

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

UNREACHED PEOPLE GROUP:
THE SWAHILI OF UGANDA

A RESEARCH PAPER SUBMITTED TO
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Introduction

God has blessed the world with an incredible number of different people groups. From the time of Abraham God promised him that he would be the father of “a multitude of nations.” (Genesis 17:4, ESV)¹ In fact, God’s promise was so extensive that He promised Abraham his offspring would be more numerous than the stars, extending a blessing to every nation on earth. (Genesis 22:17) Although through Abraham every nation has been blessed, not everyone in every nation has been “reached” by the salvation message of Jesus Christ, or those who have heard have refused to believe. (Genesis 22:17) Reaching these unreached people is part of the larger mandate put out by Jesus in Matthew 28:19 when he calls on his own disciples, and therefore us, to go, and “make disciples of all nations.”

Although the message and theology remains the same, today’s mission work is vastly different from the time of Paul, when travel was expensive, dangerous, and difficult. Today, travel is relatively easy when you consider a mission worker can go over 10,000 miles, from the United States to any part of Africa, within about 24 hours, and still be able to communicate with their home base halfway around the world. This ability to reach a people group like the Swahili of Uganda, from a home base in the United States in one day, is something Paul could probably never have imagined would be possible.

But with this ability to “reach” the unreached people groups of the world with easy comes with a price. Missionaries today “must face rapid change” in the missionary field, and

¹ *ESV Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007). All scripture notated or footnoted unless otherwise specified comes from the ESV translation.

adjust effectively to these changes.² It is now extremely important to know the history, language, culture, economy, and religion of an unreached people group to make an impact and be effective at reaching these people for Christ. Aspects like “spiritual warfare” that western cultures have dismissed for generations, and in some ways still do, have resulted in a “new type of American missionary that is more trained” to understand the aspects of spiritual warfare.³

Today the missionary needs a full and complete understanding of the unreached people group in question. A missionary trying to reach an unreached group without understanding this, and the work that came before them, is unlikely to see success in the short term, and can even strain the ability of future groups to reach these same people. The purpose of this research paper is to examine an unreached people group, provide the proper background information, give a survey of the current mission work that is ongoing, if any, and give a proposed strategy to reach the unreached people group identified.

For the purpose of this particular research study, the unreached people group chosen was the Swahili of Uganda. Although the Swahili of Uganda are smaller in number than existing groups in Kenya and Tanzania, the country of Uganda has made great strides in missionary accessibility and effectiveness since the mid-1980’s. This has made “Uganda one of the most truly Christian nations in the world, with church attendance high and public prayer common, even in government and judicial buildings.”⁴ With progress like this, reaching the fewer numbers of Swahili in Uganda is important, and will enable them to carry out the commands of Matthew 28, to their neighboring Swahili brethren in Kenya and Tanzania and beyond.

² A. Scott Moreau, Gary R. Corwin and Gary B. McGee, *Introduction to World Missions: A Biblical, Historical, and Practical Survey*, 1st Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 279.

³ Moreau, 287-289.

⁴ *Operation World*, <http://www.operationworld.org/ugan> (accessed December 05, 2011).

Background Information

History, Language and Culture

The Swahili of Uganda are part of a larger group of about 1.5 million people located across Tanzania, Burundi, Congo (Kinshasa) Kenya, Mayotte, Mozambique, Oman, Rwanda, Somalia, South Africa, Uganda, UAE and the USA.⁵ The history of the Swahili people dates back to about 100 A.D., when Arab traders landed on the coastal areas of Africa, which then became known as the Swahili coast.⁶ These people were mainly traders and hunters who settled the coast of East Africa and then intermarried the native Cushite shepherds.⁷ After this first intermarrying took place, people around the 2nd century who spoke a Bantu language in the North Congo then intermarried among these people.⁸ This practice continued over the centuries with people migrating from areas in the Persian Gulf and other regions, each bringing their own history, their own language, and their own culture. The Swahili, in present day, live in small local settlements spread out all around Africa, and the world, who have some common traits and languages. In large, they are called Swahili, but they prefer to be called by their local settlements.⁹

⁵ *The Joshua Project*, <http://www.joshuaproject.net/peoples.php?peo3=15145> (accessed December 01, 2011).

⁶ *Art and Life in Africa: The Swahili Information*, The University of Iowa, November 1998, <http://www.uiowa.edu/~africart/toc/people/Swahili.html> (accessed December 01, 2011).

⁷ *The Joshua Project*, <http://www.joshuaproject.net/peoples.php?peo3=15145> (accessed December 01, 2011).

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

The continent of Africa has such an extremely wide range of native tribal languages and dialects, but the English language, which was brought over by Colonial settlers and missionary work, made English one of the only common languages spoken across all countries in Africa. Today, English is still the most widely spoken common language for the Swahili outside of Buganda (Lugandan) and Swahili, which have many different dialects. In Uganda, the Swahili tended to speak their native ancestral language, Swahili, but it wasn't until September 2005, that the Ugandan Parliament voted to again make Swahili the second official national language.¹⁰ Because there are so many languages spoken across the continent of Africa, it makes communicating to the neighboring countries very difficult. While many people in Uganda speak Lugandan, they cannot speak a broken Lugandan to the people in Kenya or Tanzania, where speaking with neighboring countries in broken English, or broken Swahili is possible.¹¹ This makes the Swahili people unique in their ability to share a common language across political borders, especially since most speak some English and Swahili, both of which are cross cultural languages.

Many Swahili have migrated from other coastal areas, bringing additional mixtures of culture and languages from other regions.¹² This language is unique among the Swahili people group, but a large "number of its words were borrowed from Arabic," which is often a second language for many Swahili.¹³ The language of the Swahili can vary from region to region, with some speaking a combination of common languages in Uganda like English, Buganda, and

¹⁰ Cassandra M, *Languages of Uganda*, June 28, 2011, <http://www.africangrio.com/languages/21000-languages-of-uganda.html> (accessed December 10, 2011).

¹¹ "Africa report, Volumes 23-24," *Africa Report* (African-American Institute) 23 (January 1978), 21.

¹² *The Joshua Project*, <http://www.joshuaproject.net/people-profile.php?peo3=15145&rog3=UG> (accessed December 07, 2011).

¹³ Ibid.

Swahili. In many cases they will find themselves “spontaneously speaking some kind of language which is a mixture Swahili, English, and the dominant Bantu languages” of their region, which is what is then commonly referred to as Kiswahili.¹⁴ Kiswahili has seen a resurgence in growth as younger hip-hop and secular pop artists use the language in a blending of English and western ideas with the regional Lugandan or Swahili languages.¹⁵ The common use of Kiswahili has led to a call for the Ugandan government to adopt Kiswahili as an official language, but the sometimes negative connotations associated with Kiswahili, what the western world might refer to as slang, has actually helped English become more acceptable.¹⁶ As this language blending continues to occur, it will have an effect on the culture as well, blending their native cultures with western ideas and values.

Although the Swahili people had a shared language and history with the Swahili coast, they continued to diversify their culture each time new settlements were added from different countries and even different continents.¹⁷ This makes describing the Swahili people, and their culture, as a whole, very difficult. Throughout the history of the Swahili people their boundaries and culture shifted to “meet the demands of everyday life,” and this continued to change over hundreds, possibly thousands, of years.¹⁸ This does not mean that the Swahili of Uganda do not have a specific culture of their own, but it does make pinpointing their unique traits difficult. Their religion has always been closely tied to their culture so many of the cultural traits are

¹⁴ Joan Maw and David J. Parkin, "Swahili language and society: papers from the workshop held at the School of Oriental and African Studies," *Beiträge zur Afrikanistik* (Afro-Pub) 23, no. 33 (April 1984): 3, 36.

¹⁵ Kefa M. Otiso, *Culture and Customs of Uganda* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2006), 100, 138.

¹⁶ Ali Al’Amin Mazrui and Alamin M. Mazrui, *The power of Babel: Language & Governance in the African Experience* (Oxford, England: James Currey Ltd, 1998), 156, 158.

¹⁷ *Art and Life in Africa*.

¹⁸ Ibid.

common among those who follow Islam. They have traditional music with Arabic origins, which are seen in their weddings and dances, and their literature includes “stories, riddles, and sayings,” with a heavier emphasis on poetry than any other form of verse.¹⁹

For the Swahili, who are mostly Islamic, they see many of the cultural problems occurring today stemming from the lack of Islamic values being brought into their societies by the west. They see this erosion of their culture coming from a mix of western tourism and wealth, yet they are also somewhat open to western ideas.²⁰ While they try to maintain their traditional value and structure of Islam, tourism, which continues to increase, brings with it people who walk around in “immodest clothing, drink alcohol in public, and encourage loose behavior among the young,” all of which threaten the proper Islamic way of life.²¹

Economy, Religion, and Family

The economy of the Swahili today, as in the past, is closely tied to the Indian Ocean. While the Swahili of Uganda are landlocked outside of Lake Victoria (the second largest freshwater lake in the world), they are still tied to a traditional commerce of trade.²² For many hundreds of years, the Swahili have acted as middlemen in commerce from the Indian Ocean and the interior of Africa. With the Swahili in Uganda living close to Lake Victoria this tradition continues in fishing for the trade of goods. As with most rural communities, their economy is often tied directly to their farming abilities, or even their ability to get their goods to a proper market. Kampala is the largest city in Uganda, and the capital city, with a continued modest

¹⁹ Culture for Peace, National Museum of Kenya, *The Swahili People*, December 2009, http://www.swahilifestival.com/website/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=25&Itemid=28 (accessed December 10, 2011).

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² *Art and Life in Africa*.

economic growth since the mid-1980's of approximately 3-5%.²³ Much of the Swahili people now depend on the economic growth of this extremely large city, and their ability to get goods to the city, which can often times be very difficult without reliable transportation, and the high price of diesel fuel in the region.

The religion practiced by almost all of the Swahili people, nearly 99% of them, is Islam.²⁴ Since the Swahili culture comes from a coastal community that has involved coastal trade with other countries, the Islam practiced by the Swahili has moved inland as the settlements have moved inland.²⁵ The Islam practiced by most of the Swahili of Uganda is somewhat less orthodox than the very strict Islam that most coastal Swahili practice, and many are open to the influx of western culture. Where most of the "requirements of the religion are practiced by most of the people," on the coast, as it moved inland, it became less strict, less orthodox, and more influenced by western values.²⁶

As was noted briefly in the introduction, spiritual warfare is much different for the Swahili people than it is in the western cultures. Most Swahili believe in spirits, and "most men wear protective amulets around their necks," which contain verses from the Koran.²⁷ This is common across the Swahili people, specifically, the Swahili in Uganda. They give a high emphasis to spiritual warfare and those from a western background must understand the influence this has on mission work. The pastors working in and around the Swahili people must be prepared to combat spiritual warfare on an ongoing basis to earn the trust of those in and

²³ Kampala City Council, "Kampala City Handbook 2005," *Kampala City Handbook*, December 2005.

²⁴ *The Joshua Project*, <http://www.joshuaproject.net/peoples.php?peo3=15145> (accessed December 01, 2011).

²⁵ *Art and Life in Africa*.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

outside the church. Exercising spirits, talking or praying with their demons, perceived or real, is part of an ongoing ministry for local pastors.²⁸

Family life for the Swahili in Uganda, much like other aspects of their culture and language, are heavily influenced by their Islam faith. Husbands and fathers have final authority in the home under Islam, and they will make decisions for their wives and children to preserve their family honor.²⁹ In the past this has included only educating the men in the family, but more recently woman, and young girls, are being allowed an education as well, and at the same time growing in influence within the family.³⁰ As woman have moved out of the home and into the workforce, “the average number of children in each family has declined from as many as fourteen children early in the twentieth century to three or four children by the late 1990s.”³¹

Marriage lines vary greatly depending on the culture and settlement of each group. However, those settlements who have an emphasis on maternal lines, due to “government regulations concerning land, property and personal status within the family,” are increasingly shifting family organization toward patrilineal patterns.³² Even with an increase in education, and women gaining access to the workforce, the vast majority of Swahili are choosing to remain patrilineal.³³ A typical residence today might include many people from within the immediate family like grandparents, nieces, nephews, and in-laws.

²⁸ Isaac Wasswa, interview by Scott Fillmer, *Pastor, Bulba Community Church, Uganda, Africa*, (October 13, 2011).

²⁹ Culture for Peace, National Museum of Kenya, *The Swahili People*.

³⁰ Emory University Law, *East and Central Africa: The Region and Its History*, Emory Law, December 2000, <http://www.law.emory.edu/ifl/region/eastcentralafrica.html> (accessed December 10, 2011).

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ John Middleton, *The World of the Swahili: An African Mercantile Civilization* (New Haven, CT: Yale Press, 1992).

Maps and Regional Information

Uganda is in a unique place in central east Africa with a population of more than 33 million people, with the largest city being the capital city of Kampala with more than 1.5 million people within the city limits. It shares a border with the Democratic Republic of the Congo, South Sudan, Kenya, Tanzania, and Rwanda, with its southern border on Lake Victoria, the second largest fresh water lake in the world. Independence was gained from colonial Britain in 1962, but the years of AMIN (1971-1979) and OBOTE (1980-1985) claimed the lives of almost 400,000 people before relative stability was brought to the region in the mid 1980's.³⁴ Uganda is largely a Christian nation with almost 85% of the people of Uganda claiming to be Christians, and there are approximately 66 different people groups in Uganda, 6 of those, including the Swahili of Uganda, are considered to be unreached.³⁵



³⁴ CIA Publications, *The World Factbook: Africa: Uganda*, November 2011, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ug.html> (accessed December 10, 2011).

³⁵ *The Joshua Project*, <http://www.joshuaproject.net/people-profile.php?peo3=15145&rog3=UG> (accessed December 07, 2011).

Survey of Current Mission Work

Status of the Church

Unlike some regions dominated by Islam in the eastern world, Uganda is largely a Christian nation, and the church is strong, and as a whole, growing.³⁶ The Christian church makes up 85% of the total population of Uganda, with the Catholic Church having the largest constituent at over 46% of the total church body, and Protestants making up only about 8% of the total.³⁷ As a country, Uganda has only a few unreached people groups, far fewer than even the United States at this point, making up a total of 9% of their population.³⁸ Within the 6 unreached people groups there are basically only two religious views, Islam and Hinduism, and the Swahili are almost all completely devoted to Islam.

This near complete devotion (99%) to Islam within the Swahili of Uganda, makes the status of the church divided.³⁹ The Swahili are in an area and region where the Christian church is thriving compared to other parts of the world, but within the Swahili people, the church is almost non-existent. There are very few Christian Swahili, less than 5%, and even less Evangelical Christians among the Swahili, less than 1%.⁴⁰ With a people group approximately the size of 3,500 people, that means there are anywhere from 30-150 Christians among the Swahili people, about the size of a single small church.

With such a large presence of the church in Uganda, the Swahili are apt to be affected by the work in the local church just as they were affected by their ancestral migration from the

³⁶ *The Joshua Project*, <http://www.joshuaproject.net/people-profile.php?peo3=15145&rog3=UG> (accessed December 07, 2011).

³⁷ *Operation World*, <http://www.operationworld.org/ugan> (accessed December 05, 2011).

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ *The Joshua Project*, <http://www.joshuaproject.net/people-profile.php?peo3=15145&rog3=UG> (accessed December 07, 2011).

⁴⁰ Ibid.

coastal areas inland. The difference is, the stronghold of Islam on many of these families just does not permit a person to even evaluate the church on a personal basis since it would dishonor their family. Still, the opportunity for the local church to minister to the Swahili is great. The large numbers of dedicated followers in the church are very capable of having a significant impact for Christ with the Swahili people.

Ongoing Missionary Work

There are many Christian missionary groups and churches working in the same region as the Swahili, and work among the Swahili people has been ongoing for centuries. From a newspaper dating back to the 19th century a missionary laments on his work among the Swahili saying that he “gets on rather slowly with the Swahili”, and at picking up their language, “but I can now make myself understood, and even explain God’s Word to the men.”⁴¹

Today, there are more than 50 different identified mission, or missionary groups listed within the Joshua Project database that are working within Uganda.⁴² Even though this list is extensive, there are far more smaller mission groups working in areas that serve the Swahili people who are not listed in the Joshua Projects database, such as Africa Renewal Ministries out of Colorado Springs, and 60 Feet Ministries out of Atlanta, to name just two. The list of ministries working in Uganda that was provided by the Joshua Project can only be the genesis of a comprehensive list of ongoing work in Uganda, and groups working among the Swahili people.

This provides some evidence of the changes our world, and even our collective world culture, is going through in the wake of a highly technological age that in turn directly affects the way the mission field works. In a time where travel, communication, and mobilization, can be

⁴¹ Church Missionary Society, "The Mission Field: Eastern Equatorial Africa," *The Church Missionary Gleaner, Volumes 14-15*, 1887: 157.

⁴² *The Joshua Project*, <http://www.joshuaproject.net/people-profile.php?peo3=15145&rog3=UG> (accessed December 07, 2011).

done almost on the spur of the moment, it has in turn created a very “rapidly changing missionary field” beyond the speed we have ever seen in history.⁴³ This is an issue that Moreau stated in a publication dating back to 2004, at a time when Twitter, Facebook, and the proliferation of cell phones in third world countries didn’t even exist. At the same time, within the extremely fast pass of life in the 21st century, ongoing missionary work in Uganda, and among the Swahili, is often slow.

While a mission worker targeting the Swahili people can get on a plane in the United States and be on the ground in less than 24 hours, it takes, and will continue to take an investment of time to reach the Swahili people, and inroads will have to be made by the local church, and by the local Ugandans. The Church of Uganda has made an impact by launching a Swahili translation in January 2010 (CE Swahili), and with this translation a program of training their people, and other churches in the area, to “use CE Swahili” in Sudan, the Congo, Tanzania, and Kenya.⁴⁴ Other examples, like Cornerstone Church, a small local church in Auburn, Alabama, has been working among small rural villages in Uganda for more than 7 years now, doing the slow, tedious work of building relationships with the local tribes.

As missionary work continues on the ground among the Swahili in Uganda, advances have been made in translations and media available to the Swahili, as well. The Jesus Film is currently available in the native Swahili language, and YouVersion, the most popular online mobile Bible app, now has three different versions of the Bible available in the Kiswahili language. YouVersion, funded by a local church in Oklahoma, is not a ministry shown among the Joshua Project’s list of those working among the Swahili people either, but their own stated

⁴³ Moreau, 279.

⁴⁴ Stephen Sizer, *Christianity Explored Swahili Launch: Bishop Stanley Ntagali*, February 1, 2010, <http://www.stephensizer.com/2010/02/christianity-explored-swahili-launch-bishop-stanley-ntagali/> (accessed December 13, 2011).

goal is “for every person to be able to freely, easily engage with God’s Word in their own ‘heart language.’”⁴⁵ This certainly should count as mission work among the Swahili, but is another example of the uniqueness of mission work in the 21st century church. There can be no doubt that many more small local churches in the United States, and elsewhere, are also among the unnamed missionary groups diligently working with the small unreached people groups in Uganda like the Swahili.

Difficulties in the Region

As noted above, Uganda has been devastated in years past by political and economic problems, and the region is still recovering slowly from these issues. The Swahili of Uganda are not located in any one specific region in Uganda, so the same issues that affect most Ugandans affect them as well. Uganda has “worked hard to recover from the devastation of the Amin and Obote years and has made great strides to this effect,” and now provides relatively safe access to mission teams and ministry groups.⁴⁶

Even though the current government is relatively stable, the region is still fighting deep corruption within the government and legislature, making the use of their legal system difficult, especially when it comes to land ownership for churches.⁴⁷ Uganda continues to be “subject to armed fighting among hostile ethnic groups, rebels, armed gangs, militias, and various government forces that extend across its borders,” while also still dealing with a large number of

⁴⁵ YouVersion, *YouVersion Blog*, LifeChurch.tv, April 22, 2011, <http://blog.youversion.com/2011/04/youversion-now-in-twice-as-many-versions-40-languages/> (accessed December 10, 2011).

⁴⁶ *Operation World*, <http://www.operationworld.org/ugan> (accessed December 05, 2011).

⁴⁷ Patrick Sserunjogi, interview by Scott Fillmer, *CEO, Bridge Africa International, Uganda, Africa*, (October 10, 2011).

refugees from problems in surrounding countries.⁴⁸ Within it's borders, Uganda is now host to "209,860 Sudanese, 27,560 Congolese, and 19,710 Rwandan refugees," along with members of the "Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) who seek shelter in southern Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo's Garamba National Park."⁴⁹

In addition to corruption within the government and various militia groups, Uganda struggles with basic modern infrastructure needs that can be created by putting practical engineering methods in place. There is still a basic problem with access to clean water, mostly in rural areas, and adequate access to basic health services. Due to the region's high mortality rate from HIV/AIDS, and other health related issues, their medium age is 15 years old, and life expectancy is only 54 years.⁵⁰ This has created an enormous orphan crisis in the Uganda area, something that is a difficult issue to work with as a missionary, but provides an excellent opportunity to shape the country to follow Christ for generations to come.

Proposed Strategy

The 10/40 Window

The 10/40 Window is a region of the world of great evangelistic significance. The 10/40 Window is a rectangular area that contains an estimated 4.5 billion people that reside close to 10 or 40 degrees north latitude.⁵¹ Within the 10/40 Window are the bulk of unreached people in the world, and the region has great biblical significance as well. This is where God first placed

⁴⁸ CIA Publications, *The World Factbook: Africa: Uganda*, November 2011, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ug.html> (accessed December 10, 2011).

⁴⁹ CIA Publications, *The World Factbook: Africa: Uganda*, November 2011, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ug.html> (accessed December 10, 2011).

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ The Joshua Project, *What is the 10/40 Window?*, <http://www.joshuaproject.net/10-40-window.php> (accessed December 10, 2011).

Adam and Eve that they may rule the earth, and later where the Tower of Babel was placed, scattering the people and introducing different languages.⁵²

It is understandable that the majority of missionary work focuses attention on the 10/40 Window, and rightfully so, but significant work still needs to take place outside this particular region. Uganda lies just south of the 10/40 Window and possesses much of the exact same traits as those people groups within the 10/40 Window. Since the purpose of reaching the Swahili of Uganda for Christ would be so they could then reach the Swahili of other regions, this remains an important unreached people group.

Just beyond the Swahili of Uganda are the Swahili of Kenya and Somalia, both groups that are ten times the size of the Swahili of Uganda, and beyond that are the Swahili of the Congo, a group twenty times their size. The 10/40 Window is an important benchmark region, but attention still needs to be shown to those regions just outside the traditional 10/40 Window, and even the revised 10/40 Window, which expands on the original geographic area.

Possible Missionary Strategy

There is no exacting step-by-step strategy that will reach the Swahili of Uganda, especially since they are almost all practicing Muslims, but there are significant steps that can be taken to reach this small group of unreached people in Uganda. International mission groups need to develop, and devote resources for the Swahili people. There should be local Christian people familiar with their religion and culture willing to invest in the Swahili people, and there should be backing from small and large local churches in the west.

As presented above, many international, mission focused, groups are devoting non-traditional methods to developing resources for the Swahili, and many are finding ways to make a difference on the ground in short periods of time. Groups like 60 Feet and Africa Renewal

⁵² Ibid.

Ministries are action-based groups, looking for opportunities like this, where they can make a difference in the lives of people immediately. They form not from traditional based mission organizations, but also form teams of ordinary people who want to follow Christ in the manner described by Jesus in Matthew 5-7.

These organizations have begun to form within the western church body, and take on a shape that can rapidly change to existing conditions on the ground, and make adjustments on the fly. They can provide the means to give groups like the Swahili clean drinking water, aid in farming resources or techniques, and come along side them in life, investing in them as people. Groups like 60 Feet are providing social workers who rotate in, on a yearly basis, stationed in Uganda, who can then imbed themselves with local organizations such as orphanages, remand homes, and detention centers that desperately need their help. Groups like these will be vital to reach the unreached. They work on small budgets with very few staff members, but are extremely flexible, and can be highly effective.

In addition to small international organizations, there are more traditional missionaries needed who can do the work year in and year out, those who can live among the Swahili people. “Laborers who are sensitive to the Muslim culture are greatly needed to work among the Swahili,” those people who can cultivate relationships with the Swahili, speak their language, and understand their customs.⁵³ These people should come, not only from established mission organizations, but should also come from Ugandan Christians who have a heart to reach others for Christ. Just as a western missionary would do, from an established mission organization, the local churches in Uganda must raise up mission-oriented people to do the work of reaching the Swahili of Uganda themselves.

⁵³ *The Joshua Project*, <http://www.joshuaproject.net/peoples.php?peo3=15145> (accessed December 01, 2011).

This is already being done in many churches but this outreach mindset is perhaps not as understood as it could be. The region itself is almost 85% Christian, and there are many who probably do not believe there is much of a need for outreach into other communities or people groups. Many will tell you they were “born Christians” much like the Swahili would probably say they were “born Muslim,” so the need for understanding discipleship and outreach is very important.⁵⁴ This is where the local church, who already live among the Swahili people, needs to setup up to an outreach role, perhaps with the aid of a more traditional western missionary working long term within the unreached people group.

The final area that needs to be addressed for a strategy to be successful is the involvement of the local western church. Many western churches already participate in “mission trip” type work, but this work can often show little long-term results. Often this short-term trip only serves to bolster those who go, and then return a week later. Developing a long-term strategy for a local western church is extremely important. What steps can be taken where a local church can invest in the people over and over again, all throughout the year, and then year after year, until a long term impact has been made.

To do this, a local western church can help a local Ugandan church plant a small church, in areas specifically designed to invest in the lives of the Swahili people. This requires financial backing, long term planning, coordination, and an understanding that progress may move slowly, but needs to move consistently towards reaching the Swahili people. This move of coordinating between local church bodies should be a plan that will outlive specific careers, individualistic ideas, or short-term personal gains for staff or members (in the form of corruption).

⁵⁴ Wasswa.

Planting a church like this goes beyond a church building, if there even is one. It requires the first two mission steps above to be in place as well. It requires bringing safe clean drinking water to a village, and making sure their most very basic needs for life can be met. It requires building relationships with the local Swahili, one that builds genuine trust, one that is an investment in their lives that is not short-term, but meaningful. It requires laborers to share Christ through Christian living long before a building foundation ever goes in the ground.

Conclusion

In conclusion, reaching an unreached people group like the Swahili in Uganda is not an easy task, but yet, one the church is called to do. The Swahili in Uganda are 1 of the only 6 unreached people groups left in Uganda, making them, perhaps, one of the hardest groups to reach. While economic and political stability is returning to Uganda, the region is still somewhat volatile in nature, and many places still need access to the basics like clean drinking water. In this research paper, the purpose in choosing to study the Swahili of Uganda, over the larger nearby groups like the Swahili of Somalia or Kenya, is to examine how to reach an unreached people group already surrounded by the local church body. This in turn would speed up the process of sending the Swahili of Uganda into other neighboring regions where they share similar historical and culture backgrounds.

To do this, it will take an effort between young startup non-profit organizations that can move quickly, and the local groups or organizations that understand the culture and religion of the Swahili people. In addition, outreach will still have to heavily rely on traditional missionary groups who are willing to invest their lives in the Swahili people over a long period of time, and the work of the local church will also be essential.

The most important aspect of outreach must begin and end with the local church body. This includes the local church body in the west that has resources capable of helping local churches on the ground in Uganda, to construct outreach programs within the local Ugandan churches. Nothing in Scripture gives a step-by-step process that will ensure success if you do this or that. Many missionaries have failed miserably in the past, and they will continue to do so, but Scripture itself is the success, it is the Good News, and it mandates that we the Church reach the unreached. With the collective effort of many different people, groups, and organizations, success in reaching the Swahili of Uganda will be much more likely and they will then in turn be able to reach others with a similar history and background.

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