

Revisiting the Homogeneous Unit Principle

# Complex Homogeneity among Urbanized UPGs: A Challenge and An Opportunity

by Chris Clayman

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The cultural mosaic of New York City exposes humanity's complex inclinations to preserve ethnolinguistic homogeneous unity, establish hybrid identities, and form urban tribes around fluid social interests. Ultra-orthodox Jewish communities, even in the third or fourth generation, form towns and neighborhoods with dress codes,<sup>1</sup> strictly enforce behavioral norms, and organize resistance to outsiders. A 2012 conference in Queens on the dangers of the Internet filled baseball and tennis stadiums with 60,000 ultra-Orthodox men!<sup>2</sup> At the same time, one can buy hoagies (Italian) from Yemeni-owned *bodegas* (Spanish for convenience stores), Tex Mex from Chinese, gyros (Middle Eastern) and donuts from Bangladeshis, and African American soul food from West Africans in Korean-owned restaurants. Beyond ethnic fusions, social groupings form around a myriad of social, professional, and religious interests. The city's population is so large that special interest communities like *larpers* (people who dress as characters and perform Live Action Role Play) and *bronies* (male lovers of My Little Pony) all find their place.

Amidst the complexity of urban communities, missiologists are questioning the usefulness of rallying missions efforts around ethnolinguistic based lists of unreached people groups (UPGs).<sup>3</sup> I have studied diaspora groups and worked among Muslim peoples for two decades in New York City, and I still regard the homogeneity of ethnolinguistic people groups as the primary influencer on global urban migrants. At the same time, I have observed the social fragmentation and adaptation of these same peoples, through which new challenges and opportunities for missiological breakthroughs emerge. Instead of beginning with theoretical observations, allow me to introduce Kadijata's (pseudonym) personal narrative to frame the discussion.

## *Kadijata*

From birth, Kadijata breached cultural norms in her country. Her mother, a Fulbe Futa, which is a subset of the larger Fulani people cluster, married one of the "forest peoples" of Guinea, West Africa. The Fulbe Futa people

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looked down on the forest people, and her mother's family begrudged her divergence from endogamy. Shortly after Kadijata was born in Guinea's forest region, her family moved to Conakry, the country's capital. In the city, Kadijata's Fulbe Futa side quickly predominated. Kadijata's mother spoke to her in Pular, the Fulbe Futa language, and Fulani family members from across the country frequented her home. In contrast, in order to "set Kadijata up for success," her father only spoke to her in French. Month-long summer vacations were spent in the Futa Jalon (the Fulani region) instead of the forest. At the age of eight, Kadijata's father moved to Eastern Europe for work. From that point on, she only saw her father when he returned on vacations. The residential and linguistic choices of Kadijata's family meant her father's ethnic identity effectively had no influence on his daughter. As far back as Kadijata can remember, she was always a Fulbe Futa.

While Kadijata spoke Pular and French at home and school, she also learned the lingua franca of Conakry, called Susu after the dominant ethnic group in the city, as well as Maninka to converse with her friends from that ethnic group. Because her family were devout Muslims, she also attended an Islamic school on weekends to learn and memorize the Qur'an in Arabic. Shortly after her dad moved to Eastern Europe, Kadijata's mom spent years with her husband in Europe or her brother in East Africa, leaving various aunts and cousins to take care of Kadijata and her siblings in Conakry. The international work and travel of her extended family piqued Kadijata's global interests. As a teenager, Kadijata became the second best junior table tennis player in her country, and she traveled to China as a Junior Olympian. There, she befriended competitors from Sri Lanka and Ethiopia, and she continued corresponding with them for years.

At the age of 21, Kadijata received a scholarship to study telecommunications in Eastern Europe. She learned the language quickly and finished the equivalent of a bachelor's degree in five years. Kadijata then moved to Paris to pursue a master's degree and doctorate. Her plans were curtailed, however, when a relationship she formed with a fellow international student from Africa led to pregnancy. Kadijata's conservative Islamic family felt shame over the ordeal, and Kadijata felt abandoned through their lack of support. Furthermore, her relationship with the baby's father ended, leaving her as the sole provider for her baby daughter. She managed to almost complete her master's degree but the mounting pressure of single motherhood caused her to leave school and pursue a telecommunications career.

She was unfamiliar with verses the former imam cited about Jesus' followers in the Day of Resurrection (Al-Imran 3:55).

Kadijata earned a nice salary in Paris. She was promoted quickly through the company, frequently traveled throughout France on business trips, and purchased a condo in southeast Paris. Her best friends were Caucasian French co-workers and neighbors, Senegalese families in her neighborhood, and Algerian, Caribbean, and Asian colleagues. But none of those friends were Fulani. Kadijata was hurt by her people for the way they treated her after becoming pregnant. She threw herself into her work and quickly adopted a French lifestyle. When asked what people she belonged to during that time, Kadijata said, "I was French. To some people I would identify as African or Guinean, but I was French." Noticeably absent was an identification with the Fulbe Futa, from whom she had steadily distanced herself.

One of Kadijata's co-workers was a Cambodian immigrant who had married a Muslim-background Christian pastor from Mali. Knowing about the West African Muslim culture, the co-worker was burdened to pray for Kadijata and share Jesus with her. At an opportune time, she gave Kadijata a recorded testimony in French of a West African imam who had turned to Christ. Kadijata knew a lot about the Qur'an but she was unfamiliar with verses the former imam cited about Jesus' followers being superior to those who reject faith in the Day of Resurrection (Al-Imran 3:55) or those having doubts being encouraged to ask Christians (i.e., those who have been reading the "before books," Yunus 10:94). From her Islamic religious worldview, these verses gave her confidence to attend church and read the Bible. Soon after, she decided to follow Christ and was baptized.

Kadijata continued to be disciplined in multiethnic French churches. For the next 13 years, she grew in faith, became a woman of prayer, and shared Jesus with others. Kadijata even wrote long notes to her family shortly before her baptism explaining why she followed Jesus. While her decision ostracized her even more from her family, several of her family members had moved to France and Italy, and she was able to continue in relationship with some individuals. Her father, an influential man, became a follower of Christ as well, partly due to Kadijata's witness. He then went on to share Jesus with many people back in Guinea, and one of Kadijata's sisters came to Christ and is now married to a pastor.

Thirteen years after becoming a Christian, God called Kadijata to be a missionary in New York City. Through a variety of divine appointments, including an offer of free housing in Manhattan from a local church connection, Kadijata moved to New York and began learning English. One day, she observed a rally

of Hispanic and African Americans who were beleaguered by the drug and crime epidemic in their communities. Moved by their cries, Kadijata began ministering among the homeless and drug addicts. She fed them, pointed them to social centers for counseling, shared the gospel, prayed for them, and started Bible studies. Meanwhile, Kadijata frequently passed by dozens of West African Muslim women in hair braiding shops, the subway, and on the streets. A missionary family who was spreading a vision to reach West African Muslims in the city, also formed a relationship with Kadijata. One day, on the way to church, Kadijata met a Fulani cab driver who knew her family and revealed that dozens of her extended family members were in the city. Being estranged from many members of the family, Kadijata had no idea!

All these events set in motion God's call for Kadijata to share Jesus with the Fulbe Futa and other West African Muslim women. As she began meeting the Fulbe Futa community, she realized that many women only spoke Pular. Even though Kadijata's first language was Pular, she struggled to talk about Jesus, share from the Bible, or pray in her own language. She was more comfortable talking about her faith not in only French, but also in English! To remedy the cultural disconnect, Kadijata began reading and listening to the Bible, praying, and sharing about Jesus in her mother tongue, which connected to her heart in new ways.

Kadijata had rarely heard of Christians from her people group but she began discovering hundreds who had come to faith in Christ in Africa and Europe. Through joining their social media groups, praying with them, and aiding their evangelism campaigns, she effectively joined a global Fulbe Futa Christian community. Kadijata's family observed her life transforming faith journey which had taken place over the past three decades of her life, and many have opened fellowship with her again. Because of Kadijata's strong character, Muslim family members call on her to give wisdom and counsel in life's varied complications. Kadijata has come full circle. She desires nothing more than to glorify Christ with her life and to be used to introduce her Fulani people to His Kingdom. She's a member of God's family, and she's also Fulbe Futa—with a French accent. Her story illuminates several observations applicable to other hybridized members of UPGs in cities.

### *Global Urban Migrants from UPGs Have Foundational Worldviews that Continue Shaping their Lives*

Even in the increasingly pluralistic and individualistic culture of the United States, Barna studies have shown that people's moral foundations are generally in place by age nine, and their worldview is firmly in place by age thirteen. From that point on, people's worldviews are simply refined, reinforced, or applied in different ways throughout life's stages.<sup>4</sup> Among the

community-centric, honor shame cultures that comprise the remaining UPGs of the world, one can assume their foundational worldviews are set even earlier and their worldview boundaries more fixed.

Paul Hiebert defines worldview as the:

fundamental cognitive, affective, and evaluative presuppositions a group of people make about the nature of things, and which they use to order their lives. Worldviews are what people in a community take as given realities, the maps they have of reality that they use for living.<sup>5</sup>

In my experience with global urban migrants from UPGs in New York City, their worldviews remain fundamentally the same as they have throughout their lives. There are always some value shifts and variances, but their core worldviews remain intact. It has been comical to observe event-oriented West Africans hold events in time-oriented New York City culture. On one occasion, I was invited to an event that was to start at 9:30 pm. Knowing better, I petitioned the organizer to tell me the actual starting time. His values had apparently been influenced by the city culture because he claimed, "It will start at 9:30 pm sharp. It has to. We can't keep living this way." So, I showed up at 11 pm, only to find I was among the first to arrive, and the doors were still unopened. The event didn't begin until 1:30 am, four hours after the stated time.

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Worldviews, observed Hiebert, "conserve old ways and provide stability in cultures over long periods of time."<sup>6</sup> There are primordial aspects of ethnicity, both biological and cultural, that act as primary influencers on global urban migrants. No matter what global experiences and relationships people have, they have a sense of who is permissible for them to marry in order to perpetuate a unique sense of ethnic identity and descent. Not everyone heeds that cultural pressure, but the presence of the pressure attests to the biological aspect of ethnicity. Shyamal Kataria observes that,

The practice of endogamy not only helps keep ethnicity intact but *forms* the very basis for the separate identity itself. . . . It is undeniable that genealogy is one of the more objective indicators of ethnicity.<sup>7</sup>

Common kinship, language, or religion are primordial cultural aspects that ground global urban migrants in foundational identities. Clifford Geertz states that,

These congruities of blood, speech, custom, and so on . . . have an ineffable, and at times overpowering, coerciveness in and of themselves. One is bound to one's kinsman, one's neighbour, one's fellow believer, ipso facto; as the result not merely of personal affection, practical necessity, common interest, or incurred obligation, but at least in great part by virtue of some unaccountable absolute import attributed to the very tie itself.<sup>8</sup>

In the case of Kadijata, there are primordial aspects of her birth mother being Fulbe Futa and the reinforcement of Fulbe Futa linguaculture throughout her upbringing that, despite all her outside influences, have served as her identity framework. Even when she identified more as French, this shift was a reaction to her Fulbe Futa framework disapproving of her and failing to functionally support her desire to belong. The pain she experienced during that time was initiated by breaching the cultural norms and not through a planned desire to leave or change her ethnicity. Kadijata still shared the most homogeneity with her Fulbe Futa people. In the 1977 Lausanne Consultation on the Homogeneous Unit Principle, Charles Kraft stated, "The more shared factors or criteria between the members of a group, the higher the degree of homogeneity."<sup>9</sup> The connection of personal identity at birth to generations of history is not easily dissolved. The establishment of a foundational worldview during childhood is difficult to replace or alter.

### The Experiences of Global Urban Migrants Force Them to Reshape their Ethnic Identity and Worldview

Missiologists such as Len Bartlotti have initiated discussions to reevaluate our unreached people group lists due to their simplistic ethnolinguistic primordial views of ethnicity.<sup>10</sup> He is correct to point out that instrumentalist and constructivist views of ethnicity should also be integrated into our understanding of ethnicity, especially as it relates to on-the-ground strategy. An instrumentalist view of ethnicity focuses on the role state institutions, elites, and societal politics have on inventing cultural traditions and manufacturing or maintaining ethnic identity. It's a top down view of ethnicity that ignores inconvenient historical events and, instead, reinforces symbols, heroes, and messages that forge people toward a common goal.<sup>11</sup> Constructivism views ethnicity as social constructions influenced by broader culture, technology, politics, and other social factors. It maintains that people can have multiple ethnic identities, and they move fluidly in and out of these based on what is most advantageous.<sup>12</sup>

In an age when outside ideas, values, and beliefs barrage people's phones through social media channels, competing with their primordial ideals, one can't ignore the influence of instrumentalism and constructivism. The problem with reimagining unreached people groups lists, however, is that constructivist ethnic identities are too fluid for categorizing them effectively into mobilization lists.

Even constructivist proponents admit that:

Constructivist arguments are themselves so amorphous . . . that incorporating them into our theories of politics and economics is a difficult task.<sup>13</sup>

I concur with Dan Scribner, Joshua Project's founding director, that ethnolinguistic or ethnoreligious unreached people group lists are still needed to inspire and mobilize people toward a general missions need, but that local workers will need to form evangelism strategies based on the more complex realities of ethnic identities and groupings.<sup>14</sup>

Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, Sikhs, etc. don't remain unreached with the gospel because of their religion. They remain unreached because they belong to people groups whose greatest value is solidarity with the group, of which religion is one component. Global urban migrants, especially since technological advancement has allowed them to stay daily connected to home, become gatekeepers and influencers for reshaping their people's ethnic boundaries, values, and beliefs. Their proximity to new ideas, education, and relationships outside of their primordial culture often causes them to refigure their views of reality. Because they financially support the economy through remittances and achieve heightened status in the minds of their friends and family back home due to their perceived success, they are uniquely positioned to reshape the permissible values, beliefs, and ethnic boundaries of their people. They are on the fringe of solidarity with their people because of their experiences, creating enough distance from the homogeneous unit to confidently make divergent choices. Their influence and stature with their people, however, keep their divergent ideas and values from being completely discarded. In fact, these global urban migrants are often the trusted gatekeepers their people look to for interpreting and adopting new realities.

In *Transforming Worldviews*, Paul Hiebert explains that people create frameworks (i.e., worldviews) to make sense of their experiences. Sometimes, and this happens increasingly for global urban migrants, their new experiences don't match their interpretive framework. Hiebert states, "People experience a worldview crisis when there is a gap between



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their worldview and their experience of reality.”<sup>15</sup> The human tendency is to somehow fit those divergent experiences into their existing worldview. Even if they have to refigure or reinterpret their foundational worldview, they are still operating from their preexisting paradigm.

A West African imam in Harlem once told me,

If I gave a dollar to ten Muslims and told them to return tomorrow with my money, only one would return. If I gave a dollar to ten Christians and told them to return tomorrow with my money, nine would return. What does that show you?

I wanted to say, “The moral superiority of Christians,” but instead asked, “What?”

He replied, “It shows you that those Christians are better Muslims than the Muslims.”

In his worldview at that time, the righteous ones of God were Muslims, so when he experienced new points of reality from Christians, he interpreted their honest deeds as Muslim acts to

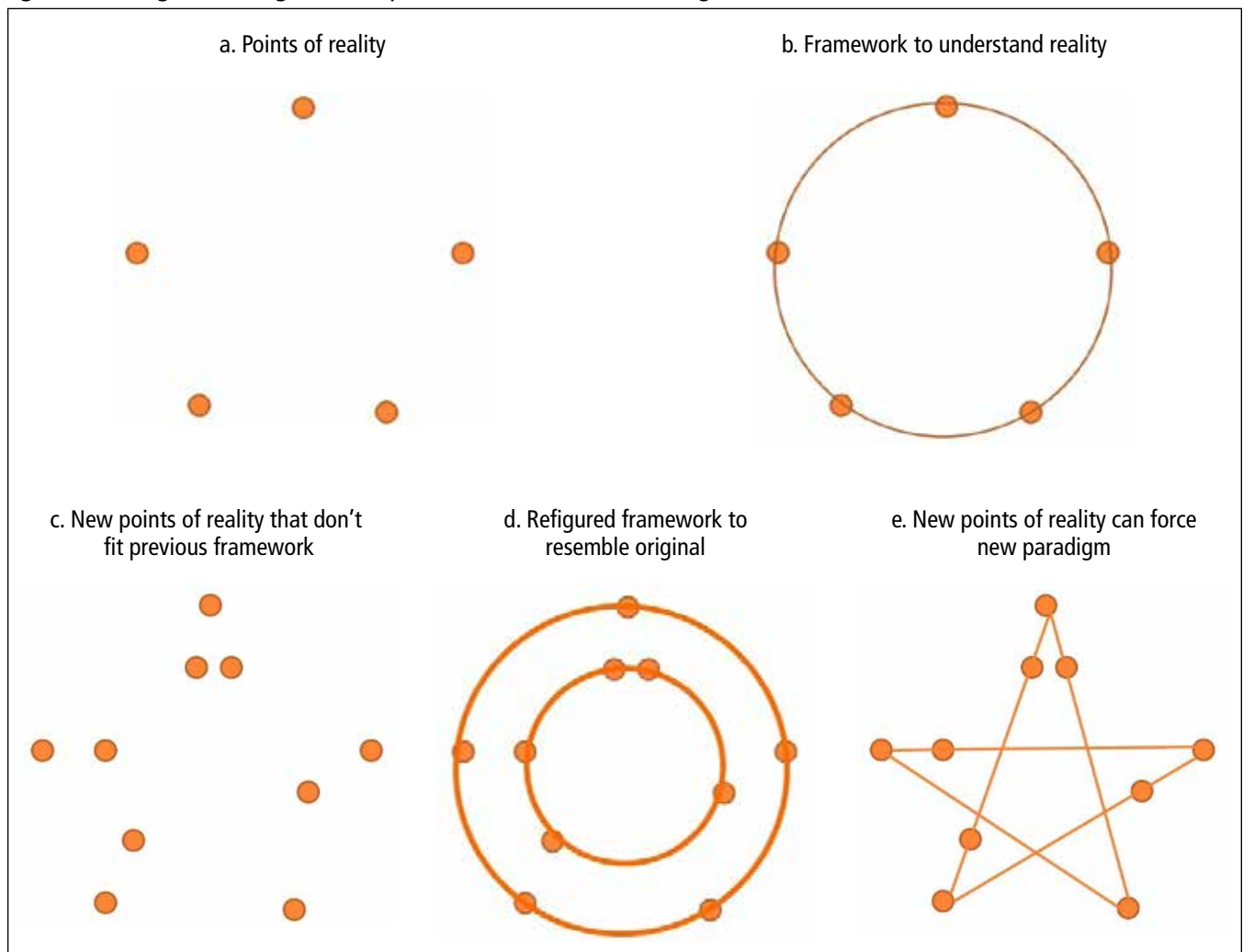
fit his framework. At some point, however, the points of reality become too far out of the framework and a new paradigm is constructed. (See figure 1 below) This same imam told me years later:

We Muslims think we know Jesus, but I realized we can't know him from the Qur'an. We have to know him from the Bible. Just as Jesus died for the people, so I want to give my life away for others.

### Global Urban Migrants from UPGs Still Have Ethnic and Linguistic Barriers to the Gospel

Donald McGavran defined a homogeneous unit as “a section of society in which all members have some characteristic in common,”<sup>16</sup> and he observed that “[people] like to turn to Christ without crossing ethnic and linguistic barriers.”<sup>17</sup> Most global urban migrants retain the most characteristics and deepest bonds with their lifelong ethnic group. Despite their experiences in cross-cultural relationships and skills in different languages, ethnic and linguistic barriers to the gospel among unreached people groups remain. Just as people group

Figure 1. Paradigm shift diagrams (Adapted from Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 49)



methodology exposed blind spots in missions strategy by helping evangelists see beyond geography, it is pertinent that urban missiology not become so geographically focused that strong global networks and bonds of ethnic groups are ignored.

Most members of unreached people groups in New York City, for example, are more connected with friends and family in their homeland or other diaspora communities than they are with their next door neighbors; that is, unless their apartment complexes have been taken over as virtual villages of their people groups, which often happens. As Kadijata met more of her Fulbe Futa people in New York City, she realized that many of them did not speak adequate French or English to understand the gospel, and she was compelled to increase her skill and use of biblical Pular so they could understand.

### Global Urban Migrants from UPGs Occupy Multiple Homogeneous Units in Cities, But Not All Are Equal

Constructivist views of ethnicity point out that people carry multiple ethnic identities, constructing these identities by whatever seems advantageous in relating to broader society. In the United States, a Jamaican might identify as American, or as black American or African American because of the influence of the nation's racial categories on politics and power structures. Among African Americans, however, they might distinguish themselves as Caribbean, among Caribbeans as Jamaican, and among Jamaicans as Kingstonian.

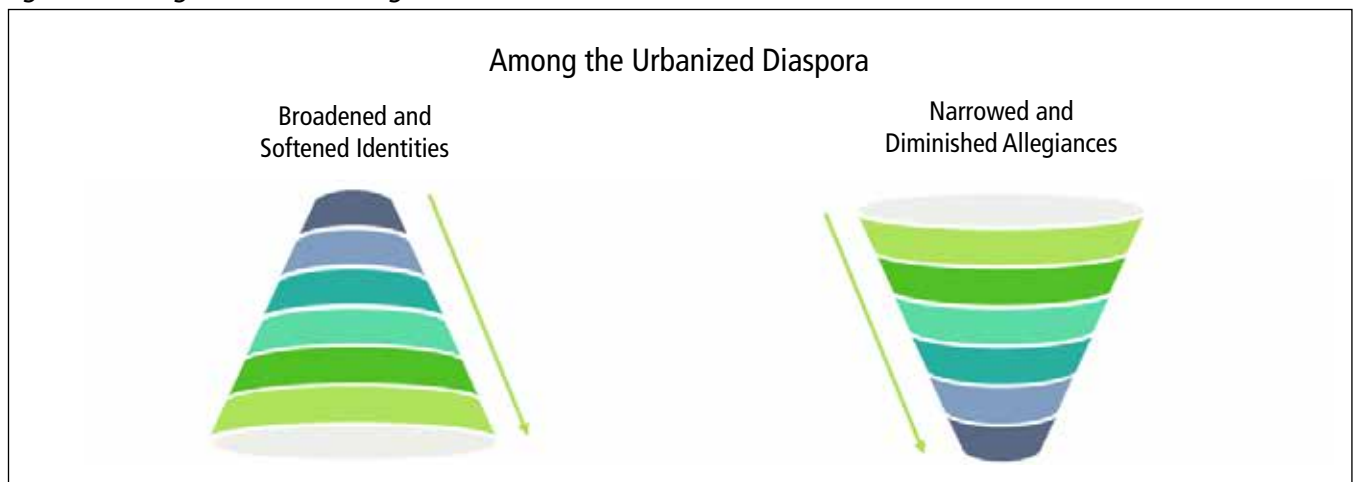
While the homogeneous unit principle's relationship to unreached people group missiology has largely been ethnolinguistic, the original principle included social or any other characteristics people have in common. In urban centers, such homogeneous units (HUs) are innumerable, and global urban migrants from UPGs will likely belong to many HUs based on ethnicity, ancestry, hobbies, interests, vocations, geographic

settings, stages of life, etc. In Kadijata's life, she belonged to many HUs, including Fulbe Futa, Fulani, Guineans, Africans, French, female Parisians, internationally competitive table tennis players, women business professionals, single moms, condo owners in southeast Paris, international students, telecommunications master's students, churches, etc.

Among the urbanized diaspora, people's identities broaden and soften. McIntosh and McMahan point out that "in urban contexts where people are regularly exposed to tremendous individual variation . . . category width tends to be wider."<sup>18</sup> Category width refers to the number of items or elements people place under a single category. For instance, an urban individual with exposure to many viewpoints likely has a broader category width for what is good or permissible than someone with limited exposure to people of different worldviews. In researching unreached people group communities for the UPG North America initiative, as well as for my book *ethNYcity*,<sup>19</sup> I've seen how, after migration, some people adopt a softened nationalistic or "region of origin" identity more than a rigid ethnolinguistic identity.

While urbanized diaspora identities broaden and soften, their allegiances narrow and diminish. They simultaneously broaden the category width of "my people" while narrowing the category width of those to whom they pledge strong allegiance. If Kadijata was raised in her mother's village, she likely would have only had Fulbe Futa friends and would have felt allegiance to the Fulbe Futa group as a whole. In village life, when someone breaches the cultural code, the village takes responsibility for correcting the behavior, not just the person's family. Honor and shame are felt by the entire community, not just by individuals or individual families. In Kadijata's case, her urban upbringing already contributed to her broadening identity and narrowed allegiances, which increased even more after emigration. Most West Africans I've met in New York City rarely

Figure 2. Shifting Identities and Allegiances



contribute to community development and group projects back home. They are primarily concerned with building houses and businesses for their families. They broaden their identities in the city to other West African Muslims or people from their countries, but their allegiances narrow to their families instead of the larger ethnic community. See figure 2 on page 62.

## A Muslim-background Christian who moved to NYC to escape persecution from his people reversed his status, becoming his village's honored representative in America.

While global urban migrants belong to multiple HUs in cities, these HUs vary in durability and “stickiness.” A person might be a part of an HU soccer team with people from multiple nationalities that play once a month. These soccer players could have different preferred languages and might not have any relationship with one another apart from the soccer matches. The HU only remains as long as the team stays together and is based on one category. It is unlikely that such an HU will play a major role on a person's deep values and beliefs. On the other hand, this person might be a devout Muslim who belongs to a Muslim student society on campus through which deep relationships develop with Muslims from other ethnicities and regions of the world. At a formulative stage in life with the “stickiness” of a major shared belief, this HU has much more potential for reshaping someone's identity and worldview, especially if that person marries someone from another culture. The influence of HUs in cities vary widely on their inhabitants.

### *New Challenges and Opportunities for Missiological Breakthroughs Exist among Global Urban Migrants*

There are multiple challenges and opportunities presented in the complexity of urban environments for reaching UPGs. I'll highlight particular observations regarding social fragmentation, hybridity, desire for unity, and the influence of host culture.

#### **Social fragmentation**

Global urban migrants experience socially fragmented lives through the busyness of cities and renegotiation of their ethnic identities and allegiances. Ed Alansky comments about his experience in Delhi:

I would say that urbanization has increased the challenge of starting movements by isolating individuals and nuclear family units from their wider relationships of trust without

replacing those relationships with new relationships of trust. Surrounded by more people than ever, people seem to be increasingly alone. Therefore, it seems plausible that despite our best efforts to adapt and capitalize, urbanization represents, for the present, a net challenge to mission movements regardless of our paradigm of “people group” or identity. Even as we seek to adapt in the face of new challenges, we need to be careful not to hastily blame “people group” paradigms when the challenge might really be social fragmentation itself. Phenomena such as multiple-identities, multi-ethnic churches, and urban networks are, in my view, symptoms of that fragmentation, rather than promising alternatives to people groups.<sup>20</sup>

One of the reasons we started Global Gates, whose vision is to reach the ends of the earth through global gateway cities, is that almost all success stories around the world of movements to Christ are among rural people. But almost everyone in the world now lives in cities or is directly affected by cities. Even the mud hut-no electricity-no running water village where I lived in Mali now has cell phones connecting them to influential family members in cities. As Alan McMahan proposes, a fourth missions era is arriving,<sup>21</sup> and the challenge of urbanization should not dissuade us from “failing forward” as God refines our missional approaches.

On the positive side of social fragmentation, global urban migrants experience reduced scrutiny from their people due to their fringe status, and they are often influential gatekeepers for disseminating new ideas and values. What a great space for the gospel! Multiple West African Muslims in New York have made statements like, “Our people don't understand Jesus, so I will send these (gospel) resources back to them so they can understand,” or, “I have initiated talks with my people back home to get close to Christians to understand them better.” A Muslim-background Christian who moved to New York City to escape persecution from his people effectively reversed his status, becoming his village's honored “representative in America.” He introduced a network of Christians to his village that resulted in dozens of baptized followers of Christ.<sup>22</sup>

Kadijata was already outside of the solidarity of her people when she became a Christian, so her conversion only widened the separation. Fringe people within people groups who follow Christ face the risk of being pushed out altogether by their people. Even if people are so fringe or separate that they will not influence a large amount of people from their ethnic group, they can still be a beachhead through whom core individuals of unreached people groups can hear the gospel. Kadijata was used by God to see her father come to Christ, who was then the main influencer for leading other family members and friends to do the same.

Some global urban migrants, despite their status as gatekeepers for new ideas and values, see their social fragmentation as deterrents for making decisions to follow Christ. A West African Muslim man who has studied the Bible with me for many years believes the Bible is true in his head, and he has even shared the gospel with Muslims from other ethnic groups. Nevertheless, he has not completely devoted his life to Christ. He explained:

I promised my family I would only be in America for a couple of years and then I would go back to them. It has now been over a decade. Because I did not keep my word, and I am not with them in person to include them in such a monumental decision, it would be immoral for me to make a decision in America to become a Christian. I would need to wait until I return.

**“Because I am not with them in person to include them in such a monumental decision, it would be immoral for me to make a decision in America to become a Christian.”**

### Hybridity and Multiple Homogeneous Units

The weakened HUs of unreached people groups in cities slow the spread of the gospel. Global urban migrants are busy, have diminished allegiance to their people, and negotiate several identities. They belong to multiple HUs, some stronger than others, that vie for their attention and time. They often intermarry with other peoples, creating more hybridity and renegotiated identity. At various stages in life, members of UPGs might identify with, and be influenced by, particular social HUs more than the UPGs to which they belong. If there are Christians among those social HUs, a great opportunity exists to share Christ.

For Kadijata, almost all her time in France was spent with French business professionals, as well as immigrant business professionals who were not from Guinea. She came to Christ through a Cambodian-French co-worker. Even though Kadijata shared Jesus with her family members, her disconnection from the larger Fulbe Futa community lessened the influence of her conversion on her people. Conversions that take place through social HUs disconnected from the larger UPG will not likely result in immediate missiological breakthrough of new bodies of believers that can incorporate members of UPGs. Nevertheless, these social HUs do create more opportunity for beachheads of individuals turning to Christ who can potentially convert core members of their UPGs to form churches.

The broadening and softening of people group identity coupled with the multiplicity of HUs in cities means that broader people group identities might be better described as overlapping conglomerations of HUs that are linked enough to have an overarching common identity. For example, people from Pakistan who live in North American cities usually choose to identify as Pakistani to the larger society. The broad category marker of Pakistani, however, encompasses many different HUs that overlap like condensed Venn diagrams to constitute the whole. These HUs consist of groups such as muppies (Muslim yuppies), stay at home moms, Balochi-speaking taxi drivers, Pathan-speaking Islamic fundamentalists, Karachiites, second generation students, IT professional workers, mipsters (Muslim hipsters), working class apartment dwellers, etc. If a 25-year-old, second generation, Pakistani muppet woman came to Christ, she could overlap a Balochi HU by being from a Balochi family, which could overlap with a Balochi-speaking taxi driver HU, which could overlap with a general Pakistani taxi driver HU, which could overlap with a Pathan-speaking Islamic fundamentalist HU, and so on, but the influence diminishes with each HU jump. Due to the broader people group identities and social fragmentation in cities, a wide range of lifestyles and values are represented in UPGs that present social barriers for the spread of the gospel. The overlapping of HUs, however, means that the gospel can spread more quickly to other HUs because the HU borders are more porous and inclusive.

The myriad of HUs make contextualization efforts difficult for missionaries. Cross-cultural contextualization efforts are difficult enough when working with highly homogeneous monocultural ethnolinguistic people groups. The complexity of urbanites demands even more astute ethnographic research from missionaries. For effective evangelism and church planting, missionaries will likely need to focus contextualization on particular population segments, paying special attention to the receptivity of those HUs and their influence on other HUs throughout the UPG. Missionaries might find as much success, however, in finding receptive groups, or individuals, and simply supporting those people in creating their own indigenous expressions of Christian faith in obedience to Scripture through their existing networks. Those networks will jump in and out of the UPG and will likely end up with varied expressions of church and incorporability with the broader UPG.

The multiplicity of ethnic identity and HUs among urbanized UPGs also creates an opportunity for the multiethnic church to play a key role in seeing first fruits among UPGs. People like Kadijata would be open to different types of churches at different stages of their lives. At the time Kadijata became a Christian, it would have been difficult for her to incorporate into a Fulbe Futa church because of her preferred HUs at the time and the hurt she felt toward her people. She was



most comfortable in a multiethnic church. McIntosh and McMahan point out that first and second generation immigrants have various stages of life where they are more or less likely to explore multiethnic churches. For instance, one-and-a-half and second generation immigrants<sup>23</sup> are most likely to be attracted to multiethnic churches during their formative adult years but prefer a church connected with their traditional cultural values when they have children.<sup>24</sup> Missionaries in cities should be open to varied forms of church models, understanding that different models will be more effective at various stages in incorporating members of UPGs.

Multiethnic churches can be safe places for members of UPGs to explore Christian community. If they are never able to experience Christian community, it is difficult for them to imagine making a decision that could result in losing their lifelong community. Without the scrutiny of their people watching, members of UPGs feel a sense of anonymity in attending multiethnic churches and forming relationships with Christians. McGavran recognized

*that if in a conglomerate (mixed member) church, a person is present from a people segment that does not have the gospel, they can become a "bridge of God" to take the Good News to their own people.*<sup>25</sup>

Multiethnic churches and general city ministries should recognize their unique opportunity to disciple and spread vision for members of UPGs to reach back as bridges of God to their people. Missionaries focused on reaching UPGs in cities should be aware of this fact and widely network with multiethnic churches. They should recognize, however, that for many UPGs there will be no such bridge. The missionary family that connected with Kadijata in New York City with a vision to reach West African Muslims did so through a general city ministry.

There are several difficulties in multiethnic church involvement with members of UPGs. Members of UPGs have unique sets of discipleship issues related to persecution, family relations, spiritual warfare, etc. that many churches will not know how to address. As one Muslim-background Christian told me, "I went to a church for ten years, but they never even knew the questions I was asking." As great and necessary as multiethnic churches are in cities, most of them are fairly monocultural and disciple people of a particular worldview. It is impossible for one church to adequately disciple people from myriads of cultural, religious, and familial backgrounds. For that reason, homogeneous churches are necessary to effectively evangelize and disciple UPGs.

When a first generation UPG immigrant is disciplined in a multiethnic church, they are rarely disciplined in their heart language, and they resultantly struggle to communicate the

gospel with their people in a way that can be understood, received, and reproduced. One day I was on the subway speaking Bambara to a Malian Muslim. When the Malian man exited, a gentleman from Cote d'Ivoire approached me and spoke in Jula, a closely related language. I was amazed when the man explained that he was an evangelist and pastor. A Jula-speaking evangelist was a rare find! When we began talking about our faith, however, the man switched to French. When I switched to Bambara, he switched back to French. Finally, he said, "I'm sorry. I wish I could talk about God in my language, but I only know how to talk about God and the Bible in French." Such a phenomenon is not an anomaly. It took Kadijata over 25 years to begin praying, reading the Bible, and sharing her faith in her first language of Pular. If Christian members of UPGs in multiethnic churches are going to be used as bridges of God to their people, they will most likely need to do so in their language.

We have also found that our most effective cross-cultural missionaries in North American cities are those that speak the language of their UPG, not necessarily because of the droves of people they lead to Christ, but because they effectively understand culture enough to enhance the work of same and near culture believers from UPGs. Similarly, in a study of best practices among Muslim ministries in North America, the likelihood of an evangelist seeing a convert was eight times higher if they were using a language other than English.<sup>26</sup>

**As one Muslim-background Christian told me, "I went to a church for ten years, but they never even knew the questions I was asking."**

### The Desire for Unity

One of the greatest critiques of the homogeneous unit principle (HUP) is that it does not adequately confront the moral and ethnic biases of HUs, which exacerbates disunity within the global church.<sup>27</sup> Ralph Winter addressed this critique, saying:

[I] freely admit that this strategy may unintentionally make it appear that we are setting aside goals of unity for goals of evangelism. This in fact is not the case. It is quite the opposite: we are willing to do evangelism in the world as it is, in the highly divided world in which we live, believing wholeheartedly that in the long run the working of the Holy Spirit through true evangelism is the only way to melt down the high walls of prejudice and thus produce true unity.<sup>28</sup>

Under the banner of unity, some urban churches could actually be preventing HU UPGs from beginning their journey with Christ. One charter member of a large urban church confessed to me, “We thought we would start this city-focused church that would reach influencers and trickle down to all peoples of the city. But we’ve realized we haven’t touched UPGs.” In an effort to be a church “for all,” they effectively excluded members of UPGs who would need a more focused HU approach. Another large urban church shut down a booth with materials for Muslims who wandered into their services because they wanted to be a united church that didn’t display a separation of peoples. In effect, they cut off opportunities for Muslims to join the Body of Christ. In the name of unity, if Kadijata was required to reconcile the bitterness toward her people prior to coming to Christ, she would have likely balked. Instead, through her transformation in Christ, she has learned to love and embrace her people despite the pain she has experienced from them.

**“We thought we would start this city-focused church that would reach influencers and trickle down to all peoples of the city. But we’ve realized we haven’t touched UPGs.”**

### The Influence of Host Culture

The host culture of global urban migrants, nationally and locally, can positively or negatively influence UPG receptivity to the gospel and influence their worldview. The greatest hindrance to members of UPGs finding Jesus in New York City might simply be busyness. Many of them work sixty plus hours a week and have long commutes. One Malian man told me he moved to the city with his best friend, but they only see each other once a month due to conflicting schedules. If best friends only see each other sporadically, what implications does that have for evangelism, discipleship, and church planting? Kadijata grew in her faith because she was devoted to Christ and her church family. At great sacrifice in the midst of her busy schedule, she made long commutes twice a week to church.

Materialism is another negative influence on UPGs from the host culture. UPGs primarily move to places like New York for money, and the city only feeds that desire. Many West African friends work two to three jobs to build up wealth in the city and their homeland. One friend admitted, “I cannot talk about anything in English except for money and selling things. What does this show about what’s important to me?” The Bible is clear: “No one can serve two masters . . . you cannot serve God and money” (Matt. 6:24, ESV).

Even though there are thousands of churches in a city like New York, these churches could be barriers to the gospel instead of bridges for some people. One Fulani man in the Bronx said to me:

Can you explain something? I see all of these churches around here, but I don’t understand. Women who go into the church do not have much clothes on, and when they go in, they dance and sing. This is not religion. This is *discothèque*.

For this man, his experience with urban churches created extra barriers to the gospel.

For some global urban migrants from UPGs, the North American culture positively impacts their receptivity to the gospel. Some of them come from oppressive backgrounds in which the freedom to make individual choices is suppressed. Perhaps they were curious about the Bible back home but reading it was too risky. Upon arrival in North America, they have societal freedom and the ability to hide under the city’s cloak to explore divergent belief systems. The most striking difference in Muslim ministry in North America compared to the Muslim world is the proportion of women becoming Christian. In the Muslim world, most of the first churches are filled with men, and if their wives convert it is often out of loyalty to their husbands instead of conviction of truth. The men might not even consider their wives important enough to hear a gospel message. North America provides social support for women, and they are empowered to more freely make their own choices. In conversations with Muslim ministry network leaders in North America, they have confirmed my observation that seventy percent of the Muslim-background people who become followers of Christ in North America are women.

### Conclusion

Unreached people groups remain. Their foundational worldviews are slow to change, even in the midst of the onslaught of new ideas, experiences, and relationships that occur through technology and migration. Missionaries’ understanding of ethnicity, contextualization, and overall missions strategy, however, will need to evolve alongside the complex identities of global urban migrants from UPGs. Forms, structures, models, communication channels, ways of transmission and reproduction, etc. are rapidly changing, and on-the-ground mission strategies will need to involve deeper understanding of hybrid identities and multiple homogeneous units within UPGs. The social fragmentation of urbanites might slow the spread of the gospel, but it also creates opportunities for life-changing information to jump easily from one HU to another. Multiple types of ministries and churches will be needed to penetrate the breadth of UPGs in cities. Many ministries will need to focus on UPGs, and some ministries

will pick up fringe members of UPGs who can be “bridges of God” back to their people. In New York City, Kadijata worships with a large, multiethnic church, is part of a church of missionaries focused on reaching Muslims, has regular prayer with women ministering among West African Muslims, has Bible studies with homeless people and drug addicts, connects

with a French-speaking West African church, networks with churches and ministries who focus on reaching the neighborhood where she does ministry, participates in prayer times with Fulbe Futa Christians from across the globe, and is seeking to start a Fulbe Futa church. Welcome to a new era of reaching unreached peoples in, and through, cities. **IJFM**

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> “Welcome to Kiryas Joel, New York. Please Behave—and Don’t Wear Shorts,” *The Guardian*, September 4, 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/sep/05/ground-zero-civil-liberties-paul-harris>.
- <sup>2</sup> Michael M. Grynbaum, “Ultra-Orthodox Jews Rally to Discuss Risks of the Internet,” *The New York Times*, May 20, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/21/nyregion/ultra-orthodox-jews-hold-rally-on-internet-at-citi-field.html>.
- <sup>3</sup> See *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 56, no. 4 (October–December 2020).
- <sup>4</sup> “Changes in Worldview among Christians over the Past 13 Years,” Barna, March 9, 2009, <https://www.barna.com/research/barna-survey-examines-changes-in-worldview-among-christians-over-the-past-13-years/>; “Research Shows that Spiritual Maturity Process Should Start at a Young Age,” Barna, November 13, 2003, <https://www.barna.com/research/research-shows-that-spiritual-maturity-process-should-start-at-a-young-age/>.
- <sup>5</sup> Paul Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 15.
- <sup>6</sup> Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 30.
- <sup>7</sup> Shyamal Kataria, “Explaining Ethnicity: Primordialism vs. Instrumentalism,” *Advances in Social Sciences Research Journal* 5, no. 4 (April 25, 2018): 131.
- <sup>8</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 259.
- <sup>9</sup> Charles Kraft, “Anthropological Perspectives on the Homogeneous Unit Principle,” in “Consultation on The Homogeneous Unit Principle,” compiled by Greg Parsons (unpublished manuscript 2001, last modified 2022), Microsoft Word file, 57.
- <sup>10</sup> Len Bartlotti, “Reimagining and Re-envisioning People Groups,” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 56, no. 4 (October–December 2020): 46–50.
- <sup>11</sup> Kataria, “Explaining Ethnicity,” 133–34.
- <sup>12</sup> Kanchan Chandra, ed., *Constructivist Theories of Ethnic Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 4.
- <sup>13</sup> Chandra, *Constructivist Theories of Ethnic Politics*, 4.
- <sup>14</sup> Dan Scribner, “The Making of Lists,” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 56, no. 4 (October–December 2020): 39–42.
- <sup>15</sup> Paul Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews: an Anthropological Understanding of How People Change* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 30.
- <sup>16</sup> Donald A. McGavran, “The Genesis and Strategy of the Homogeneous Unit Principle,” in “Consultation on The Homogeneous Unit Principle,” compiled by Greg Parsons (unpublished manuscript 2001, last modified 2022), Microsoft Word file, 2.
- <sup>17</sup> Donald McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1970), 198.
- <sup>18</sup> Gary L. McIntosh and Alan McMahan, *Being the Church in a Multi-Ethnic Community* (Indianapolis: Wesleyan Publishing House, 2012), 144.
- <sup>19</sup> See [upgnorthamerica.com](http://upgnorthamerica.com) and [globalgates.info/books-articles](http://globalgates.info/books-articles).
- <sup>20</sup> Ed Alansky, “India-Delhi” in “Notes from the Field: Voices of Pioneer Workers on the Challenge of ‘People Groups,’” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 56, no. 4 (October–December 2020): 22.
- <sup>21</sup> Alan McMahan, “Ferment in the Church: Missions in the 4th Era,” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 56, no. 4 (October–December 2020): 36–38.
- <sup>22</sup> I tell his story and the vision of reaching unreached people groups in and through cities in my book *Superplan*. Chris Clayman, *Superplan: a journey into God’s story* (Monument, CO: WIGTake Resources, 2018).
- <sup>23</sup> We are defining a first generation immigrant as someone born in another country who migrates as an adult. A one-and-a-half generation immigrant is someone born in another country who migrates as a child or young adult and, therefore, has a worldview shaped by the country of their parents as well as the new country into which they integrate linguistically and culturally especially within the school system. A second generation immigrant is someone born in the country to which their parents migrated.
- <sup>24</sup> McIntosh and McMahan, *Being the Church in a Multi-Ethnic Community*, 128–32.
- <sup>25</sup> Alan R. Johnson, “Foundations of Frontier Missiology: Core Understandings and Interrelated Concepts,” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 56, no. 4 (October–December 2020): 12.
- <sup>26</sup> Rick Kronk, Gene Daniels, Mark Chapman, and James Watson, “Fruitful Practices in Ministry to the North American Muslim Diaspora: A Mixed-Methods Study,” Fruitful Practices Research, accessed February 12, 2018, 7, [http://www.fruitfulpractice.org/diaspora-research/..](http://www.fruitfulpractice.org/diaspora-research/)
- <sup>27</sup> John H. Yoder, “The Homogeneous Unit Concept in Ethical Perspective,” in “Consultation on The Homogeneous Unit Principle,” compiled by Greg Parsons (unpublished manuscript 2001, last modified 2022), Microsoft Word file, 198.
- <sup>28</sup> Ralph Winter, “The Homogeneous Unit Principle in Historical Perspective,” in “Consultation on The Homogeneous Unit Principle,” compiled by Greg Parsons (unpublished manuscript 2001, last modified 2022), Microsoft Word file, 93.