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# Do I Hold the General's Hand or Just Drink his Palm Wine? Cultural Advice for Africa

By

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The U.S. Armed Forces, backed by the long policy and logistical tail of the DoD, are deploying at a dizzying operational tempo and operating in more countries than ever before in the history of our, or anyone else's, military. In the midst of this, one particular geographic area that will likely be a growth area for DoD for years to come is Africa: you need only look to the U.S. Africa Command to find proof of this. If you're still not convinced of Africa's importance, think for a moment about just three current, significant trends:

1. Oil—our increasing reliance on African oil, as a portion of our oil imports; rising oil investment and production in Africa; and U.S. public clamor for ending reliance on Middle Eastern oil
2. Foreign Aid—record levels of U.S. foreign assistance to Africa under the Bush Administration and planned, continuing increases (as derived from Congressional Budget projections through FY09) in all forms of U.S. security assistance to this continent
3. Instability—7 of the 16 current United Nations (UN) peacekeeping missions throughout the world are taking place in Africa, 24 of the 63 peacekeeping operations undertaken throughout its history were there<sup>1</sup>, 2 of 6 of the world's major ongoing armed conflicts are happening in Africa, and 10 of the 33 continuing conflicts (of any size) around the globe are occurring in Africa<sup>2</sup>

In Africa, this gradually increasing DoD engagement is likely to continue to focus on security cooperation, particularly on activities related to cementing new military-to-military (M2M) contacts, creating stability in post-conflict areas, building modern defense capacities in our African partner states and African regional and sub-regional organizations, and supporting international peace enforcement and peacekeeping operations (PKO). All of these activities, if done the right way, will require very close and often long-term working relationships with Africans; and this is where the importance of cultural competency comes into play.

Culture can be defined in a number of ways; but commonly, it can be thought of as the shared sets of traditions, values, symbols, beliefs, and institutions created or held important by a group of people which give them identity and shape their patterns of activity and response. "Cultural competency," a term developed by Ben Connable and Art Speyer in 2005<sup>3</sup> and cited by LTC William D. Wunderle in his

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1. "Background Note: 31 July 2008," United Nations Department of Peacekeeping Operations, United Nations website, August 2008

2. "List of Ongoing Conflicts," Wikipedia website, 29 August 2008: this article cites several other supporting references, including GlobalSecurity.org, the Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research, etc.

3. Ben Connable and Art Speyer, "Cultural Awareness for Military Operations," Concepts and Proposals: USMC Cultural Awareness Working Group, HWCA and Marine Corps Intelligence Agency, February 2005

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recent book on Arab and Middle Eastern culture<sup>4</sup>, is “the fusion of cultural understanding with cultural intelligence that allows focused insight into military planning and decision making.” For my purposes, I will amend this definition to include not only foreign “military” planning and decision making but rather all “national security” planning and decision making by influential entities outside the military, to include foreign defense contractors, political parties, Ministries of defense, etc. All these people have an impact on DoD’s foreign partnerships; and we should be concerned with cracking their cultural codes in order to successfully communicate with them, to understand how to predict their reactions, and how to best influence them.

Unfortunately, for Africa and elsewhere, DoD has tended until very recently to ignore or misunderstand culture and its importance in the success of security cooperation. A good example of this exists in a definition of culture taken from Joint Publication 1-02, Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms, which describes culture as “a feature of the terrain that has been constructed by man” and also lumps culture into the general category of things like “roads, buildings, and canals; boundary lines; and in a broad sense, all names and legends on a map.” Numerous articles and books have discussed, at length, the negative impact of our failure to understand local culture during our previous operations in Vietnam, the Balkans, and Somalia, as well as in the initial stage our ongoing operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Closer to the topic of Africa, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates recently indicated that the U.S. Government had poorly communicated its intentions and objectives concerning Africa Command with African leaders, arguably a problem linked, at least in part, to cultural differences. On 14 May 2008, Secretary Gates said in his speech to the American Academy of Diplomacy that “in some respects, we probably didn’t do as good a job as we should have when we rolled out Africa Command...I think we need to take it a step at a time. I don’t think we should push African governments to a place that they don’t really want to go in terms of these relationships.”

It appears now, however, that we are learning from our mistakes. In July 2006, the Navy established its Maritime Civil Affairs Group to create its first generation civil affairs experts, who will receive training in foreign languages and culture. In 2007, the Pentagon initiated the Human Terrain System (HTS) to embed anthropologists and other social scientists in combat units in Iraq and Afghanistan. And, in 2008, the Army is conducting a command selection board to consider—for the first time ever—the placement of single-tracked or career Foreign Area Officers (FAOs) into combat unit leadership positions in Afghanistan. While all of these efforts are still in their infancy, they clearly indicate that our senior leaders have recognized that a good, solid cultural understanding of both our foreign partners (and foes) is an important factor in the success of our security cooperation activities.

In the interest of helping along these efforts in a very small way, what follows are some general, albeit scattered, pieces of guidance or advice for approaching our partners in Africa. This information is by no means comprehensive or exclusive but, hopefully, will encourage those in DoD dealing with or working in Africa to think more about African culture and its importance and to seek further information on the specific regions, countries, or groups relevant to their endeavors.

When we talk about culture in Africa, one of the first things that must be understood is that Africa, as a very large continent historically divided by powerful geographic, climatic, economic, and political forces, is not a single culture. Because of their artificial territorial boundaries constructed during the European trading and colonization periods, there can be many different ethnic groups within a small area even within the modern nation-states of Africa. For example, in Liberia, a nation about the size of Tennessee, there are at least 16 major ethnic groups; in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, there are

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4. William D. Wunderle, *Through the Lens of Cultural Awareness: A Primer for U.S. Armed Forces Deploying to Arab and Middle Eastern Countries*, Combat Studies Institute Press, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, 2006

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over 200<sup>5</sup>. There are literally hundreds of unique combinations in the manifestations of culture such as time orientations, languages, traditions, religious beliefs, ways of reasoning, views of authority, methods of negotiation, etc.

At the same time, however, there are some commonalities in culture, especially among people within the four major sub-regions of sub-Saharan Africa (West Africa, Central Africa, East Africa, and Southern Africa) that support the use of general guidelines for relationships with people from these areas.

### **Beliefs**

Throughout sub-Saharan Africa, while there's a wide range of different indigenous beliefs, there are generally common or shared elements in these beliefs. In many countries, for instance, there is faith in pre-destination or fatalism, where individuals believe that what they can achieve or become in life is largely determined at birth by where they are born or even by what day of the week they are born on. In most countries, there are even stronger beliefs that supernatural forces control one's fate, such as witchcraft-induced curses or ancestral blessings. The use of talismans or amulets is also widespread as protection against evil forces or sources of spiritual energy or power; and divination, the interpretation of astrological signs and cosmic omens, is also common often through the use of a human intermediary in the form of a local priest or priestess. And, even though more formal and conventional "modern" religions are also common, like Christianity or Islam, there is a nearly universal tendency to integrate traditional indigenous beliefs with these world religions even among very highly educated, urbanized persons and even when beliefs and practices appear to conflict with the given conventional faith. What this means for us is even when a particular course of action or decision appears absolutely rational, it may not be chosen by our African allies because of religious or spiritual reasons beyond our comprehension.

### **Views on Time**

In most parts of sub-Saharan Africa, time, as an organizational scheduling tool, is treated much differently than in American or even European culture. Most meetings, though clearly scheduled to begin at a certain time, will start at least 30 minutes late; and if you are senior to others attending this meeting, it may be acceptable to display your status by showing up as much as an hour or so after the scheduled starting time. Time, as a resource, is also treated differently. Many cultures believe that time is one of their few abundant resources; and as such, it is more prudent to proceed very carefully and slowly so as not to waste other resources. Time horizons also are commonly different. A bit of an oxymoron, but here's what I mean: most Africans will not do specific planning beyond the short-term because they believe there are simply too many risks and variables that will overcome this planning.

### **Values of Consensus and Collectivism**

While media attention on African coups d'état and authoritarian national leaders seems to emphasize opposing cultural norms, behind the scenes at the national level and, in particular, at the local level, there is a lot of discussion and bargaining going on aimed at fulfilling the needs of not just strong or powerful national leaders but also the needs of the extended families, ethnic groups, and even hometowns or home sub-regions where those individuals maintain important, lasting cultural ties. These demands may require excessive corruption to be fulfilled; and while theft from the state treasury may not be considered particularly good, a much greater crime would be to fail to use one's position or status to provide for one's family and community. Similarly, the failure to consider all the appropriate voices within one's family or community, to include family and village elders, religious leaders, etc., to make a key decision, may also be a cardinal sin. The significance of this for security cooperation planners is it may take a long time to reach decisions on seemingly trivial issues and may be very difficult to achieve decisions aimed at achieving a greater good for the partner nation over the parochial needs of families or home villages.

5. "The World Factbook," U.S. Central Intelligence Agency website, 21 August 2008

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I could go on and on about differences in broad values, cultural elements, and the like; but since this is an article versus a book, and designed for operators versus academia, let me just throw out a few quick practical tips regarding customs or norms that are generally valid and useful throughout Africa:

- Get some business cards and freely hand these out. Business cards are exchanged much more often in Africa than in the U.S. and ascribe status to the individual giving them as well as the person receiving them.
- When in a group setting, greet as many people as possible, particularly at the beginning and end of an event. This is simply good manners.
- Don't be afraid of people standing very close to you or people of the same sex attempting to hold hands with you. Standing close during conversations is the norm; holding hands is often a sign of acceptance and friendship (not romance).
- Eat the local food and drink the local beverage. It may make you sick but probably won't kill you. But be wary of using your left hand to grab things, especially when eating from a shared or communal pot or serving tray. Seriously, if you want to avoid health problems while showing cultural sensitivity, if possible, stick to bottled beers or soft drinks (the production process will kill most germs, and the sealed bottle normally protects these drinks); order your meat well done; and try to eat or drink in small, sample quantities until you get the local microbes into your digestive system.
- When in doubt, dress up and clean up. Even the poorest of government servants in Africa will strive to own a good, second-hand suit and will spend time each day shining shoes, pressing garments, and/or arranging their hair.
- Taboos to avoid: spitting in public, cursing, taking pictures of individuals without their permission, and excessive alcohol consumption at a public reception or party.

Naturally, there are differences from culture to culture on all of these elements and rules even among different sub-regions or ethnic groups within the same country. My final point of emphasis is that you should go out and get more specific, detailed information on your country to answer important questions such as: Should I chew gum in public?; Can I cross my legs or show the bottoms of my shoes while seated?; Should I make eye contact?; When do I give gifts and what should I give?; and, last but not least, What do certain gestures (thumbs up, palms down, lateral head nods, etc.) mean in this culture?

Regardless of where you go in Africa or with whom you work, don't be afraid to reach beyond your comfort zone or experience new ways of doing things. The pay-off may be lasting, happy memories for you and more importantly, lasting, positive relationships between Africa and the United States.

### **About the Author**

Lieutenant Colonel James Toomey is currently the Deputy Director of International Studies at the DISAM. He has worked as a Sub-Saharan African (48J) Foreign Area Officer (FAO) for the U.S. Army for 10 years with tours of duty at three U.S. embassies abroad including service as a Defense Attaché in Haiti and Liberia and an assignment as the Chief, Central Africa Branch at the U.S. European Command (EUCOM). He possesses four degrees related to international business/political affairs, including master's degrees from Columbus State University and the University of Florida, where he also obtained a certificate in African studies.