Avoiding the Cookie-Cutter Approach to Culture:

Lessons Learned from Operations in EAST AFRICA

Major Christopher H. Varhola, U.S. Army Reserve
Lieutenant Colonel Laura R. Varhola, U.S. Army

Major Christopher H. Varhola, U.S. Army Reserve, is a cultural anthropologist in the final stages of completing his Ph.D. from the Catholic University of America. His current research focuses on religious identity and practice along the Swahili Coast in Tanzania. He holds a B.S. from The Citadel and an M.S. in International Relations from Troy State University. Previous assignments include cultural affairs officer with the 352d Civil Affairs Command in Iraq, researcher for the Center for Army Lessons Learned in Iraq, cease-fire monitor in the Sudan, and a variety of command and staff positions in the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Africa.

Lieutenant Colonel Laura R. Varhola, U.S. Army, is the Defense and Army Attaché, U.S. Embassy, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. She received a B.A. from the University of Michigan, an M.S. in International Relations from Troy State University, and is a graduate of the French Command and General Staff College. She has served in a variety of command and staff positions in the United States, Korea, Latin America, Iraq, and Africa.

PHOTO: A goat herder tends his flock near Tadjoura, Djibouti. (Lieutenant Colonel O. Shawn Cupp, U.S. Army, Retired)

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, a group of cease-fire monitors preparing to go to the Nuba Mountains in Sudan received a situation briefing in the Pentagon. At the conclusion of the briefing, one monitor asked about crime and economic violence in the area. The briefing officer, a colonel in the Army, patiently explained that the conflict in the Sudan was between Muslims and Christians and that crime was not a concern. His response, which reflected a common approach to examining conflict, underscored the need to integrate cultural understanding into the spectrum of military operations. The reality in the Sudan and elsewhere is that political, economic, and religious factors cannot be examined in isolation. In that area of the Sudan, for instance, competition between herders and farmers had political, religious, and military dimensions. The economic tension framed much of the conflict, and escalating economic violence was the single largest threat to the cease-fire.

Culture has been described as "multiple discourses, occasionally coming together in large systemic configuration, but more often coexisting within dynamic fields of interaction and conflict."[1] Culture is so broad that we cannot isolate it and study it apart from other societal factors such as history, economics, politics, religion, and relationships ranging from local to international. But in both military history and counterinsurgency literature, references to culture and regional understanding too often consist of a single line or paragraph stating that such knowledge is critical for success. In the past, one-hour cultural briefs conducted during preparation for deployment often misrepresented the culture and diminished its importance in planning operations. Now, largely because of challenges in Iraq, there is a growing recognition of the need for cultural awareness and understanding in the military. Lessons learned in Iraq include the need for—

- Continuity of personnel and institutional knowledge in each region.
- Cultural training in our educational institutions.
- Diversity in language capabilities.
- Socioeconomic analysis conducted during the planning process by regional specialists.
- Timely reachback to sector specialists.

Problems in East Africa

In 2002 the U.S. military established the Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA) in Djibouti for the purpose of "detecting, disrupting, and ultimately defeating transnational terrorist groups operating in the region."[2] Part of its mission involves economic assistance in the form of civil-military operations to reduce the conditions of poverty that help foster terrorism. Implied in this endeavor is an understanding of complex socioeconomic and cultural factors that influence the behavior and beliefs of peoples throughout the Horn of Africa and parts of East Africa.

Inadequate preparation and planning. Despite the lessons learned in Iraq, operations like those ongoing in Kenya and Tanzania are marked by high personnel turnover. Moreover, most of the personnel deployed have received little or no training on the region, have no Swahili language ability, and do not have a chain of command insisting that they learn the indigenous language *in situ*. To further compound the problem, few of those who plan the operations have been to the countries involved, and, even if the planning staff includes a section of regional specialists, the section usually has little influence on other staff sections. We can attribute the latter deficiency to the way military staffs typically work; that is, they tend to operate independently and focus on a functional area rather than integrating all aspects of local and regional variations into their operational plan. Regulations, standard operating procedures, models, and guidelines developed in other contexts reinforce this tendency. As a result, the staff develops the plan in a vacuum with little regard for the importance of regional concerns and specificities.

Mistaking the power of tribal identity. It is very common in Iraq to hear American military personnel state that Iraqi society is tribal, and that if one understands tribes, then one understands Iraq. The same thinking is common in East Africa. Because war often involves the complete breakdown of political and economic structures, theories about the resurgence of primal religious and ethno-tribal identities rise to prominence. These theories focus on cross-cultural interactions and insist that some basic interactions supplant other forms of interaction. This analysis is tempting in its simplicity, but it is wrongheaded. The variable role of tribal identity is certainly important within the shifting mix of other factors such as race, religion, nationality, history, mode of livelihood, and locality; however, none of these factors can be examined in isolation from the other factors or under conditions that stress one factor over others.

Tribal identities may play a less obvious role in peacetime engagement activities because these operations usually occur in sovereign countries with functioning governments and judicial systems that might hold greater sway than cultural and ethnic concerns. Nevertheless, cultural factors play an important role in governmental and societal structures. Accordingly, each staff section must consider them during planning and execution. This simplistic statement may be axiomatic, but its application is complex.

Overlooking cultural complexity. The cookie-cutter approach to incorporating culture in operational planning for humanitarian and other peacetime operations is simplistic; it disregards the complex reasons why people choose terror as a form of action. For example, consider the August 2006 press conference in Tanzania at which a senior U.S. military commander declared that the U.S. military was in Tanzania "going after the conditions that foster terrorism." Tanzanians were perplexed by the commander's comments, and a reporter from the Associated Press found them amusing and went around asking Tanzanians if they had seen any terrorists recently. Tanzanians greatly appreciated the U.S military effort, but the reason given for providing assistance did not enhance critical ties of trust to the degree they could have.[3]

The politicization of discontent born from poverty and social oppression is nothing new. It has long been part of the rationale behind the U.S. Agency for International Development and its counterparts in foreign governments. Saying that poverty alone causes terrorism simplifies complex situations and ignores a bevy of other factors besides gross domestic product that affect social conditions and attitudes. The commander in Tanzania conducting the press

> *Components of culture [history, economics, politics, religion] cannot be isolated from each other…*

conference wanted to publicize U.S. military humanitarian-assistance activities. But his comments, obviously linking U.S. actions to fighting terrorists, actually lessened the effectiveness of the operation: they drew attention to the fact that American forces were in Tanzania to advance U.S. national interests, not to improve the welfare of the Tanzanian people. The commander's comments revealed his staff's limited focus and lack of knowledge of the intricacies of Tanzanian rural areas.

Dubious public-affairs efforts. Military public affairs officers are supposed to be specialists in dealing with the media, but without experience in a given region,

U.S. Army CPT Dwayne Overby, 96th Civil Affairs Battalion, medicates a donkey during a Veterinary Civic Action Program in Ali Adde, Djibouti, 19 September 2006.

they often default to the idea that the more press there is, the better. However, if the purpose of an operation is to improve social conditions, thereby reducing an area's potential as a breeding ground for terrorists, then publicizing the action would be largely unnecessary and perhaps even counterproductive. Local news passed by word-of-mouth is sufficient to inform the target audience about the U.S. effort and to convey the idea that Americans are undertaking humanitarian assistance for more than the sake of immediate attention and gain. Unfortunately, U.S. military and State Department personnel often do only a one- or two-year tour of duty, which limits their impact and the number of projects they can effect. It is understandable that they want to publicize the actions they do undertake, but unreflective publicity can make it appear that the United States is involved in high-visibility, flash-in-the-pan actions, not long-term programs. Informing the national and international news media about these operations invites criticism because it opens U.S. actions up to a larger audience, one that might link the operations to "militaristic" or "imperialistic" U.S. actions elsewhere in the world. This is less the case when publicity is limited to the local level.

Misunderstanding religious influence. Perceptions that rural areas in Tanzania are potential breeding grounds for Islamic extremism are not necessarily wrong, but they generally ignore local religions, paths of development, civic attitudes, and the popularity and accessibility of elected government officials. In the district where the commander made his remarks, there is a historical blend of Islam and Christianity (the latter mainly Catholic and Anglican) under a larger African cultural umbrella. This syncretic religious mix recognizes the role and power of spirits and magic, as well as the influence of family ancestors, in contemporary life. It also fosters a religious tolerance that promotes coexistence and economic networking. Throughout the locality, interfaith marriages are common, as are conversions from Islam to Christianity and vice versa (with gender playing no role).

Lately, however, an influx of external, less tolerant religious influence has been challenging the status quo. Specifically, there is a growing number of Pentecostalists who have declared that placating the spirits of one's ancestors is a form of devil worship and that Muslims are barred from heaven because they do not accept Jesus as a god. But Muslims in the area have refuted the Pentecostalists' attempt to

divide the community. By deeming the Pentecostalists to be heretics who worship Jesus instead of God—and not merely a different Christian sect of the same (syncretic) religion—they have effectively expelled the newcomers from the larger community. The theological specifics of the Christian Trinity have proven to be less important than maintaining a system that allows for peaceful coexistence. Similarly, extreme Muslim views that do not accommodate local beliefs and allow conversion to Christianity are unlikely to resonate with these Tanzanians. Obviously, this greatly affects the area's potential to breed terrorists. We should incorporate this fact into American civil-military strategies.

Ignoring economic and power relations. The commander's comments also ignored civic identities and modes of livelihood that affect attitudes and proclivities toward supporting or using violence. Political opposition to the United States in the area is limited, but where it does exist, it must be placed in socioeconomic context, not be taken at face value—appearances can be misleading. For example, a majority of residents in another, overwhelmingly Muslim, village in the same district declared their hatred for America and stated that no American was welcome there. These villagers couched their views in political and religious rhetoric, but in this case, politics and religion were less important than economics. The village sits on the coast, and its residents were smuggling marijuana, mangrove poles, and poached meat to Zanzibar and the Middle East. The attitudes they espoused were less political than pragmatic: they wanted to minimize outside attention to the area because it would disrupt their ongoing illegal enterprises.

Likewise, on a recent visit to Bagamoyo District, we observed a large number of cattle herders. These people had recently moved into the area because of a drought in their traditional grazing lands. Their presence is a source of tension, and conflict with farmers in the district is common. Consequently, U.S. civic action to provide veterinary services to the herders' cows might seem an obvious course of action, but it would likely anger the indigenous residents of the area and generate ill will toward the United States.

One fallacy shared by Americans and many Westerners is the belief that civic action projects are always positive and relatively simple to execute. The idea that local populations must perceive such activities as beneficial is just not true. In the former colonial countries of East Africa, religion was a tool for colonization, and the motto "Uhuru and Kujitegemea" (Freedom and Self-Reliance) indicates East Africa's resolve to avoid a repeat of the dependency relationships of unequal exchange that characterized the colonial era. Even if development is correctly billed as an effort to win hearts and minds, it is not always seen as a benign force. The United States cannot gain the acceptance of a population simply by spending money on social projects. On the contrary, the population often regards such expenditures as another way for developed nations to advance their national agendas and diminish African sovereignty.

Developmental assistance is also frequently portrayed as a cover for military and intelligence operations. For instance, several months ago, Tanzanian and Kenyan newspaper articles discussed a U.S. military "top secret plan" to fight terrorism. The articles stated that Army coordination elements and military liaison elements, composed of highly trained Green Berets proficient in local languages, were operating under the cover of humanitarian projects to collect intelligence and infiltrate terror networks.[4] One can see how easy it is to associate contemporary civil-military operations with covert military operations. The U.S. military must establish priorities and guidelines with regard to conducting these operations.

Who Should Do Culture?

Understanding the role culture plays in society is neither an easy task nor one for which military

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units are ideally suited. Special Forces, foreign area officers, and Soldiers working in civil affairs and psychological operations receive language and regional training. The level of that training varies depending on the region and on current requirements and priorities in Iraq and Afghanistan. It is common, however, for "specialists" on Africa to have no training on Africa and to have never deployed anywhere on the continent. Thus, even if regional specialists are available and we utilize them effectively, they may lack expertise.

To make up for this, some military units use chaplains as culture specialists. Their commanders consider this a natural fit, given the close link between religion and culture. But while chaplains have an assigned role to advise commanders on religious matters in military operating environments—a role they have generally performed with great success in Iraq—having to deal with culture as a whole will create a dilemma for them: How do they segregate religion from culture? This is an all-but-impossible task. Components of culture cannot be isolated from each other, and broader cultural analysis is not an area in which chaplains are trained. Advising on religious considerations in an AOR is also a vague doctrinal role and brings into question the extent to which chaplains should perform missions interacting with locals outside of military bases, since many might view chaplains as biased, dogmatic, or ethnocentric. This is ultimately a command decision, and the point here is simply that commanders need to be aware of potential negative effects from the use of chaplains as cultural advisors and liaison officers.

These nontraditional missions may have unintended consequences. For example, a senior U.S. military chaplain recently requested permission to enter Tanzania to meet with key national religious leaders. His intent was to "[develop] ways in which religion, [a component] that plays a critical role in international relations here in this region, can be used as a force for peace and cooperation." His justification for visiting Tanzania further stated, "We have also sent donations by way of others to make their way into Southern Sudan. We liaise with secular and religious nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) throughout our Area of Interest (AOI) to leverage more efficient and effective shared goals."[5] All aid, humanitarian or otherwise, has at least some political and even military significance, but Christian NGOs fund the Sudan People's Liberation Army outright. By using his military position to funnel aid to the Sudan, the chaplain was consciously or unconsciously pursuing a politico-religious agenda; he was circumventing controls put in place by the U.S. Government to prevent such actions.

The U.S. system of governance includes the separation of church and state; thus, no government agency has a mandate to do religious work. Chaplains in the U.S. military, however, are something of an anomaly. Because they are paid by the government specifically to minister to Soldiers, there is no disguising the fact that they are religious advocates. The ill-advised use of the word "crusade" by American military and political leaders to describe the war in Iraq might make the chaplain

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Marines assigned to Bridge Co. "A," 6th Engineering Battalion, and soldiers of the Ugandan Peoples' Defense Force work together to build a new roof for a nurses' cottage during a Medical Civil Action Project (MEDCAP) in Serere, Uganda, as part of Exercise Natural Fire 2006, 20 August 2006.

look, to Arab-Muslim eyes, like a crusader, a Judeo-Christian jihadist ("crusade" in Arabic translates as *harb al salibeya*: a war of the cross, which can easily be translated as "Christian jihad").[6] In two cases I observed in Iraq, this was underscored by chaplains carrying weapons, an act of questionable legality that violates the tenets of common sense and reinforces impressions of interfaith warfare.

For these reasons, designating military chaplains, who are overwhelmingly Christian, as cultural experts and as the primary agents for cultural interaction might give American regional activities a religious tinge. This is not an indictment of chaplains, but a cautionary note about the potential liabilities inherent in using chaplains in expanded roles in some politico-religious contexts. Overall, using chaplains as cultural specialists and advisers underlines the failure of the military chain of command to understand the complexities of local culture. In turn, this highlights the need for methodologically analyzing and integrating cultural factors into military operations.

Lessons Lost

Using its operations in East Africa as a case in point, it is evident that the U.S. military has not applied lessons learned in Iraq. Thus far, U.S. forces bound for East Africa have received no training on East African culture prior to deployment; instead, the Army trained them for Iraq and Afghanistan. While much of this training was undeniably good—it included convoy live-fires; prisoner handling; and study of the law of war, small-unit tactics, and IED-recognition techniques—it simply wasn't applicable to operations in East Africa. Consequently, U.S. forces in the region have often relied on the U.S. Embassy for basic assistance, both logistical and informational. This can lead to clashes with embassy personnel, who may see U.S. military forces new to a region as a drain on time and resources and as a potential source of embarrassment.

The lack of regional training and overall expertise also prevents U.S. forces from adequately integrating into foreign societies. They sometimes reside in luxury hotels and hire translators or "expeditors" to procure items in the local economy and to advise them on how to interact with locals. Sustained operations have involved the creation of luxurious "safe houses" in the wealthy expatriate communities of East Africa. Although this arrangement meets embassy guidelines for force protection and helps keep forces under some form of control through proximity, it doesn't provide the optimum setting in which to learn about a country.

If the U.S. military is going to conduct peacetime engagement activities, it must incorporate ever-changing socioeconomic, cultural, ethnic, and historical knowledge into operations planning and execution, and it must give its leaders access to information and specialists so they can make informed decisions. We must overcome dogmatic institutional prerogatives. We need mature, informed decisions influenced by feedback. We must build an institutional knowledge base that gives us flexibility and continuity.

One cannot understand the conditions that breed terrorism by observing them from the isolation of luxurious enclaves in capital cities during a 90-day stint of temporary duty. It takes years of training, and it takes command recognition that the mission is important. *MR*

NOTES

1. Nicholas Dirks, Geoff Eley, and Sherry Ortner, *Culture/Power/History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 4.
2. Mission statement, Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa, <www.hoa.centcom.mil>.
3. "U.S. Builds Clinic to Win Hearts and Minds of Tanzanians," *This Day* (Dar es Salaam, Tanzania), 19 August 2006.
4. "Special Forces to Serve at U.S. Embassies," *The Citizen* (Dar es Salaam. Tanzania), March 2006.
5. Personal correspondence of the author.
6. For instance, on 16 September 2001, during a televised speech and press conference, President Bush said, "This crusade, this war on terrorism is going to take awhile…." See Peter Ford, "Europe cringes at Bush 'crusade' against terrorists," *The Christian Science Monitor*, 19 September 2001, 12. During Desert Storm, the author observed a tank with "CRUSADER" painted on the barrel, and another example is the Army's Crusader artillery system.