

Granularity: Determining People Group Boundaries

From field researchers - April 2025

What determines a people group is not an exact science. Defining the boundaries of a people group is challenging, particularly by outsiders. Some researchers might see a collection of individuals as one people group. Other researchers might split that same collection of individuals into multiple people groups.

Based on good field research, Joshua Project attempts to classify peoples based on their own perceptions of themselves. For example, when field researchers classified peoples in Laos, they relied on the tribe's own perception of themselves. That is, they did not rely on outside resources to predetermine who the tribe was. The difference between a people group and a subgroup (a tribe and a clan, may be another way to put it), is not always clear.

This distinction is important because different outside parties have different aims/goals in mind when slicing and dicing peoples. For example, translation projects are concerned primarily with language compatibility. Ask a linguist how many peoples need a translation, and you'll get a substantially smaller number of peoples than actually exist because many of those peoples use the same language. In like manner, governments are primarily concerned with administrative blocs to help them govern. For example, in Laos, depending on the reigning philosophy of the Lao government, they have classified the tribes of Laos into 3 peoples, 49 peoples, 50 peoples, and 188 peoples respectively.

By asking the people themselves who they are and who they are not, we arrive at a classification system that is not likely to change based on outside factors. For example, of the over 20 Akha groups in Laos, a number have mutually unintelligible languages, they wear different clothes, they build their homes differently, and they live in distinctly identifiable villages. The Akha might be considered one "people group" by the government, one or possibly two groups by linguists, but are considered 20 people groups by field workers base on barriers to the spread of the gospel.

One of the common questions that gets asked on people groups, (as a tool from the outside) to determine if a people is a people, is, "Will the gospel naturally flow from this people to the other one in consideration?" This is an interesting question from a gospel engagement strategy position, but it actually clouds the determination of if a people is a distinct people. Specifically, we can't know for sure if the gospel will "naturally flow" or not until it is preached and accepted—so, after the fact. So, by default, we always assume the gospel will not flow naturally from one group to another. Therefore, Joshua Project info might be considered "worst case" i.e. it may be more granular than necessary. We feel it's better to err on the side of being more granular than not if there is some unclarity.

