



# COMPLEX OPERATIONS IN AFRICA

## Operational Culture Training in the French Military

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**F**RANCE HAS DEPLOYED some 8,000 French troops around the world, and the way they interact with foreign populations and military organizations overseas is the direct result of a successful, 100-year-old marriage between ethno-anthropology and the French military experience in the 19th and 20th centuries in Africa, Asia, and Europe.

The French military definition of operational culture takes note of this alliance: “Operational culture is the understanding of foreign cultural norms, beliefs and attitudes: it is an operationally relevant field guide used by general officers as well as infantry squad leaders to navigate a complex human terrain.”<sup>1</sup>

Deployed French Army units learn about a foreign country’s culture by studying its customs, history, economic issues, social norms, and traditions. This anthropology angle became part of the military learning process as a result of lessons learned in two centuries of counterinsurgency wars, or what we today refer to as irregular war or “hybrid war.”<sup>2</sup> The French military experience led to two counterintuitive principles:

- Effective leaders of small combat arms units must think like human intelligence collectors, counterpropaganda operators, nongovernmental organization workers, and negotiators.
- The combat arms battalion is the nexus of operational cultural training and education for complex military and nonmilitary tasks.

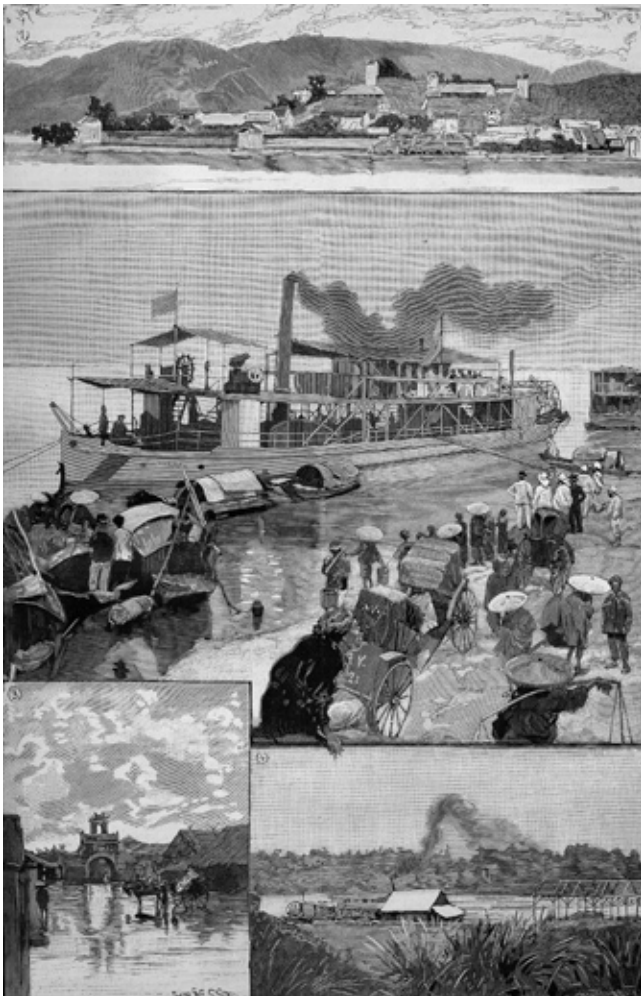
### French Operational Culture Concept

The colonial era influenced the development of operational culture concepts throughout the 19th and 20th century. The colonial campaigns from 1862 to 1962 linked anthropological studies with strategic and tactical military courses of action.

**Marriage of anthropological studies and irregular war.** During the colonial expansion in Africa and Indochina in the second half of the 19th century, French military officers returning from campaigns in Asia and Africa

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MAP: “Afrique Centrale” from Annales de Géographie Tome IV, Paris 1895. (University of Texas Libraries)



Scenes from China and Hanoi during the second French colonial empire as published in *Le Monde Illustré* in 1891.

travelled to Paris to share their observations and lessons learned with a large audience of politicians, journalists, geographers, and ethno-anthropologists.<sup>3</sup> A common interest in unknown populations led these military thinkers to share their cultural awareness with these groups. Colonial officers hosted anthropologists overseas who assisted them in the study of violence among nonstate groups.<sup>4</sup> This laid the foundation for the strong influence of ethno-anthropological studies on the colonial Army throughout the 19th and 20th century. Officers compared written reports with ethno-anthropologists' observations on lifestyle, customs, social structures, and tribal governments in the unexplored territories of Africa and Asia. In 1885, for instance, Captain Savorgnan de Brazza returned to Paris with ethno-anthropological information gathered during his exploration of the Ogoue, Congo, and Kouilou-Nari basins in Central Africa.<sup>5</sup>

Anthropologists also became more familiar with the planning and execution of military campaigns. Two French colonial military figures enforced this process: Marshals Joseph Gallieni and Hubert Lyautey. In 1899, building on 20 years of colonial campaign experiences, they established the first principles of expeditionary operations later integrated into operational culture.<sup>6</sup> In his *The Colonial Role of the Army*, Lyautey, then a colonel, called for permanently stationing a reservoir of units overseas to develop staff and small-unit leaders with expertise in foreign cultures and languages, and in mediation and negotiation techniques. Lyautey set the conditions for integrating operational culture into irregular-warfare concepts.

Expeditionary campaigns in Upper Tonkin (1885-1897) and Madagascar (1896-1900) served as on-the-ground laboratories to develop this approach. Company- to platoon-sized units operated independently to gain control of wide areas of operations. Captains, lieutenants, and sergeants learned that collecting the right intelligence at the right time was the key to mission success.<sup>7</sup>

Superior in their knowledge of the terrain but inferior in their equipment, organization, and firepower, the French Army's adversaries often waged guerrilla warfare.<sup>8</sup> French colonial campaigns were first and foremost expeditionary operations whose success depended on the support of the local population and the intelligence-gathering skills of infantry platoon commanders. Commanders discovered that an ethno-anthropological lens was an effective tool to develop situational awareness. It remains at the core of the French operational culture domain.

In *The Colonial Role of the Army*, Lyautey noted that "captains, lieutenants and sergeants must perform with excellence in areas such as local politics, as well as social, education and economic development of the population."<sup>9</sup> Gallieni's "instructions" during the campaign of Madagascar in May 1898 stressed what is now a paramount principle in modern irregular war: "We must bear in mind that in colonial conflicts, which are unfortunately forced on us by the unruliness of rebellions, we must never destroy except in the last extremity. Every time that warlike incident obliges one of our colonial officers to proceed against a village and occupy it, he must never lose sight of the fact that his first responsibility is to reconstruct the village, set up a market, and build a school."<sup>10</sup>

**...we must never destroy  
except in the last extremity.**

The success or failure of expeditionary campaigns depended on two factors about small-unit leaders:

- Their knowledge of the local population regarding cultures, traditions, customs, and languages.
- Their ability to conduct CMO and information operations.

By the end of the 19th century, operational culture was part of every layer of the military planning process, from the strategic to the tactical. Commanders integrated CMO and information operations into small-infantry-unit operational orders.

Lyautey and Gallieni's influence led to the creation of a military center for foreign cultures in 1906 that integrated anthropological studies into expeditionary or irregular war practices to prepare deployed officers and NCOs at the farthest reaches of the empire "to command inaccessible outposts, live with the indigenous population, [and] work as combat leaders, diplomats, and political administrators of areas of responsibility as vast as half the size of France."<sup>11</sup> In such environments, cultural knowledge of tribal and clan lifestyles, social organizations, and family and kinship lineage served one paramount objective: to successfully navigate and control complex human terrain.

The 102-year-old center, Ecole Militaire Spécialisée dans l'Outre-Mer et l'Etranger (EMSOME), located in Paris' western suburbs, maintains and continues to develop the anthropological knowledge to help officers and leaders understand the complexity of cultural interactions in foreign countries and regions. For instance, 1908 reports on the Tuareg, Bambara, and Dogon ethnic groups in the French Sudan provide insight into 2008 Mali sociocultural parameters.

**Operational culture, HUMINT, PSYOP, and CMO.** Gallieni and Lyautey's concepts influenced many officers during the first half of the 20th century, including Colonel Roger Trinquier and Lieutenant Colonel David Galula. The American military has studied their writing extensively since 2004.<sup>12</sup>

Over the years, operational culture became the cement holding together many tasks across the irregular war spectrum. As Trinquier and Galula note, the tasks include—

- Assessing the political effect of any military action.
- Supporting the population.
- Mapping the insurgency.
- Clearing and holding areas of operations to "box" the insurgent influence.
- Relying on a web of mobile- and light-infantry units.
- Performing a variety of nonmilitary tasks that benefit the local population.

Trinquier and Galula echoed principles already outlined by Gallieni and Lyautey a century earlier. For Trinquier, "the sine qua non of victory in modern warfare is the unconditional support of the population," because "the inhabitant in his home is the center of the conflict."<sup>13</sup> Control of this center of gravity is "as necessary for the counterinsurgent as for the insurgent," Galula says, and requires small-unit leaders to train in a broad variety of tasks ranging from human intelligence (HUMINT) collection to psychological operations (PSYOP) as counterpropaganda and CMO.<sup>14</sup>

French combat arms platoon and squad leaders have used their



Joseph Simon Gallieni  
(1849–1916)



Louis Hubert Gonzalve Lyautey  
(1854–1934)

knowledge of local cultures to carry out these tasks. For instance, in Algeria, they spent a great deal of time trying to convince potential insurgents that politics could be a substitute for guns in the ongoing battle to control resources and power. In the countryside, commanders received substantial support from chiefs of villages with whom they were on excellent terms. (They shared common interest to keep the National Liberation Front at large.) As a result, operational culture in France acquired a strong political and ideological component, combined with anthropology studies. Some regimental and company commanders integrated this model into their combat training to prepare infantry squad leaders to become as skilled in PSYOP and HUMINT as they were in marksmanship.

In 1962, the French military began to keep a low profile in the aftermath of France's bitter Indochina and Algerian wars, and such counterinsurgency concepts as psychological and counterpropaganda operations vanished from official terminology and curricula. After 9/11, the timeless principles of irregular warfare were back in the limelight. Today, PSYOP, HUMINT, CMO, and information operations once again define the content of operational culture curricula.

The French military's operational culture syllabus examines foreign societies' cultural habits, traditional customs, social and political constructs, moral ideas, codes of honor, and ways of thinking. Such knowledge helps commanders quickly identify and take advantage of psychological points of weakness and strength of the insurgent they are—or will be—fighting, as well as the local force they are—or will be—training. Furthermore, understanding what drives local authority and identifying who is really in charge helps commanders establish and enforce lines of communication with local political, religious, and military leaders, thus working “with the mandarin, not against him,” as Lyautey advised in 1899.<sup>15</sup>

Recent counterinsurgency, stability and support, and peacekeeping operations in Africa, Bosnia, Kosovo, and Afghanistan have reinforced the

French model of integrating anthropology into irregular warfare planning and execution and helped battalion commanders develop operational culture programs of instruction for small-unit leaders.

## **Operational Culture for Small-Unit Leaders: Win the People First**

Nineteenth and 20th century counterinsurgency operations laid the foundations for modern counterinsurgency doctrine by integrating HUMINT, PSYOP, and CMO into a common warfighting continuum. As Galula demonstrated, success often comes from combined-arms battalions whose squad leaders are savvy operators in all these fields.

History teaches us that destroying the enemy is not the strategic goal of counterinsurgency operations. As Lyautey states, “The raison d'être of our colonial military operations is always and foremost economic.” A colonial commander's role was to gain control of a territory and its population to integrate the region into the French empire ideologically, politically, and economically. In this respect, the population was the center of gravity, even at the sergeant level. Knowledge about the culture of the people was paramount.

At the operational level, colonial commanders applied the now famous methodology of the spreading “ink blots” or “oil stains.” From secure bases, small light and mobile units gradually spread out over the theater of operations from one base to another until they covered the region with interconnected bases and outposts, progressively controlling each area. Gaining the trust of tribes and villages depended on proper cultural behavior by the troops.

Maneuver was the decisive tactical element at company level and below. Isolated company commanders and platoon and squad leaders had to take crucial, timely initiatives to obtain strategic goals. To control wide areas of operations, they sought to impose a stable and secure environment by interacting with villagers, training local militias, and containing hostile enemy forces by either the use of force, the threat of it, or negotiation. “Win the people first,” Lyautey ordered in 1901 in Madagascar. “Each time we find ethnic groups that are politically structured within organized institutions, we must rely on them and work with them.”<sup>16</sup> Again, the general principle of colonial expansion in Asia

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was to “work with the mandarin, not against him.”<sup>17</sup> This policy required an in-depth knowledge of local and regional alliances and powers. Operational culture training and education programs address these irregular warfare principles.

**The battalion as nexus of operational culture training.** The French Army’s operational culture domain relies mainly on the combination of anthropological-centered EMSOME teaching and the combat arms battalion’s mission-oriented application of it. Although EMSOME offers a central repository for cultural knowledge, the knowledge spreads at the combat arms battalion level, the cradle of the expeditionary culture. From 1882 to 2007, more than 120 years of expeditionary campaigns have driven the operational culture training and education at the 2d Infantry Marine Regiment and provided it with unique cultural expertise.

EMSOME emphasizes the “so what” of operational culture in its seminars, while small-unit leaders convey their experiences to each other at the battalion level. The knowledge acquired does not depend on rank but on mission, task, and military-occupational specialty.

As mentioned earlier, anthropology drives predeployment operational culture programs to explore the dynamics of tribes, clans, traditional beliefs, and religion. Understanding local moral values and codes of honor helps officers and soldiers negotiate with powerful local religious, political, tribal, and administrative authorities.

What makes this program so unique is that it does not use a template approach. Each combat arms battalion has the autonomy to tailor the training to its own level of experience. The program’s purpose is to help company commanders train their platoon and squad leaders. In addition, studying a country’s culture, history, economic issues, social norms, and traditions addresses one key question: Who are the people in our area of operations? Infantry company

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commanders, platoon leaders, and squad leaders learn the answer during predeployment training that covers:

- Human terrain.
- Counterinsurgency operations.
- Training and advising national forces.
- Operating civil-military operations.

Battalion commanders can easily translate each domain into two-hour classes in their programs of instruction.

**Course 1. Navigating the human terrain: a combat arms skill.** Learning how to navigate complex human terrain is a combat arms skill that requires more time and energy than learning how to fire a weapon, use a compass, or drive a truck. The first course, therefore, covers the traditional domains of ethno-anthropology studies through a cultural approach. Officers and enlisted members take the same classes in human geography, history, religion, traditional beliefs, moral values, social and political organization, family structure, kinship lineages, economic challenges, customs, and individual societal abilities and habits.

The studies highlight the complexity and nuances of these human structures and warn against the oversimplifications in many Western matrix approaches. The training puts into perspective concepts of land ownership, family lineage, generation networks, and traditional clan struggles for power. Further, it highlights the political influence of ethnic groups or subgroups. Officers and enlisted men learn about subtle differences within the Northern Teda group, the Goranes, and Toubous. They study the traditional influence of the Zaghawa, Tama, and Bideyat clans in the Wadai region of eastern Chad as well as the differences between “black” Saharan nomads, “Arab” Chadians, and the Chari-Baguirmi group.

EMSOME mobile teams provide much of this teaching. However, during predeployment training, they use the expertise available within the combat arms battalion itself. Officers and soldiers who have operated in the country of deployment give additional briefs based on their own experiences.

Instructors also teach their students how to interact with street vendors, local imams, and marabouts; what greetings to use; which “codes” to apply when conducting a meeting; how to quickly identify dominant families or individuals in the neighborhood; how to understand the social value of bargaining



French Marines in Chad, 2006.

with vendors in a market; how to bargain; and how to follow rules of hospitality.

At this stage, small-unit leaders benefit from a two-hour basic language course providing them with about 50 key “icebreaker” sentences and numbers. Language proficiency, however, is not a priority for the battalion commander. Proficiency in a foreign language requires years of in-depth study combined with immersion in the country and is beyond the scope of predeployment training. Instead, the combat arms battalion effort focuses on teaching officers and soldiers how to use an interpreter.

**Course 2. Counterinsurgency and operational culture: conducting military and nonmilitary tasks.** Examining the legacy of Lyautey and Galula, this course is military-oriented, yet covers a broad variety of nonmilitary tasks. Personnel in the battalion play an important role by conveying their knowledge of a specific country. In addition to EMSOME insights, their briefs address and update the following topics:

- The military impact of geography and climate, accessibility of the roads, and the location of available airfields and reliable medical facilities in the area of operations.
- The required combat readiness level (rapid reaction force structure, etc.)
- The history of guerrilla operations in the area. (When? Which tribes and clans? Where? How?)
- The history of counterinsurgency courses of action in the area, when relevant.

**Course 3. Training and advising foreign units.** This course prepares infantry platoon and squad leaders to execute ad hoc training and advisory tasks

with national forces and nongovernmental armed groups. The course goal is to teach officers and soldiers how to adapt to their counterparts’ cultures. It usually addresses the following topics:

- History of conflicts.
- Specific military traditions.
- Civil-military relationships.
- Types of recruitment and resources available.
- The level of training and equipment available.
- Types of forces and organization.
- Uniforms and ranks.
- Morale and esprit de corps issues.
- Counterinsurgency combat skills.

Operational culture remains the core of the predeployment course.

**Course 4. Civil-military operations.** This course provides in-depth information on the status of CMO in the battalion area. EMSOME updates the information provided by previous rotations in the country, giving the battalion commander situational awareness of the support the local population needs in his future area of operations: schools to renovate, wells to dig, and bridges to repair. This allows the commander to include two or three CMOs in his warning order. The number varies depending on whether it is a counterinsurgency, stability and support, or peacekeeping operation.

The warning order might tell company commanders to include soldiers who are skilled as carpenters, plumbers, and electricians. A CMO project is a critical tactical course of action to “win the people” in the area of operations. After meeting with local authorities in the country, the commander integrates the CMO into the battalion’s operation order. Then the company accomplishes the CMO mission under the battalion commander’s watch.

## Cultural Understanding as a Long-term Process

The French Army developed the operational culture concept from lessons learned during more than 100 years of colonial military campaigns. These

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courtesy of author

Training Malian forces, 2006.

expeditionary counterinsurgency operations were similar to what we now refer to as irregular warfare. Three generations of officers, noncommissioned officers, and enlisted men learned the hard way how to interact with foreign cultures to “win the people.” The experience of one generation energized the expeditionary training and education of the next.

The primary lesson learned is that operational cultural understanding is a long-term process. For over a century, the marriage of ethno-anthropological studies and military experiences have developed

cultural standards small-unit leaders still follow today in operations in the Balkans, Afghanistan, and Africa.

The history of counterinsurgency operations has taught us that winning people’s hearts and minds and changing the adversary’s mind-set always matter more than physical destruction of the enemy. Operational culture is a combat skill that is critical to mission success. Like many other Western armed forces, the French military views it as the core of warfighting for combat arms units conducting irregular wars. For all combat arms leaders, from commanders to squad level, operational culture training and education is paramount to achieving success

in both military and nonmilitary missions within a foreign environment. This training aggregates capabilities ranging from the restrained use of force to mediation and negotiation. In short, it develops the transverse capabilities required to fight a four-block war.<sup>18</sup>

Ultimately, the battalion commander’s operational culture training is driven by the idea that teaching leaders and soldiers how to think and operate in a foreign environment matters more than just teaching them what to think about it. **MR**

## NOTES

1. Interview with BG Philippe Roisin, former director of the Ecole Militaire Spécialisée dans l’Outre-Mer et l’Etranger (EMSOME), 12 December 2006. Located in Paris western suburbs, EMSOME is the French Army school specializing in training and education for units and individuals deploying to overseas French territories and theaters of operations.

2. LTG James N. Mattis and LTC Frank G. Hoffman, “Future Warfare: The Rise of Hybrid Wars,” *Proceedings* 132, May 2006. The “four-block war” is LTG Mattis’s expansion of former Marine Corps Commandant General Charles Krulak’s concept of “three-block war.” General Krulak claimed that today’s expeditionary unit must be able to fight in one city block, hand out humanitarian supplies in the next block, and then make peace between warring factions in yet another block. To this requirement, “Hybrid Wars” adds the necessity of conducting effective information operations.

3. Georges Balandier and Marc Ferro, “Au Temps des Colonies” *L’Histoire Seul* (1984), 76.

4. André Le Révérend, *Lyautey*, (Paris: Fayard, 1983), 268.

5. Pierre Kalck, *Un explorateur au centre de l’Afrique*, (L’Harmattan, 1993), 9.

6. The “Report of General Gallieni on the situation in Madagascar,” by General Joseph Gallieni and “The Colonial Role of the Army” by Lieutenant Colonel Hubert

Lyautey, an enlightened plea for the creation of a colonial army, were both published in the same year, 1899.

7. General Joseph Gallieni, “Report on the situation in Madagascar,” 1899.

8. Le Révérend, 228.

9. Raoul Girardet, *La Société Militaire de 1815 à nos jours*, (Perrin, 1998), 228

10. Gallieni [no page number given].

11. Le Révérend, 278.

12. David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare—Theory and Practice* (Westport, CT Praeger, 1964) and Roger Trinquier, *Modern Warfare. A French View of Counterinsurgency* (London and Dunow: Pall Mall Press, 1964).

13. *Ibid.*, 8.

14. Galula, 74

15. Le Révérend, 203.

16. *Ibid.*, 279.

17. *Ibid.*, 278.

18. Mattis and Hoffman, *Proceedings* 132, May 2006.