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The Effect of Migration on People Groups

A Case Study of Diaspora Peoples in Louisville

by Matthew Pierce

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The journey of Su Su[1] is not isolated in the era of forced migration in which we live. Su Su is a freshman in college in Louisville, Kentucky. She wants to be a doctor and came to Louisville as a refugee from Burma when she was 10 years old. She was born in the jungles between Burma and Thailand. Her family fled their home country because the Burmese army was burning villages in Dawei state and forcing other Burmese men to fight in the military. The military took men from Su Su's village and burned the village to the ground. Su Su's mom ran away fearing for the life of her unborn daughter and young son. Su Su's 18-year-old mother fled through the jungle with mostly Karen tribal people.

Su Su's mother told stories of disease and sickness as the group travelled through the jungle together. People were killed by land mines, poisoned rice, and other foods poisoned by the military. Su Su said when she was a little girl she did not have the right to cry because the military might find her family if she made any noises. Her family traveled with the Karen people because the Karen people knew where to hide in the jungle. One time Su Su was playing with her brother and a Burmese soldier found them and pointed his gun at her and her brother. Su Su's mother cried touching the feet of the Burmese soldier begging for the life of her children. The soldier told them to run faster. Su Su's mother and the Karen people ran through the hills with their young children until their feet bled.

Su Su spent most of the first ten years of her life in a refugee camp surrounded by Karen people. She is from the Dawei ethnic group that was traditionally subsumed under the Burmese ethnic label. The Dawei language is a Burmese dialect. The Dawei people follow basically the same rituals, holidays, and religion as ethnic Burmese. Ethnologue lists the language as Tavoyan with Dawei as an alternate name for the language. Tavoyan is classified as a Southern Burmese dialect (Lewis et. al, 2015). Su Su only speaks Dawei dialect with her parents. When asked if she would ever identify as Dawei she said no. Nobody knows what Dawei means and it is easier for her to identify as Burmese. In the camp she studied in Sgaw Karen, spoke Sgaw and Pwo Karen with her neighbors, Central Thai with Thai people, and Burmese with people who did not know any of these languages.

[1] Quotations and stories that follow in the article are from interviews conducted by the author. All participants are referred to pseudonymously.

Su Su said that she would identify herself as Burmese when talking to Americans, but would also identify herself as Dawei when talking with people from Burma. Su Su's ethnic identity is contingent upon the "other." Her ethnicity is like a passport to gain access to the context she is in. When she is around Karen people she speaks Karen, dresses like a Karen girl, and takes on Karen culture. Su Su does the same around Burmese people. She can easily speak Burmese, dress like a Burmese girl, and take on Burmese culture. She admits that the topic of ethnic identity is difficult because of her background.

The distinct boundaries between people groups are eroded by diaspora peoples moving to urban areas in North America. This article will showcase this erosion through two groups, Burmese-speaking and Nepali-speaking refugees in Louisville, Ky. The desire to reach people groups has driven missiologists to place diaspora peoples into distinct categories of ethnic groups; categories that do not exist in reality. This research suggests grouping factors of location (urban cities) and cultural identity (music, religion, etc) will increase in importance over ethno-linguistic barriers in the midst of migration.

Peoples have gathered more in networks connected by the flow of money and information through technological advances like the internet (Rynkiewich, 2013). The negotiation between honoring heritage and forward progress in a network is heightened by complex systems. Diaspora peoples have often been forced to move from one country to the next; surrounded by different majority groups in each new location. People determine their identity based on the 'other.' The changes have often caused diaspora peoples to have fluid identities. This article will show Diaspora peoples cannot be placed into distinct groups without seriously distorting reality.

The theory that diaspora peoples have fluid identities puts a major wrinkle in the idea that diaspora peoples can be placed into distinct categories. Paul Hiebert wrote that people group strategy is based on early theories of sociology. Early anthropologists focused on studying small societies and viewed them as closed systems. Hiebert (2009) says that today anthropologists have realized "peasant and urban societies cannot be cut up into distinct, bounded people groups without seriously distorting the picture . . . consequently, we cannot really speak of distinct people groups or hope to generate people movements in complex settings" (p. 92).

Hiebert's assessments of people group strategy are valid when applied to diaspora peoples. People group strategy is dependent on individuals having a master identity. Peggy Levitt (2001) uncovers a faulty assumption that makes

distinct people groups a little too simple: "Much research still assumes that individuals have a 'master,' overarching identity that is fundamentally rooted in a single place" (p. 202). Identity is not rooted in a single place for diaspora peoples who often develop fluid and sometimes conflicting identities. For example, Zoe Lewicki (2010) notes, "People in the Himalayan regions of Nepal and Bhutan navigate multiple identities every day because both countries are so linguistically and ethnically diverse" (p. 9).

Sometimes people in the Himalayan regions of South Asia identified themselves based on their caste, sometimes based on language, and other times based on their geographic location. For example, when talking about the refugees from Bhutan case workers and evangelical Christians in Louisville usually call them Nepalis. But this label fails to account for the diversity of this group. The same applies to the people sometimes referred to as Burmese. Neither of these groups can be easily categorized as homogeneous people groups without seriously distorting reality. Diaspora groups have multiple, fluid identities that change based on the people with whom they are interacting. Ethnic identity amongst diaspora peoples has not been explored in depth in relation to the way evangelicals use the term "people group." These case studies will allow us the freedom to engage people on their terms in complex cities we share with them.

Group Boundary Markers

Lawrence Ethnic groups in one sense are situational. Groups are a creation of particular interactions, history, economic, and political circumstances. For example, the United States is made up of predominant cultural groups that were part of migration and forced migration from Europe, Africa, and South America, but they have evolved to take on new cultural boundaries. Ethnic identity manifests itself in the exchange or negotiation of the group's features at the boundaries that divide ethnic groups. Some ethnic groups are more resistant to change and exchange in boundary negotiation and tend to preserve more of what they see as their ethnic identity. Others are more fluid and flexible in negotiating boundaries between groups.

In a globalized world, we are seeing more fluid groups negotiate in traditionally stable group locations as urbanization continues to rise. For example, this case study includes generational migrating Burmese-speaking groups settling in a stable majority setting in Louisville, Ky. Now, we have the job of recognizing the reality of the fluid boundaries groups missing true

ministry opportunity or engagement. What follows is an overview of the boundaries in the refugee communities from Burma and Nepal.

Burma

The lives of the refugees from Burma have been shaped by war, politics, and the diaspora. Across the different tribes from Burma they have been soldiers; children forced from their homes due to war or were born in refugee camps in Thailand. The people in this community identified themselves differently in different circumstances and different locations. When they were in Burma most identified based on one of the eight national races, in Thailand or Malaysia, it depended on the others they were around. In the United States the refugee sometimes identified as one of the eight national races, or even Thai. The ethnic identities used when conversing with outsiders was usually different than the ethnic identity used when conversing with insiders. The boundaries in this community were based on language, politics, and religious identity.

Language

Language is a powerful boundary marker for the refugee community from Burma that currently resides in Louisville. For example, People from Chin state in Burma also use language as a referent for drawing boundaries between one group and another. The people in Louisville who speak Falam Chin greatly outnumber other Chin groups who speak different languages. The Falam Chin people in Louisville identify themselves first by the state they are from, Chin state. But then, one man explains that in addition to the state identifier they identify with language: "Sometimes we say our language to classify which town we are from. I am from Falam, so I speak Falam. Some might say I am Falam Chin. In Louisville there are several different churches for refugees from Burma. The Tedim people have a church, the Hakah church meets at [another church] and the Chin people from smaller groups without enough people to worship in their own language have a Burmese speaking congregation. There are three big Chin groups: Falam, Hakah, and Tedim." Enough people in Louisville speak the Falam Chin dialect that the Falam Chin speakers can have their own church, and their own community. The other small tribal groups from Burma use the Burmese language as a common language for worship and fellowship

Ethnic categories should not be assumed before meeting the people with whom one is interacting. Even when someone self-identifies as belonging to a certain ethnic group, this same person might not be recognized by members of

said group. For example, some people in the community identified as Karen, but are not recognized as Karen by the larger community.

Thai language is commonly spoken by people who were refugees in Thailand. The refugees who speak Thai fluently often self-identified as Thai. The Thai speaking refugees readily admitted that the Thai identifier is something that is dependent upon people and situations. Karen people working in certain industries felt compelled to use the Thai referent for ethnic identity so they could more readily fit into Thai society.

Politics

Politics is another powerful boundary marker in this community. In the process of fighting the Burmese government for not allowing them to have freedom from persecution and Burmization (forced to study in the Burmese language and follow Burmese culture) leaders of these large categories of ethnic groups have attempted to homogenize the identity of these diverse communities. Leaders of the KNU have promoted the Sgawization of the Karen people (South, 2008). The KNU developed idealized pictures of what it means to be Karen and imposed these idealized pictures on the people.

The idealized picture of what it means to be Karen, or even Burmese, continues in Louisville. The refugee community from Burma continues to be influenced by their political past. The Karen community is suspicious of anyone who does not speak the Sgaw Karen dialect. The non-Sgaw speakers are seen as being Burmese, or not really Karen. The people who identify as Burmese are usually Buddhist and feel like they are mistrusted and disliked by the majority Karen population.

Categories of ethnicity are strongly held notions of group and individual ethnic identity that are not easily overcome. Understand people where they are, not where you want them to be when conducting cross cultural research. Discrimination and hatred between groups can only be overcome by the gospel. Sometimes big cultural shifts, like putting aside deeply held prejudices, do not happen until the second generation of believers. Religion is another powerful boundary marker in this diverse community of refugees from Burma.

Religion

Religion is also a powerful boundary marker for people in this community. Pwo Karen Buddhists tend to be closer to ethnic Burmese Buddhists.

The ethnic Burmese interviewed and observed often had Pwo Karen Buddhist friends stop by their house to visit, eat, and drink beer with them. These were the same ethnic Burmese people said the ethnic Karen do not like them, so they do not interact with the ethnic Karen. When the ethnic Burmese say Karen, it is usually in reference to the Christian Sgaw Karen. New identity markers based on religious affiliation developed based on wide spread suffering and mistrust from the civil war.

One of the best ways to determine whether something is a boundary marker in a society is marriage. Hiebert (1983) writes that endogamy "is a rule that people must marry others of their own kind. While exogamy excludes marriage to kinsmen, endogamy excludes those who are culturally defined as 'outsiders'" (p. 199). Hiebert goes on to use the caste system as an example of endogamy. The refugees from Burma are not Hindus and do not follow the caste system, but they still have a form of endogamy. The people of this community would not allow Buddhists to marry Christians or Christians to marry Buddhists, unless someone converts to the other's religion.

Interpretation

Ethnically the people in this community look similar and they all come from the same country. But, due to years of civil war, colonialism, and other factors they have developed boundaries between each other based on politics, religion, and language. To understand differences in this community researchers need to take the time to discover the boundaries discussed above.

According to Frederik Barth (1998) culture can move anywhere and be transmitted to anyone, but ethnicity is about social boundaries. How do the refugees that originated in Burma categorize themselves and place boundaries between themselves and other groups? The boundaries drawn by different groups within this group are based on religion, language, and politics. The best way to begin church planting and evangelism amongst people in this diverse community is to focus on religious and language groups. Language is an important part of the refugee community from Burma. This determines who they will marry, who they will worship with, and who they spend time with. These cultural rhythms all represent obstacles that hinders gospel proclamation that calls for a unique strategy among the given group.

Some would say Chin, Kachin, Karen, and other labels are just that, labels. They are labels developed by missionaries, anthropologists, and politicians to label tribal groups in the mountainous regions of Burma. Gravers

(1996, p. 293) writes, "If we deny (Karen identity) as a mere colonial invention, we simultaneously deny these people any active role in history." Karen, Chin, and Kachin identity may be a mixture of ancient and more recently acquired elements of their identity, but the groups decided who they are. It is not just individuals deciding they can be labeled without group recognition. These are groups of people who have been formed out of the fires of civil war, religioius persecution, and mistreatment by others.

In summary, as people move away from places with a predominant majority culture, ethnic boundaries are negotiated to help groups find stability. Language is used to create groupings based on communication, but also preference even if groups speak a common language as well like in the case of the Falin, Hekah, and Tedim Chin. Politics creates boundaries for groups. Karen were found not to accept Chin individuals even if they journeyed with them in forced migration. Also, Chin peoples will not identify as Burmese even though they speak the common language. Finally, religion will create groupings based on rhythms of life and who people will marry, spend time with, etc. One major finding is that individual identity is fluid based on the social interaction. It's like they have multiple passports of identity given the context they find themselves. Therefore, strict people group methodology may not be adequate to minister to diaspora peoples. Leaning on strict people group methodology may result in a more narrow strategy than is actually required for the city the people live.

Nepal

How do the Nepali-speaking refugees that originated in Bhutan categorize themselves? How do they place boundaries between themselves and other groups? The boundaries drawn by different groups within this group are based on caste, tribe, and the regulation of food and marriage. The regulation of food and marriage are also tied to the caste system. People in different castes have different rules for what to eat and who to marry.

Higher Caste

Caste is a boundary marker within the Nepali-speaking community. Caste determines who one will marry, who one worships with, and how one worships. The lower caste people did not, and still does not, place as much emphasis on the importance of the caste system. The reason the Bhutanese government saw the Nepali-speaking Hindus as a threat to integration with society are the boundaries created by the caste system. These boundaries include

religion, food laws and marriage restrictions. One man spoke of life while still in Nepal

> The high caste Brahmins did not allow us to go to their temple. The same problem in Nepal too. We didn't worry too much about their system. I don't know much about conflicts, but we had conflicts. I don't have examples. They did not allow us to join their worship and meet with them. They did not allow us to enter the temple and worship their gods. We worked together as a team, but we didn't interact outside work. During my father's time there were big problems with the caste system. But the schools helped people understand we need to go to school together, work together because we are all people. We built a bridge together so we could go to school. We ate together at the school but not in homes. During my father's time caste was very bad. Second generation it was ok. All the children from different castes ate together, studied together everywhere but in the homes.

The higher caste Hindus in this community practice their own rituals, marry within their own caste, but work with people from different castes and different ethnic groups. Caste is still a major determinative factor in most of their lives, even in the diaspora. Most informants said that caste was still an important part of their lives. The higher caste people do not worship or celebrate holidays with lower caste people:

> We have bojan (worship) on Wednesday nights. It is all people from the same caste. We celebrate festivals with family and friends from the same caste. We lived close to people from other castes in Nepal, Bhutan, and the US but we don't celebrate festivals with them or marry with them.

The higher caste people only worship with people from the higher castes, the lower caste people are not invited and not welcome. Hindus from other castes said they have never been to a Hindu temple or worship ceremony in Louisville because that was only for higher castes.

The caste system restricts who the higher caste people worship with and the higher castes also see a tighter correlation of their ethnic identity being tied to Hinduism. Seven of the higher caste people said that being Nepali equals being a Hindu, none of the lower caste people responded this way. Only two people from higher castes said that someone from their family could become a Christian.

Marriage is also restricted by caste. Only a few higher caste people said they would allow their children or grandchildren to marry people from lower castes, but this is probably because they perceive this to be the correct answer for Americans.

Boundary markers are important because they determine who is and is not part of a homogeneous group. Donald McGavran (1990), a long time missionary in India writes, "Castes or tribes with high people consciousness will

resist the gospel primarily because to them becoming a Christian means joining another people. They refuse Christ not for religious reasons, not because they love their sins, but precisely because they love their neighbors" (p. 155) To illustrate the boundary, one informant said, "Brahmans hesitate to come to my church on Sundays in Louisville. Some do not allow him to enter their home or touch their food. One time a Chetri gave him some food the proper way by dropping it on his plate. He was full so he accidentally touched her arm. She gave him the food anyway because she considered it polluted after he touched her arm and the food." Many lower caste people are finding their identity in Christ and being lifted up out of the system. Brahmans are wondering why their former servants have changed. The boundaries drawn between who is and is not part of the same group may be determined by who they marry, who they will and will not eat with, who they worship with, and how they worship.

Lower-Caste

Susan Hangen (2010) writes of the lower caste people sometimes referred to as Mongol, "The terms 'Mongol' and 'Aryan' are derived from eighteenth and nineteenth century colonial categorizations of South Asians" (p. 53). Much like the refugees from Burma, modern classifications used by the people came from those assigned to them by colonial leaders and anthropologists. The Mongols have a more Asian appearance than the Aryans. The Mongol group consists of Rais, Limbus, Mangars, Sunuwars, Gurungs, Sherpas, Tamangs, and others. Most of the Mongols in Louisville are Rais and Limbus who are, "Hindus with a low status in the caste hierarchy" (Pommaret, 1998, p. 58). Pommaret also mentions that Mongols do not commonly intermarry between different groups and have their own shamanistic practices.

The Mongols are not as strict in maintaining these boundaries as the higher caste Nepali-speaking refugees. For instance, one informant said, "The Brahmans discriminate more than us. They are aggressively teaching their children to follow the caste system. Brahmans hesitate to come to my church on Sundays in Louisville. Some do not allow me to enter their home or touch their food. One time a Chetri gave me some food the proper way by dropping it on my plate."

Even though the lower caste peoples who originated in Bhutan are *not* in one sense a homogeneous group through marriage, they *are* in another sense through solidarity. The Mongols tend to celebrate festivals together, worship together, and eat together. They have a sense of solidarity based on their

treatment by the higher caste Hindus. The Mongols are a case study on how strict people group application can be too limiting for a church planting and evangelism strategy. While the groups have boundary mechanisms that constrict rhythms of life like marriage, there is also evidence that they can go to church together.

Interpretation

The best way to begin evangelism amongst people in this diverse community is to focus on castes. Caste is an important part of the Nepali-speaking refugee community. Caste determines who they eat with, who they worship with, and who they marry. Even the people who said caste was unimportant demonstrated that it was still an important part of their lives by their actions. These same people would not eat, worship with, or allow their children to intermarry with someone outside their caste.

Separate church planting strategies among each group Brahmins, Chetris, Vaishyas, Sudras, and Kirats (Mongols) are not needed, but a strategy that separates on-ramps to gospel proclamation between castes is warranted. Language is a barrier that must be overcome. Also, the way the people socially interact is an obstacle to gain relationships for gospel conversations. However, once they become Christians, the commonalities in the city of Louisville like place, music, food, gathering events, etc. will allow for a singular church planting vision. People from Brahmin and Chetri caste worship together, intermarry, and eat together. But, people from the Kirats (Mongols) do not marry people from higher castes like the Brahmins and Chetris. Caste is the most distinct ethnic boundary within this community. The Nepali-speaking diaspora community is not a group that can be reached with one strategy.

Conclusion

The two case studies have demonstrated that peoples in the diaspora community have developed multiple, sometimes overlapping, identities used in a variety of circumstances. Sometimes refugees from Burma who lived in camps in Thailand refer to themselves as Thai when speaking with their American neighbors, but would refer to themselves as Karen when interacting with people from Burma. Refugees from Nepal sometimes refer to themselves as Nepali, Bhutanese, or even by caste designation. Self-identity is important for evangelical mission strategists because evangelical mission strategy is dominated by a desire to reach “people groups” and diaspora peoples are not easily broken up into

distinct people groups. This research suggests that groups of people may melt into the contexts they live in currently as much as they honor their historical group boundaries.

The refugees from Burma and Nepali categorize themselves differently within each group. Each group has different boundaries. The refugees categorize themselves using non-ethnic modes of classification. The refugees from Burma and Nepal are not necessarily bounded by the label Burmese, Karen, Dawei, or Nepali. But they are bounded by language, religion, caste, etc. Therefore, when prayerfully deciding which ethnic group to work with, one must be careful and not assume the group is one homogeneous unit. As Wimmer (2013) suggests ethnicity may not be able to be established through theory or definition, but through careful analysis. The church planter/missiologist must take the time for this 'careful analysis' to discover boundaries in the community. A lower caste Nepali-speaking refugee is going to have a difficult time reaching the Brahmins from the same community. The same applies to the Christian refugees from Burma. Most of the Buddhists in this community view religion as a cultural boundary marker in the community.

Diaspora was originally used in reference to the Jewish dispersion from Israel or the Greek dispersion during the Hellenistic period. The experiences of these diaspora communities are used commonly as an "ideal type" (Saffran, 1991). The Jewish people clearly longed for their homeland during the diaspora, so writers often refer to other diaspora communities longing for their homeland. This is not the case with the Nepali-speaking diaspora community from Bhutan or the community from Burma. This was true in the past, many years ago for the refugees from Nepal. But, they have long since given up on the idea of returning. The community from Burma has been forced to migrate for so many generations that they no longer know where to call home. Today these communities have settled into life in the United States while attempting to maintain ties with family members scattered across the world. These communities are less concerned about their roots to their homeland than about routes to a group, a recreated group identity in multiple locations developed through transnational ties. Their identity is not coupled to people and land like the Jewish people, but to a new identity formed in a new land (Clifford, 1994).

These diaspora communities are made up of peoples that look similar to people from Burma or Nepal, but they have had very different experiences from the peoples of Burma or Nepal. These differences will create different on ramps, conversations, worldviews, and felt needs concerning the gospel. A strict

ethno-linguistic people group strategy may not be the best traveled road to the heart of the people. The refugees have developed, or maintained, different boundaries. Boundaries are also different between the refugees from Nepal and the refugees from Burma. The refugees from Nepal have food and caste boundaries that do not exist in the community from Burma. The refugees from Burma have political boundaries that do not exist in the community from Nepal. Boundary differences developed over time due to war, religion, and other factors. To understand these differences, missiologists need to take the time to discover the boundaries within the communities they are trying to reach with the gospel.

As noted earlier, in a complex world from globalization, each city where cultures negotiate terms offers a new laboratory to understand the people. It seems the further away people migrate from their original boundaries, the looser the people's boundaries become. In a globalized world, we must learn to ask our neighbors the best on ramps for spirituality within our context. This line of analysis will lead to deeper levels of understanding among actual people with layered journeys.

Clear labels for people groups may not be the best tool when attempting to reach peoples in the diaspora or complex systems such as cities. Instead, church planters should focus on determining what boundaries exist between different groups or segments. The humble role of learner is needed when approaching new groups recognizing the history of categorizing peoples without inductive reference from the group themselves is pertinent among anthropological studies. People group lists are useful in identifying where large groups of unbelievers live so missionaries can know where to begin. However, church planters need to rely more on contextualized research that interacts with people *and* place, rather than traditional ethnic boundaries.

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