the world's languages and dialects. Ron Rowland of WBT sought to co-ordinate database holdings (including that of peoples) by developing the cross-referencing Harvest Information System⁵ in the 1990s. This HIS system continues to this day, with appointed stewards for maintaining registries for people groups and other entities such as Geography, Languages and Religions.
2. **David Barrett** in what later became the *World Christian Encyclopedia* of 2001. The latter contained the first published, full list of the

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known ethno-linguistic people groups of the world, though earlier drafts had also become the basis of lists held by the International Mission Board of the Southern Baptists (for whom Barrett worked on contract for some years) and of Joshua Project, which developed during the lifetime of the AD2000 and Beyond Movement.

I decided that we would not develop a separate listing of the world's peoples along with the other major tables in the *Operation World* database. All my efforts in peoples research went into helping in the development of the *World Christian Encyclopedia* database from 1979, and then later from 1991, the strategy and development of the Joshua Project Peoples Listing.

Thus, today we have the World Christian Database, Southern Baptist, and Joshua Project people listings⁶, all with their specific assumptions, emphases, ministry foci and informant networks, and each aiming to develop and maintain a high degree of information-sharing and correlation. Each has approximately 12,000 largely ethno-linguistic people groups within countries and territories of the world⁷ with a fairly good degree of commonality, but this number rises to 16,000 in the case of Joshua Project because of the inclusion of South Asian castes as people groups⁸.

For the first time in all history we now have a reasonably efficient listing of the world's people groups; let us now be efficient in discipling them! Let us also be strategic in our use of this list to mobilize the global Church and its resources to complete the task and see a viable church-planting movement in every one of these people groups.

Bringing Strategic Order to These Lists

The long list of 12,000 people groups is hard to work with. Not only is it big, but there are no readily-apparent connectivities or groupings

that can give a more understandable overview of the spiritual needs and the efforts needed to meet those needs. Over the last few years I have sought to achieve this by categorizing all these peoples into a pragmatic two-tier hierarchy of 15 Affinity Blocs and 251 or more People Clusters⁹. The basic principle is that the categorization is not strictly "scientific", but rather what could be most helpful for practical purposes of mobilization and engagement. This hierarchy therefore retains the flexibility to make adjustments to people groups listed within them, or even create new clusters. We expect developments to be field-driven – that is, most affected by those closest to the action.

Here are some definitions:

Affinity Bloc: A large grouping of peoples related by language, history, and culture, and usually indigenous to a geographical location.

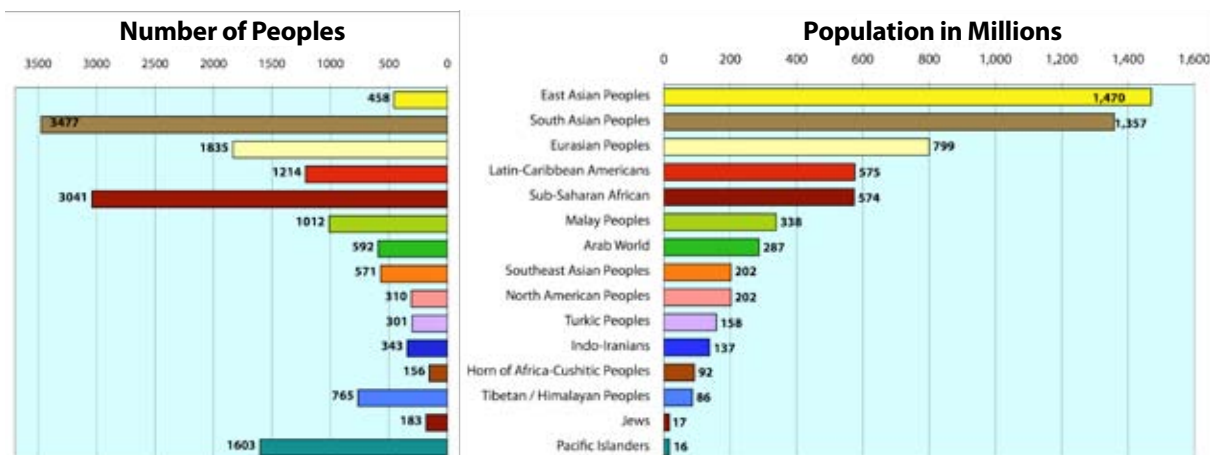
People Cluster: A smaller grouping of peoples within an affinity bloc, often with a common name or identity, but separated from one another by political boundaries, language or migration patterns.

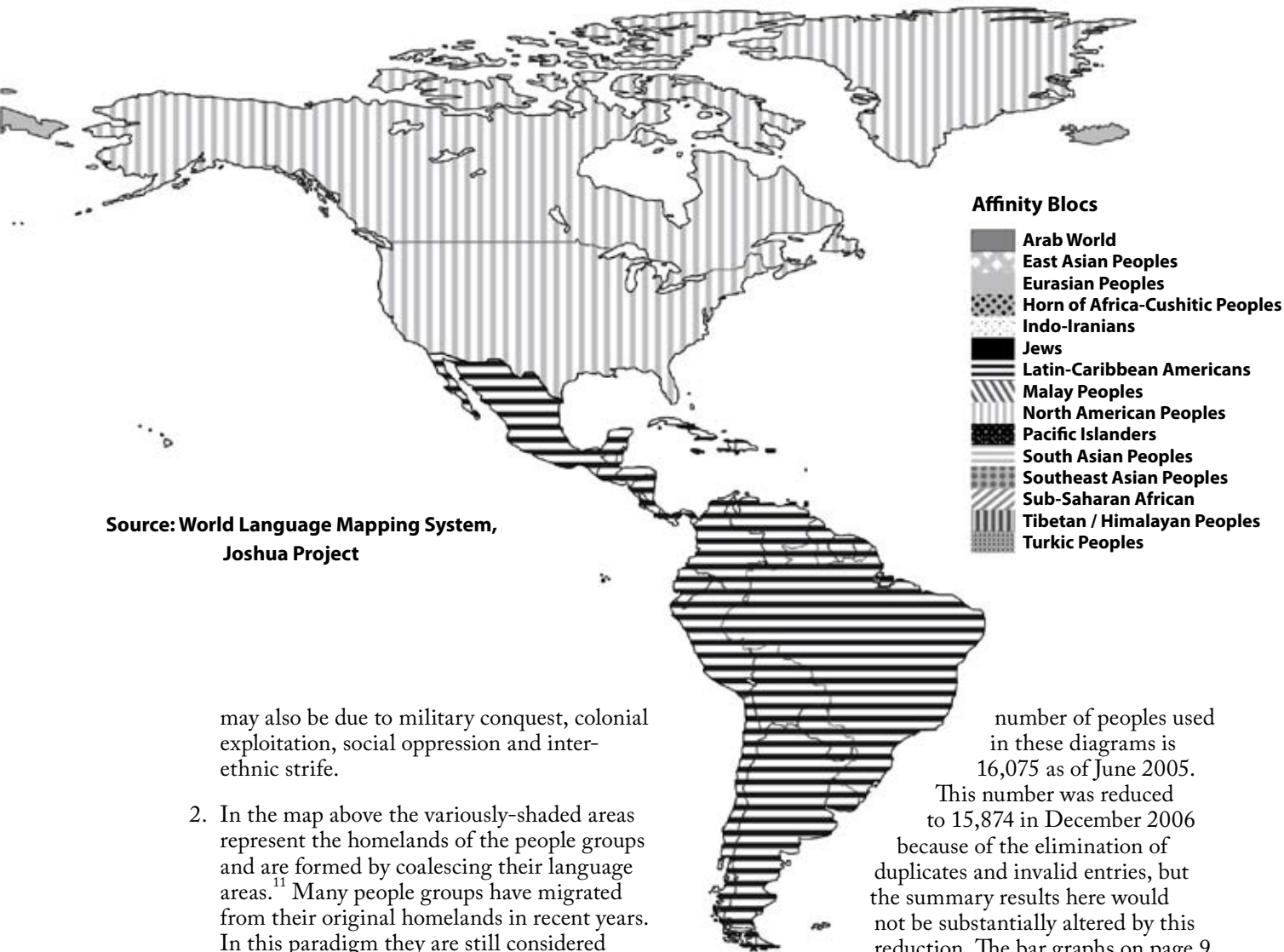
People Group: A significantly large sociological (predominantly ethno-linguistic) grouping of individuals who perceive themselves to have a common affinity with one another. From the viewpoint of evangelization, this is the largest possible group within which the gospel can be spread without encountering barriers of understanding or acceptance. This is the most helpful unit to use when considering church-planting.

Population Segment¹⁰: Any other sociological or incidental agglomeration of individuals for which evangelistic strategies may be effectively deployed.

Some cautionary notes:

1. "Affinity" does not imply compatibility or mutual attraction between the constituent peoples of an affinity bloc. Their associations





Source: World Language Mapping System, Joshua Project

may also be due to military conquest, colonial exploitation, social oppression and inter-ethnic strife.

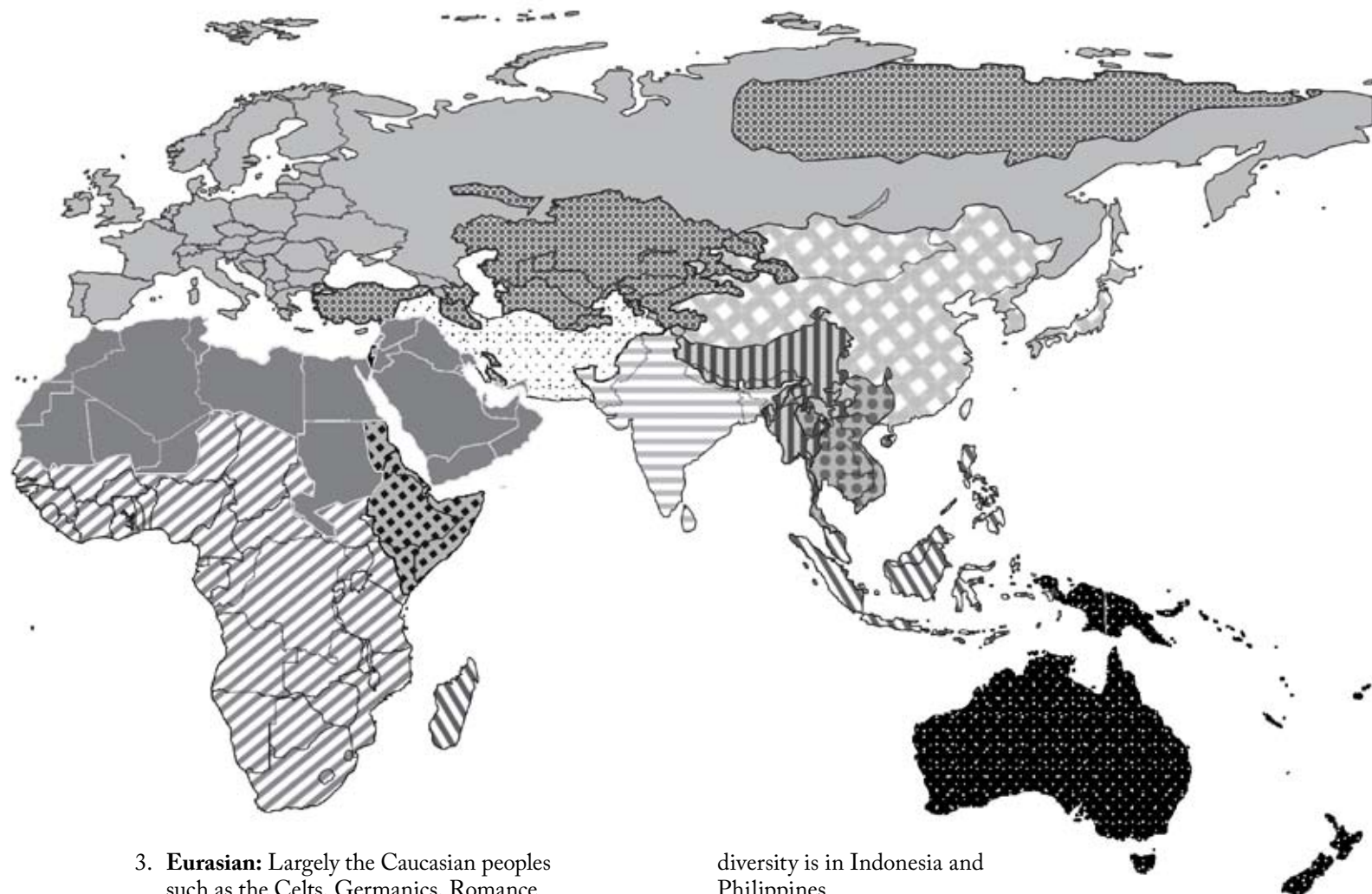
- In the map above the variously-shaded areas represent the homelands of the people groups and are formed by coalescing their language areas.¹¹ Many people groups have migrated from their original homelands in recent years. In this paradigm they are still considered part of the original affinity bloc if they continue to retain their language and cultural origins, but because they do not really have a specific home area, they cannot be shown on such a map.
- Eurasian settlers in the Americas now far outnumber the original indigenous populations, but they have been amalgamated into a single affinity bloc together with the indigenous peoples whose lands they seized and with whom they intermingled. By contrast, we considered it more practical to retain Australians and New Zealanders as part of the Eurasian bloc.

Affinity Blocs – Their Populations and Number of Peoples

In this article I am leaning on the statistics from the Joshua Project List in which I have invested the most time in shaping and editing. The total

number of peoples used in these diagrams is 16,075 as of June 2005. This number was reduced to 15,874 in December 2006 because of the elimination of duplicates and invalid entries, but the summary results here would not be substantially altered by this reduction. The bar graphs on page 9 compare and contrast the number of peoples and their cumulative populations in the 15 affinity blocs.

- East Asian:** Peoples deeply affected by the Han Chinese in culture, religion, philosophies, etc. This includes the Japanese and Koreans. Note the relatively few people groups, but the very large population. This is due to the very large sizes of the constituent peoples.
- South Asian:** All peoples influenced by the Indo-Aryan cultures that entered the sub-continent four millennia ago and dominated the local Dravidian and Asian peoples already present. This is the source of the pervading caste system. The castes themselves are such that they function virtually like ethnic groups and thus affect church-planting strategies. This explains the high number of people groups and also the large population for the affinity bloc.



3. **Eurasian:** Largely the Caucasian peoples such as the Celts, Germanics, Romance groups, and Slavs. The high number of people groups is partly due to the fragmented politics of Europe and partly due to the high levels of emigration to other continents. This affinity bloc could also include most North and South Americans, but for reasons explained above most migrants (except the most recent) are included in the bloc of residence.

4. **Latin-Caribbean Americans:** The cultural commonalities bring together the multiple origins of the bloc – Hispanics, Caucasians, Indigenous Americans, Africans, etc. The large number of people groups is a reflection of the many, very small indigenous ethnic groups.

5. **Sub-Saharan Africans:** Africa's population is divided by the Sahara between the Arab-dominated North and the dark-skinned African people groups. This bloc has by far the largest linguistic diversity.

6. **Malay:** This diverse bloc is scattered in an equatorial belt across 45% of the world and its oceans from Hawaii to Madagascar. The greatest linguistic

diversity is in Indonesia and Philippines.

7. **Arab World:** This bloc straddles North Africa and West Asia. The Muslim Arab conquests led to Arab cultural dominance over the North African Berbers and people groups of northern Sudan, and thus these are included in a bloc which covers most of the areas where Arabic is the dominant language.

8. **South East Asian:** This bloc contains a medley of racial groups with a common history of political, cultural and religious influence from both India and China.

9. **North American:** This bloc includes the original indigenous people groups and the long-settled Caucasians and African-Americans, but not the recent immigrant groups and the many Hispanics – the latter still being retained in the Latin-Caribbean American bloc.

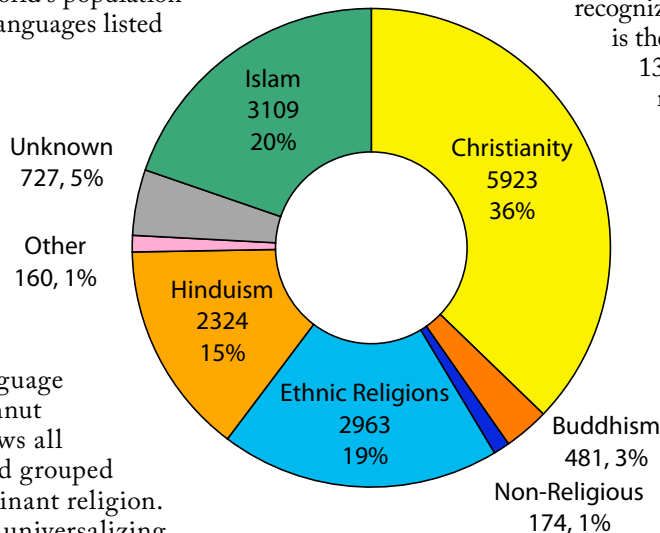
10. **Turkic:** A variety of related peoples stretching from Turkey in the West to the Bering Straits in Siberia, but divided by the Russian eastward expansion to the Pacific several centuries ago.

11. **Indo-Iranians:** A bloc of peoples stretching from Turkey to Pakistan which includes the Kurds, Persians, most Afghans and many Pakistanis.
12. **Horn of Africa:** This bloc includes the more Semitic Amhara, Tigre, Tigrinya and the more Cushitic Oromo, Afar, Beja and Somali.
13. **Tibetan / Himalayan:** This bloc covers most of the peoples of Tibet, Western China, Myanmar, Bhutan and much of Nepal.
14. **The Jews:** This is a unique bloc in that it is mainly religious, but with a fairly strong sense of ethnic descent in the midst of great diversity of appearance, countries of residence and languages.
15. **Pacific Islanders:** The Melanesian populations of Australia, Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu, New Caledonia, etc. are small, but speak an astonishing variety of languages. Thus 0.26% of the world's population speak 22.4% of the languages listed in the *Ethnologue!*

Affinity Blocs and Major Religions

Religion is a fundamentally important factor in today's world and is often closely linked with language and culture. The doughnut graph on this page shows all the peoples of the world grouped according to their dominant religion. The emphasis is on the universalizing or missionary religions: Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism. We have placed religions such as Taoism, Shinto, Judaism, tribal systems, etc. in the category of Ethnic Religions. The number of peoples and the percentage of the total of peoples is indicated.

The bar graph on page 13 shows the dominant religions in the peoples of each of the 15 Affinity Blocs. This may be either cohesive as with Islam in the Arab World, or a cause of intense conflict as in countries where Islam is threatened by a non-Muslim majority as in the South Asian and Eurasian affinity blocs, or where Islam seeks to dominate Christian minorities in the Arab World or in Turkic and Malay peoples. This graph just records the number of peoples by largest religion in each affinity bloc.



Note:

1. The three affinity blocs that are almost entirely Muslim – Turkic, Indo-Iranian and Arab – many of these peoples once had large Christian populations in 1000AD.
2. The large number of Christian peoples in Africa and the Pacific – a change from ethnic religions in the past two centuries.
3. In this article I have not given the breakdown of affinity bloc by Christian megabloc or by Evangelicals. This I will do in my forthcoming book, *The Future of World Evangelization in the 21st Century*, scheduled to be published in late 2008.

Affinity Blocs and People Clusters

Every affinity bloc can be broken down into a number of people clusters where there are more and closer commonalities. Peoples often form a cluster with a common name which is widely recognizable. An example of this is the Kurdish people cluster: 13 distinct people groups regard themselves as Kurdish, but they are scattered in identifiable communities in 35 countries, while Joshua Project lists 54 Kurdish groups-in-countries – all of which contribute to the total of least-reached peoples in the world. A further series of examples can be seen in the Horn of Africa Affinity Bloc in Table 1 (on page 14). This complex affinity

bloc contains both strongly Christian (Amhara, Tigrinya, and many in the Omotic and Oromo) people clusters and ardently Muslim (Somali, Afar, Beja) people clusters, yet their histories and cultures have been entwined for millennia – even if much has engendered hatred and warfare. This intertwining has enormous implications for the spread of the Gospel in both a positive and negative way.

Working our way down the hierarchy of this affinity bloc, let's look at the Somali people cluster. Table 2 (on page 14) provides its listing from the Joshua Project Website.

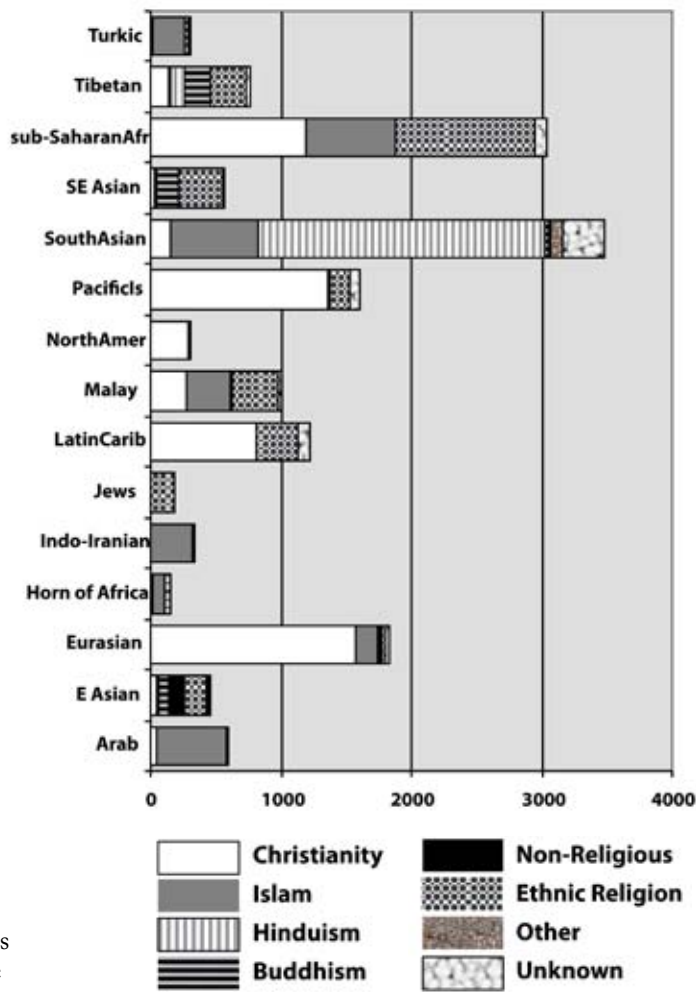
Note the ethnic code in the final column; those peoples listed as NAB57j¹² are actually racially distinct Bantu peoples who have adopted the

Somali language and aspects of Somali culture even though they are often despised farmers as contrasted with the nomadic, herding Somali. The Somali cluster comprise 14 million people in 12 people groups, but about 3-4 million have fled from war-ravaged Somalia to other parts of the world. Note, too, that “Somali” is both the name of this cluster and the name of one of its constituent people groups. Working our way further down the hierarchy, we can see the Somali people group by country of residence in Table 3.

Table 3 (on page 15) graphically demonstrates the value of listing a people group as a people (as in the previous table) and here by country of residence. Note the following:

1. Much of the fighting among Somalis springs from deep clan divisions within the Somali ethnic group – indicating a level of complexity beyond that shown in the Joshua Project database. Should Somalia open up for the gospel, clan divisions among the Dir, Hawiye, Isaaq, Darod and others may be revealed as barriers which prevent the free spread of the gospel across clan or sub-clan boundaries, and that therefore these sub-divisions should be considered as separate peoples for church-planting.
2. A high proportion of Somalis live in what is today Ethiopia (a majority in the Ogaden Province) and Djibouti (where they are the largest ethnic group).
3. The population of Somalia hides a reality of great significance: in colonial history the British ruled the north and the Italians the south of the country. At independence the colonies were united as a single nation-state, but because of the chaos in the south, the north declared its independence as Somaliland, yet this independence is not recognized by the United Nations. The south remains a collapsed state with a raging civil war between clans and between warlords and Islamists, but the north is relatively peaceful and with more possibility at present for Christian outreach.
4. The migrant communities of Somalis in other countries have been swollen far beyond the above obsolete figures because

of the massive refugee population – there may be now 200,000 in the UK, 300,000 in the USA, and increases not yet listed. A high proportion of these refugees have moved secretly, and the true numbers are not possible to obtain. This indicates the problems of needing to continually update information and illustrates why the different people group lists vary. It also shows how a global strategy is required for bringing



the gospel to the Somali people. Language learning, Christian ministry and even church-planting may be feasible in more open lands, and this, in turn, becomes part of the strategy of the evangelization of the presently-inaccessible Somali heartlands.

The previous illustrations have pointed to the value of the classification of the world's people groups into affinity blocs and people clusters. In conclusion, let us summarize some of the advantages of this approach.

Table 1 *Horn of Africa Affinity Bloc (http://www.joshuaproject.net/affinity_bloc.php?rop1=A004)*

▲People Cluster	Population	# Peoples-by-Country	# Least-Reached Peoples-by-Country	% Peoples Least-Reached	Population in Least-Reached	% Population in Least-Reached
Afar	2,098,000	6	6	100.0 %	2,098,000	100.0 %
Beja	2,846,000	5	5	100.0 %	2,846,000	100.0 %
Ethiopian	36,668,000	39	12	30.8 %	2,686,000	7.3 %
Omoti	10,902,000	56	17	30.4 %	644,000	5.9 %
Oromo	24,076,000	18	9	50.0 %	8,763,000	36.4 %
Somali	14,039,000	33	31	93.9 %	13,980,000	99.6 %
Totals: 6 People Clusters	90,629,000	157	80	51.0 %	31,017,000	34.2 %

The Value of Affinity Blocs and People Clusters

1. The mind-numbing list of 16,000 peoples is broken down into a smaller number of identifiable and understandable entities. For example, the Kurds are a high-profile, news-rich people cluster, but the general public would not understand the relationship of constituent peoples (such as the Surani, Dimili or Herki) to the wider Kurdish cluster.
2. The lack of such a classification has been a major factor in the measure of disappointment in Adopt-A-People programs for prayer or ministry over the past 25 years
3. This approach makes possible comparisons between more closely-related peoples, thereby indicating likely conditions and compensating for imperfect or missing data for a specific people.
4. The focus is moved away from endless discussions about details and levels of accuracy for specific peoples and to the more strategic challenges for ministry. The separate listing of some “people groups” which have no clear cultural uniqueness (such as the

“Arabized Berbers” of Algeria) may have validity scientifically, but often frustrate those who set out to engage peoples for ministry purposes.

5. Grouping similar peoples in this way helps to identify duplicate people groups listed separately under alternative names, or reveals spurious entries. These arise because there are constantly new people group candidates proposed from a wide range of sources.
6. The least-reached are least-reached because the very existence of a “bloc” hints at a potential “block” for the gospel. For example, to reach the Riff Berber in Morocco, you cannot ignore the dominance of the Arabic language even as you seek to learn the culture and languages of the Riff.
7. It provides the basis for developing regional and global strategies for engaging in ministry with trans-national peoples. Least-reached peoples cannot be engaged for ministry without a clear understanding of the wider inter-people group relationships and the broader scope of local politics, logistics, etc. Without such understanding, adoptions of peoples from a long list and by means of a “parachute” arrival are rarely successful.

Table 2 *Somali People Cluster (<http://www.joshuaproject.net/peopcluster.php?rop2=C0198>)*

▲People Group	Population	# Peoples-by-Country	# Least-Reached Peoples-by-Country	% Peoples Least-Reached	Population in Least-Reached	% Population in Least-Reached	Ethnic Code
Digil-Rahawiin	720,000	1	1	100.0 %	720,000	100.0 %	CMT33e
Garre	65,000	1	1	100.0 %	65,000	100.0 %	CMT33
Goraa	57,000	1	0	0.0 %	-	- %	CMT33e
Jiddu	36,000	1	1	100.0 %	36,000	100.0 %	CMT33e
Juba Somali	351,000	1	1	100.0 %	351,000	100.0 %	CMT33e
Mirifle	32,000	1	1	100.0 %	32,000	100.0 %	CMT33e
Mushungulu	46,000	1	1	100.0 %	46,000	100.0 %	NAB57j
Shabelle	17,000	2	2	100.0 %	17,000	100.0 %	NAB57j
Somali	12,667,000	21	20	95.2 %	12,665,000	100.0 %	CMT33e
Somali Ajuran	9,600	1	1	100.0 %	9,600	100.0 %	CMT33e
Somali-Sab	1,700	1	1	100.0 %	1,700	100.0 %	CMT33e
Tunni	36,000	1	1	100.0 %	36,000	100.0 %	CMT33e
Totals: 12 People Groups	14,039,000	33	31	93.9 %	13,980,000	99.6 %	

Table 3*Somali People Group* (<http://www.joshuaproject.net/peoples.php?rop3=109392>)

Peoples-by-Country (click name for profile)	Population	% Evangel	% Adherent	Least Reached	Primary Religion	Primary Language
Canada	35,000	0.07 %	0.07 %	Y	Islam	Somali
Denmark	16,000			Y	Islam	Somali
Djibouti	329,000	0.01 %	1.30 %	Y	Islam	Somali
Eritrea	61,000			Y	Islam	Somali
Ethiopia	3,487,000	0.00 %	0.05 %	Y	Islam	Somali
Finland	3,100			Y	Islam	Somali
Italy	50,000	0.01 %		Y	Islam	Somali
Kenya	481,000	0.01 %	0.01 %	Y	Islam	Somali
Netherlands	1,600	0.02 %		Y	Islam	Somali
New Zealand	2,000				Islam	Somali
Norway	5,900			Y	Islam	Somali
Saudi Arabia	51,000	0.00 %	0.00 %	Y	Islam	Somali
Somalia	7,150,000	0.00 %	0.01 %	Y	Islam	Somali
Sri Lanka	30			Y	Islam	Somali
Sudan	1,400	0.00 %	0.00 %	Y	Islam	Somali
Sweden	12,000			Y	Islam	Somali
Tanzania	40,000	0.00 %	0.50 %	Y	Islam	Somali
United Arab Emirates	51,000	0.00 %	0.00 %	Y	Islam	Somali
United Kingdom	7,700	0.05 %	0.10 %	Y	Islam	Somali
United States	24,000			Y	Islam	Somali
Yemen	858,000	0.00 %	0.00 %	Y	Islam	Somali
Totals:	21 Countries	12,667,000		20		

8. It gives a level of focus at either an Affinity Bloc or People Cluster level for promoting strategic inter-agency partnerships. In fact, since the late 1990s the people cluster approach has shown its value to partnership-brokering by key agencies such as InterDev and visionSynergy.
9. It helps churches and agencies to develop a ministry for a presently inaccessible people by concentrating first on the diaspora of that people.
10. It helps locate possible nearby Christian resources which could be more easily deployed to less-reached people groups within the same affinity bloc or people cluster. 🌐

Endnotes

- 1 A full listing of these languages is embedded in the "Cosmochronology" section of the third volume of the *World Christian Encyclopedia – World Christian Trends* published by the William Carey Library in 2001, and also in my forthcoming book, *The Future of World Evangelization*.
- 2 Anything from 1,000 to 4,000 languages might still require the considerable investment of time, resources and skilled personnel to translate the New Testament, but much research will be needed to clarify the viability and need of such beforehand. This is the vision of WBT's Vision 2025.
- 3 The *Ethnologue*: <http://www.ethnologue.com/>
- 4 Revelation 5:9
- 5 <http://www.missionfrontiers.org/2000/01/his.htm>; <http://www.harvestinformationssystem.info/Overview.htm>
- 6 CPPI: <http://imb.org/globalresearch/acronyms.asp>, JPL: <http://www.joshuaproject.net/>, WCD: <http://www.worldchristiandatabase.org/wcd/>
- 7 The 12,000 includes multiple entries of the same people group living in different countries or territories.
- 8 For a helpful and fuller discussion on the numbers see : <http://www.joshuaproject.net/numbers.php>
- 9 The emphasis is on a flexible pragmatism – we want to categorize in a way that facilitates planning and engagement. For instance, at present we have not adequately further categorized the present Bantu People Cluster – partly because the majority of these peoples are in more evangelized parts of Africa.
- 10 During the 1980s many used the term "people group" to cover any identifiable social, linguistic, or ethnic entity. During the 1990s we sought to distinguish between ethno-linguistic peoples (into which every person on earth is uniquely classified) and people groups (into which any person may have multiple social classifications). There is now wide consensus to term the former "people group" and the latter "population segment".
- 11 The fundamental distinctive of a people group is language. Language polygons were compiled by GMI International using the information of the *Ethnologue*. This left a patchwork of small polygons with frequent uncovered areas, so in the mapping program a sub-layer of color was added based on the national or regional majority affinity bloc present.
- 12 The Ethnic code has been developed for use in *World Christian Encyclopedia*, Vol. 2.