

Chapter 3

Culture

3-1. This chapter addresses culture and its role in a counterinsurgency operational environment. Culture forms the basis of how people interpret, understand, and respond to events and people around them. Cultural understanding is critical because who a society considers to be legitimate will often be determined by culture and norms. Additionally, counterinsurgency operations will likely be conducted as part of a multinational effort, and understanding the culture of allies and partners is equally critical.

3-2. Insurgents from a local area generally understand local culture, the perspectives of the population, and the population's concerns and grievances much better than any foreign military forces understand them. Therefore, culturally, the insurgent may have an enormous advantage over a foreign military force. This may not be true if the insurgents are not from the local area. If a military force is to succeed in gaining support of the population, it must seek to understand the local people and their culture and incorporate the perspectives and concerns of the population in their plans and operations as well as, if not better than, the insurgents incorporate them.

3-3. There are many definitions of culture in use by the United States (U.S.) military. As a starting point, this publication understands culture is a web of meaning shared by members of a particular society or group within a society.

UNDERSTANDING CULTURE

3-4. To be successful in interacting with the local population to gain information on the enemy, or to understand their requirements, military members must do more than learn a few basic facts or “do’s and do nots.” They must understand the way that their actions can change the situation for the local population (both positively and negatively) and the resulting perceptions of the population towards those actions. To be successful, commanders and staffs consider four fundamental aspects of culture when planning and executing military operations:

- Culture influences how people view their world.
- Culture is holistic.
- Culture is learned and shared.
- Culture is created by people and can and does change.

3-5. The way that a culture influences how people view their world is referred to as their worldview. Many people believe they view their world accurately, in a logical, rational, unbiased way. However, people filter what they see and experience according to their beliefs and worldview. Information and experiences that do not match what they believe to be true about the world are frequently rejected or distorted to fit the way they believe the world should work. More than any other factor, culture informs and influences that worldview. In other words, culture influences perceptions, understandings, and interpretations of events. Soldiers and Marines need to know that U.S. interpretations of events are often quite different from the perceptions of these events by other people in an area of operations. If Soldiers and Marines assume that the local population will perceive actions the way that they do, they are likely to misjudge their reactions. The U.S. military refers to this pattern of assuming others see events in the same way the U.S. does as mirror imaging. Mirror imaging is dangerous because it leads Soldiers and Marines into thinking that their assumptions about a problem and its solution are shared by the population and multinational partners, rather than employing perspective taking, and looking at the problem from the population's perspective.

3-6. Holism is based on the principle that all socio-cultural aspects of human life are interconnected. While interacting with people in other cultures, Soldiers and Marines may be tempted to say their problems “are all about [fill in the blank: tribalism, corruption, lack of work ethic, and so on.].” In truth, very few

counterinsurgency challenges boil down to one simple answer. Politics affects economics. Family structure affects job choices. Religion affects politics. Every aspect of culture affects every other aspect in some way, even if indirectly. By acknowledging these interconnections, military members can better assess how the local population might react to their presence and actions. For instance, when Soldiers and Marines are not thinking holistically, they may anticipate that closing down a local market will only have an impact on the local economy. However, after closing the market, it may be that the local reaction seems to be about religion or tribal concerns instead of economics. Even if Soldiers and Marines do not understand why, they should be aware that their actions will have unknown second and third order effects. By understanding that a marketplace is more than a place to exchange goods for money, and that economic conditions may affect tribal power, the status of religious leaders, and other social conditions, Soldiers and Marines can see a culture holistically. A holistic perspective helps military members understand the complex interconnectedness of a culture and avoid being surprised by local reactions to military decisions.

3-7. Culture is learned and shared. Children learn the appropriate way to act in a culture by observing other people; by being taught accepted values and ways of thinking about the world from their parents, teachers and others; and by practicing (sharing) what they have learned on a daily basis. This process of learning a new culture is called socialization. Culture can be learned at any age. Marines and Soldiers, for example, learn military culture by going through basic training or officer training in their late teens or early twenties. In fact, these initial training schools recognize their important role in socializing young men and women into core Marine and Army values. As a result, Marine Corps and Army basic training curriculums include not only classes on marksmanship, but also classes on ethics and core values. In counterinsurgency operations, understanding that culture is learned and shared can offer an important operational and tactical opportunity. Any Marine or Soldier can learn about the culture of the population simply by interacting with the local people. One of the more successful adaptations of the U.S. military in Iraq and Afghanistan occurred when service members realized they could learn a lot about the local culture quickly by talking to and observing their interpreters. Their enhanced understanding of the cultures of their areas of operations enabled them to better negotiate with leaders, to conduct operations that would be successful, and in a number of cases (such as the al Anbar Awakening), to gain the support and assistance of the population in fighting an insurgency.

3-8. One of the keys to success (and failure) in dealing with a population in a counterinsurgency operation is understanding that cultures are not static; they can and do change, often rapidly. During times of conflict, the usual methods for getting through the day may stop working for the local population, and they may try adopting new ideas or start highlighting traditional ways of doing things. Alternatively, they may switch rapidly among a range of possible behaviors. These changes can occur because of a number of factors were at play, but probably the greatest cause of this during conflict is a rapid decline in security. As security declines, the threat of attack, rape, and murder forces many changes in society. The rapid decline in the status and opportunities for women in these countries, therefore, was not merely due to centuries-old tribal beliefs, but to very real and pragmatic economic and social changes over time. As the cases of Iraq and Afghanistan illustrate, cultural practices and attitudes are frequently influenced by changes in very real physical conditions. Since the arrival of a large military, often accompanied by the destruction of physical property and the erosion of the local economy and security, is undoubtedly an enormous change for the local population, counterinsurgency planners need to recognize and plan for the impact that their operations will have upon the people and cultures in an area of operations.

ASSESSING A CULTURAL SITUATION

3-9. Although it may seem that people around the world are extraordinarily different and have little in common, in reality all human groups interact with their world and each other in some basic, predictable patterns. The particular details of these patterns may vary. But the underlying patterns will not. Thus, all people use, manage, and interact with their environments. All groups have some kind of economy for exchanging goods and services. Every group has a social structure, with differing roles and status among members. Political behavior can be found in the smallest community. All people have some kind of belief system, whether based on religion, tradition, narratives, or history. By identifying these patterns wherever they deploy, Marines and Soldiers will be in a better position to assess the cultural situation and the influence of their operations upon the local population.

3-10. All cultures have a unique and interdependent connection with their physical surroundings. The physical environment (including climate, terrain, and resources) influences the people living in it by providing a range of possibilities within which they act. People shape their environment by the choices they make, creating a cultural landscape which reflects their social, cultural, economic, and political attitudes. A careful reading, or interpretation, of the cultural landscape can provide useful information about the people who create it, use it, and live in it. A military presence in an area of operations will affect a local population and its use of the physical environment. For example, Marines and Soldiers may inadvertently divert or impede access to resources, such as water or food, which in turn may cause real shortages or upset the balance of power by allowing greater access to these resources by one group and harming another. Counterinsurgency planners need to anticipate how their operations will impact local populations and their use of their environment and recognize that since use of the environment is cultural, these impacts may significantly differ from what might be expected in the U.S.

3-11. All cultures have specific systems for obtaining, producing, and distributing items people need to survive (for example, food, water, and shelter) or luxuries and material things. This system, which does not necessarily require money or a banking system, is called the economy of a culture. Frequently, insurgents use the informal economy to obtain funding and support for their activities. Another aspect of the economic system that is often overlooked is the concept of reciprocity, which is an exchange between people that creates a relationship. Although in Western cultures exchange usually involves the exchange of goods and services of equal monetary value, in other parts of the world exchange may be only partly about what people expect regarding goods and services and also partly about building working relationships. If Marines and Soldiers fail to see what the local people expect from the exchange, to include its impact on interpersonal relationships, it will be hard for them to understand or anticipate people's behavior.

3-12. In all cultures, people hold differing positions of status and power, often closely related to their roles in a group. In the military, for example, one's status and power is based on rank. Depending on a person's rank, a person fills different roles in an organization. The way that a group distinguishes among its members according to their role, status, and power is reflected in its social structure. A person's position in the social structure may depend on many factors, including age, gender, class, family name, tribal membership, ethnicity, religious identity, and even rank. In conflict environments, differing groups (for example, ethnic, religious, or tribal) may each vie for power, often looking to outside militaries to support them. In counterinsurgency operations, it is essential that military leaders understand which social groups have traditionally held power in an area of operations. Otherwise, they are likely to be drawn into power struggles among competing groups, and possibly even unwittingly end up aiding the insurgents. A concept central to one's place in society is that of identity. Identity is a broad term used to describe how people conceive of themselves and how they are perceived by others. Identity shapes how people view themselves and the world. Understanding identity is complex because people have multiple identities. In times of conflict, people may choose to emphasize certain group identities such as nationality or religion, while at other times different identities, such as one's profession or gender, may matter more. Social structure and identity are extremely important concepts for counterinsurgency planners and operators to understand, as they affect people's allegiances and influence how groups and individuals will interpret and respond to U.S. actions.

3-13. In all cultures, people have a system that determines who leads the group and who makes decisions about its welfare. Although people in the U.S. use an electoral system to select their leaders, this is not the case in many other countries. In many places around the world, even when the official government is elected, the local population may not view that government as legitimate or effective. In fact, one of the primary motivations for people to support an insurgency is their sense that the official or formal government has failed to provide for their needs. Frequently, insurgents may be providing a "shadow government" which replaces and competes with the official government in certain parts of the country. Shadow governments are one example of informal leadership. In most areas of operations, Marines and Soldiers will find that communities or groups are influenced by a variety of leaders, most of whom are not part of the government. In some areas, religious leaders may have great influence. In others, people may look to tribal leaders or respected individuals within their ethnic group. Business leaders and warlords often have great power and influence too. To be successful in counterinsurgency operations, military members need to quickly and accurately identify the various community leaders and develop strategies to work with

each of them in order to increase government legitimacy. Without support from the various power brokers in an area of operations, military action is unlikely to gain support from the local population.

3-14. Cultures are characterized by a shared set of beliefs, values, norms and symbols that unite a group. These beliefs may come from many sources, such as a person's background, family, education, religion or history. Understanding the beliefs and values of a local population is critical for effective information operations. Failure to respect or understand the beliefs of a local population can result in serious hostility towards military intervention and attacks upon military personnel. Likewise, information operations that assume the foreign audience shares the same jokes, history, or values that Soldiers and Marines do frequently fail to deliver messages effectively. To gain an understanding of belief systems, counterinsurgents read and monitor information available through media or books, and counterinsurgents talk to people in the culture. Discussing history with local people can be a window into understanding the way that people in that area define a problem, who they believe caused it, and who they think the heroes and villains are. Stories, sayings and even poetry can reveal cultural narratives, the shared explanations of why the world is a certain way. Frequently, advertising appeals to people by using these narratives, as do effective information operations. Beliefs, however, are not perfectly shared or understood within a group. There is usually a range of acceptable thoughts and behaviors. This is called variation. For example, in reading about Islam, Soldiers and Marines may understand that Muslims are supposed to fast during Ramadan. However, when deployed they might observe seemingly faithful Muslims drinking and eating during Ramadan. Within U.S. culture, these internal mismatches and contradictions (variations) are often accepted without much comment. In a cross-cultural interaction, these contradictions can seem jarring or confusing. Often, working with others in a foreign culture requires the ability to suspend judgment. People often act and work in ways that may be difficult to accept or understand. However, by recognizing that all people share some fundamental patterns and seeking to understand and develop military plans and operations that build upon these patterns, commanders and staffs can effectively work to counter an insurgency within an area of operations.

3-15. Religion can be a powerful force in shaping beliefs. In many cultures religion and religious leaders have significant influence over local populations. Religious ideology can incite conflict, but religion can also be instrumental in stabilizing a culture by using universal religious concepts of justice, healing, and transformation. Because religion is often an integral part of the values set of a local culture, counterinsurgents conducting mission preparation and analysis examine the religion in an area of operations. Religion can also play an important role in creating peace and stability. Religion can create cultural instability, but in many cases it can alleviate problems in a society and be a unifying force. Many religions have messages and themes of pacifism and forgiveness. In many insurgencies, religious leaders have played an essential role in ending conflicts. The effect of a religion has to be understood within that religion and within that society. Counterinsurgents conducting a mission analysis may find that insurgents are using a radical interpretation of a religious text to incite violence. This can be countered by empowering indigenous religious leaders who promote a different interpretation. For example, radical Muslims may cite texts from the Quran that justify violence, but they may ignore the passages taught by more moderate Muslims that advocate compassion, peace, and human dignity.

ORGANIZING TO UNDERSTAND CULTURE

3-16. There are three important methods for trying to understand the cultural element of a counterinsurgency. First, all counterinsurgents must make every effort to experience and understand the local culture, including by trying local food and learning local languages and customs. Second, commanders can organize their staffs in order to concentrate on cultural understanding and inject this understanding into their unit's plans and operations. Third, commanders can rely on an outside capability to allow commanders and staffs to understand the culture. Two techniques that involve organization of staffs or outside capabilities are—

- Green cell and cultural advisor.
- Human terrain systems.

GREEN CELL AND CULTURAL ADVISOR

3-17. The purpose of a green cell is to consider the population in order to promote a better understanding of the environment and the problem. At a minimum, the green cell provides for the independent will of the population. Planning teams must develop an understanding of civilian aspects of the area of operations and the will of the population. There are many techniques to achieve this capability, and each unit may approach this differently based on resources and available qualified personnel. Two techniques of note are the green cell and cultural advisor. (See MCWP 5-1 for more information on green cells.)

3-18. A green cell is an ad hoc working group consisting of individuals with a diversity of education and experience capable of identifying and considering the perspective of the population, the host-nation government, and other stakeholders within an operational environment. Ideally, a green cell is composed of individuals with cultural expertise across all warfighting functions. If a whole-of-government approach is used, experts from other government agencies such as the Department of State should be included in the cell. The green cell cooperates closely with the other members of the planning staff so that cultural factors are considered throughout the range of military operations. The green cell also interfaces and coordinates with joint and interagency groups, drawing upon the collective knowledge and experience of the Department of State, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and foreign resources, such as provincial reconstruction teams. (See MCWP 5-1 for more information on green cell activities.)

3-19. The commander forms the green cell during the receipt of mission and problem framing planning steps to add to the commander's and the operational planning team's cultural understanding of an operational environment. In order to support the operational planning team, the green cell understands the operational planning team's mission and tasks and is able to translate cultural information in a way that is relevant to the mission.

3-20. The cultural advisor is a concept developed and employed in Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan. Cultural advisors are the principal subject matter experts on culture and planning related to their designated geographic region of expertise, serving as the cultural and language advisors to the commander. The cultural advisor is a special staff officer for the commander and a member of the planning staff. This person not only serves on the planning staff, but also deploys and serves as an ongoing advisor to senior leaders while they are in theater, if needed. The advantage of having a cultural advisor on staff is that this advisor can often help explain to the commander what the advisor sees on the ground in the area of operations. A foreign area officer or a civil affairs Soldier may be a good selection for a cultural advisor. Both can provide an understanding of the host nation and its specific regional, religious, and ethnic differences, and they may have foreign language skills. As a result, the commander can adjust operations in response to a culturally challenging environment.

3-21. Overall, there are many options to task-organize staffs to incorporate culture into planning. While a green cell creates expertise in one part of the staff, those concerns are also important for other staff sections. It is important for commanders to create staffs that are well integrated across the warfighting functions. One danger of creating a cultural cell within the staff is that it will relegate cultural concerns to one staff element and inhibit cultural concerns being integrated into the planning process. Commanders ensure that the staff integrates all operational and planning concerns, including cultural concerns.

3-22. Regardless of the particular planning configuration, commanders and planners find and use whatever cultural resources are available to the unit. Commanders and staffs incorporate culture into planning during the beginning of mission planning in order to understand an area of operations prior to developing any course of action. Success is recognized not by stand-alone briefs that describe the culture of an operational environment, but when all of the operational planning teams' planning products reflect and have been informed by the cultural analysis that has been performed by subject matter experts.

HUMAN TERRAIN SYSTEM

3-23. The human terrain system provides tactical to strategic level support to commanders. The human terrain system conducts field research and analysis of the local population to determine the civil considerations in order to help commanders better understand the operational environment from the population's perspective and assess how actions will potentially impact and be perceived by the local population.

3-24. A human terrain team typically consists of a team leader, one or two social scientists, and one research manager. When manning demands permit, human terrain team personnel are recruited and deployed to promote engagement with elements of the population that typically have restricted access. For example, in Afghanistan at least one woman is assigned per team to facilitate access to females within the local population.

3-25. Human terrain teams, part of the human terrain system, represent a capability that traditionally falls outside of military expertise. These teams are an additional enabler for commanders to gain situational understanding of their operational environments through the socio-cultural running estimate and are an important tool in the military decisionmaking process. (See FM 2-01.3/MCRP 2-3A for more information on human terrain teams.)