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Cultural Awareness or Cultural Apperception: Is There a Difference?

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“...hear all that passes, search out what is beneath the surface, read their characters, discover their tastes and their weaknesses...”¹

--T.E. Lawrence, 1917

One of the more favorable byproducts of Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom is the US Army's rediscovered interest in the importance of foreign cultures. Of course this statement goes above and beyond the traditional elements of the US Army that have been educated and trained in foreign cultures and languages, such as Foreign Area Officers and Special Forces soldiers. It speaks to the heart of a matter that has created initiatives such as the TRADOC Culture Center at Ft. Huachuca, AZ or the mandatory Arab language training and enculturation of US Army majors at the US Army Command and General Staff College, Ft. Leavenworth, KS. It is ironic to note that the efforts to immerse soldiers in a foreign culture came only as a result of the bogging down of conventional US Army armor and mechanized units in Baghdad following the invasion in 2003. If the Abrams' and Bradley's had been met by cheering and American flag waving Iraqis in downtown Baghdad, this interest in Arab culture may have never surfaced; anymore than it surfaced following Operation Desert Storm in 1991. But this is a moot point and should be left for historians to ponder. What is important is that the enculturation has occurred and has given the US Army a more multidimensional quality, leading to an enhancement and effectiveness of its efforts in theater. But has it really?

In 2005 during the development of the Red Team Leader's Course, the University of Foreign Military and Cultural Studies in Ft. Leavenworth, KS attempted to tackle this question. What the curriculum developers discovered is worth sharing. Yes, culture may be defined as the integrated system of socially acquired values, beliefs, and rules of conduct which delimit the range of accepted behaviors in any given society. Cultural differences distinguish societies from one another. Cultural awareness implies being aware of cultural values, beliefs, and rules of conduct at a level of realization or knowledge. Not shaking or greeting with the left hand or not exposing the bottom of one's shoe is an example of cultural awareness. On the other hand

¹ T.E. Lawrence, "The 27 Articles of T.E. Lawrence," The Arab Bulletin, 20 August 1917, <http://www.bu.edu/mzank/Jerusalem/tx/lawrence.htm>

cultural apperception views things at levels below the surface and more complex in nature. Apperception is introspective. It is defined as the process of understanding something newly observed in terms of past experience. It is comprehension by assimilation with one's previous knowledge and experience. What this means is that understanding cultures requires getting down to the heart of what people value...or what is dear to their hearts. Until this level is obtained, courses in cultural awareness may be nothing more than a quick Berlitz approach to understanding the most useful, but rudimentary levels of information.

Because cultural apperception relates to the perception of something while being conscious of perceiving, cultural apperception addresses essential issues related to cultural ethnocentricity... the attitude or biased view that one's own group is superior to other cultures. This is also tied to perceptions of reality and how society's cultural lens shape their realities. Simply by being aware of the power and influence of ethnocentricity in shaping our view of the world is an important step in recognizing how our flawed view may impact an understanding or appreciation of other cultures.

Cultural apperception also includes knowing the narratives and dominant themes of a society. What are these themes and why are they important? Instilled in all societies are basic themes which capture the basic value systems of a people. For example, in the United States those themes may be tied to the national purpose... Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness. Or they may be tied to inalienable rights and freedoms... the importance of the individual... or some might say, simply baseball, Mom, and apple pie. Dr. Mohammed Hafez, a distinguished professor of Middle Eastern studies who taught at the University of Missouri-Kansas City, provides an interesting insight into the narratives and themes at work in Iraqi society.² Some of the more important themes are nationalism, honor, and the importance of the Muslim world. Dominating these themes is a sense of humiliation at the hands of the West based on the invasion of Iraq by the US and its allies. Significant to this humiliation is the notion of collusion by elements of the Iraqi government with the US and a sense of impotence in changing the situation. However, to counter these notions or feelings of failure is the belief that eventually success is inevitable, regardless of how negative the situation may appear.

Another example serves to illustrate this phenomenon. In a 2006 NPR news report, an Iraqi who purchased a video at a Baghdad video store was interviewed. The video showed scenes of American soldiers being shot by insurgent snipers. When asked why he chose to watch this, he answered that "it helps restore my sense of honor." Nationalism, honor, and the Muslim world have tremendous influence and appeal in certain societies. Iraq serves as an excellent example of this cultural trait.

To summarize, these narratives and themes may be lost in translation, if they even surface at all. Identifying that they are at the heart of how societies view events and how they react to them is a step toward achieving a greater level of cultural apperception. Similarly, one should also be

² Dr. Mohammed Hafez guest lectured at the University of Foreign Military and Cultural Studies, Ft. Leavenworth, KS beginning in 2006 while a professor at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. He now teaches at the Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, California. He is the author of numerous books and journal articles on Islamic movements and suicide bombers.

attuned to the fact that every foreign country and its people have themes at work. Knowledge of this fact may help military institutions better and more effectively capture and instruct these important, but seldom discussed human factors. As the examples in the previous paragraphs demonstrate, there is much more at work in a foreign culture that may not be clearly understood in the quest to understand that culture. Secretary of Defense Richard Gates' observation rings true," "Never neglect the psychological, cultural, political, and human dimensions of warfare, which is inevitably tragic, inefficient and uncertain."

Finally, and to conclude, it is important to recognize that much progress has been made in the education of officers, non-commissioned officers, and enlisted service members in an effort to expose them to foreign cultures. Taken one step further, language instruction should rank as one of the more important and significant efforts in developing professionalism and cultural apperception within the force. In the words of one foreign general officer, "the US Army has a long way to go in understanding foreign cultures. Learning a foreign language is the first step in bridging that gap." Access to AKO-sponsored language courses or attendance to the Defense Language Institute may have to be taken with more seriousness. Just as linguists are required to maintain language proficiency at unit level, weekly language familiarization classroom time may eventually become as important as the rifle range. Of course, this goes hand in hand with an appreciation of the various levels of cultural awareness and to the degree one is able to work below the surface and address narratives and themes. Teaching culture on the basis of levels...starting with the fundamentals and working toward the more underlying, but dominating themes should be a measure of effectiveness. Cultural awareness and cultural apperception provide a team approach toward gaining a richer understanding of the nuances of foreign cultures. This is the level that US Army institutions and units should aspire to achieve and maintain in an effort to "bridging that gap."

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