# Unicorns and "Hidden Peoples"

Karl Franklin

*Karl Franklin is a linguist and anthropological consultant with the Summer Institute of Linguistics in Papua New Guinea.*

*The author claims that the definition of a "hidden people" used by some missiologists is so ill-defined that it defies any reasonable or consistent application to groups of people. He adds that such a definition often leads to establishing mission strategies closely tied to a Western viewpoint, but that the insider or "emic" point of view can help correct and modify such outside strategies.*

alph D. Winter, a foremost missiologist, admits (1981:175) that the concept of a Hidden People can be difficult to define. However, he attempts to do so and says that they "are defined by ethnic or sociological traits to be people so different from the cultural traditions of any existing church that missions (rather than evangelism) strategies are necessary for the planting of indigenous churches within the particular traditions. " The phrase "hidden people " is derived historically from McGavran's (1955) "homogenous unit ", which became known later by mission strategists as "people groups. "

The general concept has arisen, therefore, in a religious, in fact, a conservative evangelical framework, as an attempt to delineate groups of people which need some particular missionary effort. There has been no attempt to delineate the range of ethnic or sociological traits that are necessary to mark the people as a separate or particular tradition.

In point of fact, although the phrase "hidden people " is emotionally persuasive and certainly useful, it is difficult to examine along either anthropological or Biblical lines. There are good reasons for this, and we do not conclude that the term should be totally abandoned. However, we need to be aware of some of the conceptual fuzziness associated with the term so that the associated problems of trying to build a strategy around its unspecified properties are noted.

By way of illustration, imagine a unicorn, which is relevant in mythology. It is an animal which has been invented by the mythologists for particular reasons of interest, but, like hidden peoples, we should be surprised to meet a real one; a unicorn is purely imaginary.[1]

**VISIONS, DREAMS AND INTERPRETATIONS**

It is quite possible that when some mythologist of the early ages "saw " his first unicorn, it was after some stale ale following a local hunt, or by virtue of a sudden inspiration during evening prayers. We don't know—but any such scholar would envision the unicorn in reference to the general animal kingdom. It has been described as a being which had the body and head of a horse, the hind legs of a stag, the tail of a lion, and a single horn in the middle of its forehead. Like mermaids and centaurs, it is a unique imaginary creature, but made up from the characteristics of real prototypical creatures. We suggest that the same holds with hidden peoples; they are imaginary groups made up on the basis of prototypical anthropological traits of existing social groups.

Let us look briefly at Winter's definition, focusing in particular on the contrastive ethnic and sociological traits which should in turn lead us to recognize diverse or separate cultural traditions. This should, then, suggest particular strategies for the needs of particular groups of people. By this identification process, we should be able to single out traditional groups which need missionaries to establish ( "plant ") indigenous churches among them.

My purpose is not to lampoon Winter's definition. But his "hidden people " concept does need to be examined on the basis of the broader issue of strategy which is chained to it. And this need to happen before mission strategists overwhelm the layperson with numbers. We are told, for example, that some 16,750 people groups exist and that, by implication at least, each must have a separate mission strategy.

To help us see the problem more clearly, let us imagine two such supposedly contrastive hidden groups of people and ask ourselves just how missionaries might consider planting indigenous churches within them.

Note, first of all, that the root metaphor "plant " presumes some degree of favorable "soil. " This may be why Winter and others do not propose simply an evangelistic strategy. It is not that these groups are

"unreached "; indeed, many of them have "heard " the rudiments of the Gospel from neighboring groups for some time.

### SOME FICTITIOUS HIDDEN PEOPLES

One group that we might imagine are the *Akwatiks*. This group of people lives along the coast and engages primarily in fishing as a living. Their livelihood and tradition is therefore bound up in the sea.

The *Taurus*, on the other hand, are cattle herders and live in the fertile valleys to the north. Their sea-dwelling neighbors are more stable in their residence, but the herders tend to move around to the best pasture lands.

The *Akwatiks* were evangelized by friendly fishermen to the south, the *Taurus* by friendly traders to the north, but neither group first heard the Gospel from overseas "traditional " missionaries. However, over the years, neither group has established a church and gradually, as new settlements and immigrations have taken place, they have been cut off from the friendly groups which first evangelized them.

Some years later, the expatriate missionaries arrive. They convene and plan strategies for planting churches among the two groups. The field council of missionaries decides that a boat ministry is needed for the *Akwatiks* and a horse ministry for the mountain people. So eventually, there are "Seaside " churches for the one group and "Pastoral " churches for the other.

Now let us take the fictitious case study a step further. The missionaries "discover " that the *Akwatiks* are really two groups. One of them hunts only turtles, not fish, and they comb their hair straight up, instead of allowing it to hang in curls. In fact, it turns out that Group A can be further subdivided: some like their houses on stilts, and some don't. Some are more modern and use bottled gas and lanterns, but the others prefer campfires. Group B turns out to have crucial differences as well: some hunt with spears, others use dynamite. Some won't eat shark unless it is cooked in seaweed; and so on.

How many hidden peoples are there? Two? Four? Sixteen? And on what basis do we decide what is a critical and defining trait or characteristic? And who decides if it is critical or defining? And what if the strategists disagree? To what other sort of evidence can they turn for support? We suggest that it is impossible to define the difference between such groups in a consistent and replicable manner based on cultural traits and then determine that a separate "strategy " is necessary. There are, however, more objective considerations than traits, and one of these is language.

### LANGUAGE GROUPS: ARE THEY REAL OR IMAGINED?

In mission work communication is the essential criterion; there is a message about God and from God (in the case of translation) to be transmitted. We cannot be interested simply in "How many people can be 'reached' with this language? ", because such a question is from the evangelistic point of view. It is therefore invariably spoken by an outsider, who, in turn, provides an outsider's answer. For example, church members in the U.S. often say: "Why not teach 'them' English?, " believing that this approach will take less time to "reach " the people. This argument comes from the Western premise that "time is money " and that the more souls that can be saved for the least amount of money in the quickest period of time is therefore the best strategy. But establishing churches of practicing Christians is as different from saving souls as a unicorn is different from a goat.

Would counting languages instead of cultural traits allow us to establish a more consistent and sound strategy? What if the *Akwatiks* and *Taurus* spoke dialects of the same language? And how much difference could be tolerated before someone concluded that their communication processes were limited or distorted?

When it comes to counting languages and dialects, linguists are at times as confusing in their assignment as missiologists who count hidden peoples. People often ask how many languages there are in the world. Barbara Grimes (1983:xvi) reports that there are 5,445, but this figure is established on the basis of varying and conflicting survey data with a goal to establishing Bible translation needs. Translations are in fact sometimes made for separate groups which have good intelligibility. Once such works are published, with separate language names, each is then counted as a separate language. There are, however, objective linguistic techniques available to determine languages and dialects.

When linguists attempt to determine communication capabilities between communities, they do so on the basis of several parameters, such as:

(1) To what degree do the communities (villages, towns, homesteads, etc.) understand one another? Or, put differently, what is the degree of intelligibility between speakers of the *Akwatik* and the *Taurus*? Formal, controlled intelligibility tests are given at various sites to answer such questions;

(2) How closely related are the sound systems of the two languages? What about the grammars and lexicons of the communities which we choose to compare? And how different can they be before the intelligibility factor is so low that communication is severely distorted? Again, there are a number of techniques well established and tested to help linguists interpret and unscramble dialects and languages.

(3) How much difference will two societies, two generations, the social stratification, or other factors allow? That is, what if peasants and teachers or shark and turtle eaters understand each other well but will not accept each other's dialect? They may choose to accentuate the differences, regardless of degree.[2]

It is within this latter category that hidden peoples must be considered. However, the distinctions between such proposed groups must first of all be established on the basis of language-related criteria. There are well-established guidelines and tests to determine languages and dialects, but there are no procedures to determine hidden peoples. Determining the latter is an unending task, subject to the particular criteria of the missionary strategist. Groups which are supposed to be defined by social variables must first of all have the variables clearly established. This turns out to be extremely complex. For example, anthropologists such as Murdock (1961) cross-refer to over 88 separate cultural categories, each with an average of 8 traits, which have to be considered in establishing or studying separate groups. And then who decides on the ranking of the variables and their significance?[3]

**INSIDE OR OUTSIDE STRATEGIES?**

This leads up to an obvious but often unstated point: A strategy for any group is best established by collaboration with the insiders of that particular group, and not by outsiders. This is not to say that outsiders should not play a part, just as linguists may assist in establishing the boundaries of dialects.

Each of us is a member of a language, a dialect, and a nation, to use a phrase borrowed from E. Haugen (1966). As English speakers we speak one language but a number of dialects which are, in turn, spoken in several nations. But with some degree of contact we have no real trouble understanding speakers of other English dialects, even if the speakers are from other countries with various differences in cultural traits.

Each English speaker also has a cultural tradition, although this may vary as he moves about. Within this tradition certain communicative strategies are more appropriate and acceptable; the home-spun, down-country dialect style may not go over as well in Brooklyn as in rural Georgia. On the other hand, even Jimmy Carter might find it difficult to buy a used car from a salesman with a Flatbush accent. And both Mr. Carter and Mr. Flatbush will probably distrust some people from within their own communities, dialects and cultural traits aside. But both also trust others from the outside, and this relationship depends on factors which are not purely linguistic. We might ask, to return to our previous culture group, how or why did any *Akwatan* begin to trust his neighbor and listen to him in the first place?

Considerations of trust, belief, respect, understanding, and so on, are judgments made by insiders about each other and about outsiders as well. As insiders we learn whom we can trust, even if we are at times betrayed. And with the help of other insiders, we devise a strategy to deal with both insiders and outsiders. The social cohesiveness we learn to rely upon is from the inside and must be protected because when it breaks down a society begins to disintegrate. There is therefore enormous pressure to maintain some kind of unity and structure within any group.

Further, as insiders we are able to judge the boundaries of "our" group, or what is acceptable to our group. We rationalize our communication strategies to establish discreteness, and no method of strategizing from the outside can be completely acceptable or accurate. In fact, such outside categories can be quite misleading.

**RELIGIOUS CATEGORIES**

A prime example of categories established from the outside are the world's religious groups, as listed, for example, by Dayton (1983:584). These seem generally representative of what mission strategists propose: Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Marxists, "secular religionists", traditional Chinese, Buddhists, animists, "other religions", traditional Japanese, and Jews.

Despite how well-accepted such categories may be, they are judgments by outsiders from Western cultures which traditionally count things like urban populations, languages, dialects, or even stars. Inevitably, such judgments and counts lead to strategies which are subject to the concerns and interests of the particular strategist. These are in turn translated into budgets—missionary budgets to be exact.

One point should be fairly obvious: The strategy for any indigenous church should come from within the particular culture on the basis of its needs, and not by outsiders alone who might address a list of cultural features which, *a priori*, would determine a hidden people.

To labor the point, consider another cultural context: Nestled in the hills of northeastern Pennsylvania lies a small, somewhat nondescript village called Shickshinny. Near this town are numerous rural settlements where, not long ago, the cultural tradition revolved around farming.

Across the Susquehanna River from Shickshinny are other towns. Here the cultural tradition is mining and the people are mainly from a central European immigrant stock.

On the one side of the river we have mainly Catholics; on the other are Protestants.

Given just this little information, most of us would grant that there are at least two separate groups, perhaps "hidden peoples ", perhaps not. Historically, two different strategies were involved in setting up churches: the European priests with the miners and the Methodists who followed the Wesleys with the farmers. Upon reflection, however, we note that the historical strategies (if they were that) simply validated and accentuated the ethnic partitions which already existed. The strategies grew up naturally, directed by the inside needs and concerns. Only later as group members crossed the religious line between the areas could they see how effective and appropriate their particular strategy had become. And it is often this very social dynamic of exchange between two groups that is necessary to tell us if separate strategies are really needed.

**THE EMIC VIEW**

The emic view is well known in anthropology as the insiders' point of view. By way of illustration, Jesus had an emic Jewish worldview. He was an insider with an Aramaic dialect representing the Galilee area, and he engaged in tasks which were typical to that culture and day. His worldview was common with his community members, so that he understood concepts such as honor and shame, reciprocity, kinship and marriage, tradition, and religion in a Jewish context, like the other people in the area. Growing up as an insider he had an emic point of view.

There were many diverse groups that Jesus also had contact with. Some were inside and religious (like the Sadducees and Pharisees), others were outside and political (like the Romans), and some were ethnic cross-groups (like the Samaritans). We read that he used his knowledge of their cultures to effectively communicate with them, but there is no clear lesson on outside strategy leading to his establishing separate groups of disciples wherever a religious or cultural distinction took place. Paul, because of his ministry to the Gentiles, may be a better source of strategy for us. But did he have separate "church-planting " strategies for various areas, or did he in fact have one particular model in mind? Banks (1980) suggests that Paul operated on the basis of house churches wherever he went, although each church had certain distinctives, regardless of the model they first observed. Their so-called strategies were applied on the basis of the emic viewpoint of each church or group.

Roland Allen is best known for his commentary on the missionary methods of Paul. He (in 1927) dealt with an issue in missionary work which is as important today as it was in his own time: the toleration of foreign missionaries in the light of nationalism or ethnic identity and pride. Allen put his finger on the fundamental problem that has always confronted missionary work and is crucial when considering strategizing: Given the opportunity, the insiders will invariable understand and judge their culture quite differently than untrained outsiders.

Again, consider a well-known example: the church of Paul Yonggi Cho of Korea. This mega-church appeals to many pastors because it is noteworthy as the largest church in the world. The church has been examined by numerous outsiders to determine the secret to its growth with a view to transporting the formula to the U.S. or somewhere else. What is Cho's strategy, the observers ask? A number of answers are given, but overseas churches have not adopted the Koreans' fanatical zeal for prayer, meditation, or fasting. These do not fit our inside view of short services, mobile fellowship, or individualism. The Korean churches have inside strategies that work for them and have been developed by them.

Of course, not all strategists are Western. Cho is an example, and so are many seminaries which have staff and students from different parts of the world. But this does not guarantee that they will understand their own culture or return to build their strategies on an insider's basis. Often such insiders simply abandon any practice that an outsider might consider to be pagan or different.

**CONCLUSION**

I did not return to Appalachia to live among my own culture group, and most seminarians do not return to their rural or urban communities either. If we do, it may not be with an emic or inside point of view at all because we are retrained to think in a particular Western pattern. It is often only after a long and painful

process that we can examine our own society, know our communities' needs, and respond to such issues as emic Christians.

Christian people in any culture need to be taught basic doctrine, but decisions on the length of their hair or dresses should be left to them. Colonial evangelism has unfortunately turned this around; missionaries stay with the people they have "reached, " teaching them cash cropping and providing education and other treats, often in the process effectively setting up their own outside denominational structure. It sometimes takes a revolution to dislodge the missionary.

The cultural insider may need a missionary, like Paul, who journeys into the area for concentrated periods of teaching. But the outsider is never a legal resident; he is always a pilgrim. In short, hidden peoples, whoever they may turn out to be, are effectively best catalogued and strategized from the inside out. By analogy, we can conclude by noting that it takes a unicorn to know one.

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## NOTES

1. The unicorn has a long and noble history (for example, see Shepard 1979). But so do terms like language, tongue, tribe, and nation—each with difficulties when we attempt to define them.

2. Laycock (1982) claims, for example, that there is a deliberateness about linguistic diversity in Melanesia. Language change, in other words, can be a product of choice and not simply an environmental accident.

3. Murdock and his colleagues (1954) selected 400 cultures to study, which were said to represent 10% of all known to history and ethnography at the time. Eight major regions were looked at for cultural diversity, distinctive cultures, and availability of adequate descriptive materials. One third of these were from literate peoples because these were assumed to have had more time for cultural divergence. This study predated the later one (1961) which classified the particular cultural traits which should be examined in individual societies, although of course no one culture would have them all.

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