WHAT ABOUT CULTURE?
THE IMPORTANCE OF CULTURE IN THE STRATEGIC-POLITICAL AND THE TACTICAL-OPERATIONAL LEVELS IN BUNDESWEHR OPERATIONS ABROAD

Maren Tomforde

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In the past, the cultural dimension of operations abroad either went largely unnoticed or was examined with regard to specific topical aspects. The central issues of analyses were, for instance, intercultural training at domestic military bases, interaction with the local population in the theater, or the coincidence of quite diverse military cultures in multinational units.[1] Based on an evaluation of pertinent literature and my own field research,[2] this article seeks to take another look at the correlation between culture and operations abroad. Using the operation in Afghanistan as an example, it analyzes the claim that a profound reflection on the role of the local culture in the field is necessary and should be of central importance to individual soldiers and to commanders, and *should also be recognized* at the politico-strategic level at home. At the local level, the significance of culture has already been recognized, however, at the macrolevel local cultures have played a subordinate role so far. Without a mandate that takes into account these cultures and the particularities of the local population during the initial stages of planning and organization, the sustainability of any stabilization measures becomes seriously jeopardized. This has already been evidenced by a multitude of

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[1]   Cf. **Bil** 2003; **Berns; Wöhrle-Chon** 2004, 2006; **Haußer** 2006; **Soeters** *et al*. 2006; **Tomforde** 2008b.

[2]   My own statements on topical aspects concerning the subject of 'Intercultural competence and the Bundeswehr' are based on ethnographic field research conducted between the years 2003 and 2007 in the Bundeswehr theaters of the Balkans and Afghanistan, as well as at local bases in Germany; cf. **Tomforde** 2008a, 2009). I also subsequently conducted several interviews with career officers, the results of which are to some extent taken into account in this paper.

examples of cooperative development over the last few decades.[3] In the long run, conflict management, building and development can only be achieved when pursued *in harmony* with the people of an area, and not by working against them or ignoring their needs. If the local population is not taken into consideration from the very beginning and considered an equal partner at the strategic-political level, then it doesn't matter how interculturally competent the individual deployed soldier may otherwise be – he[4] will most likely be perceived as a member of an occupying force, or something along those lines, due to the underlying circumstances of the military operation. This negative perception clearly jeopardizes the soldiers' safety (as well as the safety of the civilian personnel of international organizations working in the field), as can be currently observed in Afghanistan. The question arises then as to whether politicians and the military leadership are basically willing to engage with the local cultures in Afghanistan, to integrate them into their plans, and whether they will have – figuratively speaking – the openness, the patience, and the time for "three cups of tea[5]" in the course of their commitment to Afghanistan. Here, we are assuming that German politicians really want to pursue post conflict measures and peacekeeping operations within the scope of International Security Assistance Force for Afghanistan (ISAF) and are genuinely interested in the stabilization and reconstruction of the country, above and beyond the various national interests.[6] If this is the case, then in the long run, the Federal Government and the military leadership will have no other choice than to take the Afghan cultures and local circumstances into account in their concepts.

At a symposium on "Culture in Conflict" at the Military command and Staff College in Shrivenham (United Kingdom) in June 2008, Major General James Shaw of the UK Armed Forces summed up his deployment term in Iraq as follows: "To operate without cultural understanding is to operate blind and deaf."[7] This quote suggests two things: first, that culture plays a central role for operations in culturally unfamiliar regions and that this necessity has

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[3]   See **Bliss, Merten, Schmidt** 2007.

[4]   For the purpose of simplification, the generic masculine is used in this text; however, it equally refers to women. Currently eight per cent of the deployed personnel of the Bundeswehr are women; cf. **Kümmel** 2008.

[5]   In Afghanistan (as well as in Pakistan, India and other Asian countries), it is a common tradition to establish trust and confidence, good relations and co-operation through seemingly endless tea sessions. Cf. **Mortenso, Relin** 2007, p. 150.

[6]   See **Rühle** 2009, p. 4.

[7]   **DCDC** 2009, p. 1.

also now been acknowledged by the highest military leadership echelon, too. Second, that operational aims cannot be achieved with purely technical military means alone, neither at the tactical-operational, nor at the strategic level.

Up to now, at the strategic-political level, culture has attracted attention only to the extent deemed necessary for the success of international missions under the umbrella of the United Nations (UN), the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) or the European Union (EU),[8] due to the fact that it has become clear that the actions of individuals may also be strategically relevant and may contribute to deciding the success or failure of an entire operation.[9] This was illustrated, for instance, by an incident in Iraq, when armed British soldiers assaulted a mosque in pursuit of insurgents. The action was unsuccessful, but relations with the local population were severely affected and the reputation of the British troops was ruined for some time.[10] Events at the microlevel (see also, for instance, the 'skull pictures' taken by German soldiers) may directly influence the macrolevel, especially in the cultural domain. If soldiers in the field show a lack of cultural sensitivity, this may jeopardize an entire operation as well as the safety of the troops: "Culture is important to peacekeeping at the lower levels of organization where individuals and corporate elements of the mission interact with local populations. At the same time, culture is important at the higher levels of the interaction among organizations that play a role in the mission."[11]

While more and more intercultural competence is required from the individual deployed soldier, the strategic-political macrolevel, which defines the level of ambition and the contents of the mandate, and determines the way in which a mission is accomplished, has largely done without the 'cultural view' at both the international and the German level.[12] Missions have generally been planned by strategists and technocrats, and as a result information about local practices and political systems play only a subordinate role, if any at all.[13]

There have been several scientific studies proving the central importance that regard for cultural circumstances may have on the success of operations.[14]

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[8]   See, for instance, **Ben-Ari, Elron** 2001, p. 276.

[9]   Cf. **Rubinstein** 2008, p. 102; **Liddy** 2005, p. 140.

[10]   **DCDC** 2009, p. 1–3.

[11]   **Rubinstein** 2008, p. 39.

[12]   Cf. **Hohe** 2002a, 2002b.

[13]   Cf. **Myint-U, Sellwood** 2000, pp. 33.

[14]   **Heiberg** 1990.

Since the failure in Somalia, as well as due to the operations in Kosovo and in East Timor, which were also characterized by a lack of understanding of local structures and their cultural contextualization, interest in the subject 'Operations Abroad and Culture' has gradually been on the increase. Substantive works have emerged in this topic, which urgently call for the inclusion of local structures and cultures into international interventions and missions rather than ignoring them during the course of democratization and nation-building processes that follow Western models.[15] Because of this ignorance, Amitav Gosh[16] referred to peacekeeping operations that follow Western models as a "neo-imperialist canard" as early as 1994 after a profound appraisal of the UN mission in Cambodia, thereby challenging the element of inherent cultural imperialism in the UN concept at a very early stage.

This paper is structured as follows: based on a review of the operation in Somalia, it is evident that there has been a lack of attention towards culture in UN operations so far, and it will be further explained why this desideratum, to some extent also results in the perception of these operations as being 'neo-Imperialist' endeavors. In the second step, we will also take a look at the ISAF operation in Afghanistan, which is ending soon, and determine whether and to what extent there has been a change of paradigms, keeping in mind the greater design of integrating the Afghan population (and, accordingly, culture) into the stabilization and build-up measures. Then, using the "culture" pocket cards as an example, we will explore the problems of ensuring that *all* deployed soldiers get a quick and concise insight into the cultures of the theater. Finally, the fourth chapter deals with the direct contact between Bundeswehr soldiers and the local population in Afghanistan and illustrates the complex challenges of these intercultural encounters. It is evident that military personnel are in an 'intercultural dilemma, or hybrid situation' since this is the very kind of intercultural competence they need in the field for their own safety, which is hardly taken into consideration, let alone promoted, at the politico-strategic level. However, intercultural competence 'with reservations' cannot work and in the long run will result in problems arising when dealing with the Afghan population.

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[15] **Lanik** (in print); **Rubinstein** 2008; **Kammhuber** 2007; **Hohe** 2003, 2002a, 2002b; **Duffey** 2000; **Chopra** 2000.

[16] **Gosh** 1994.

1. Flashback: The Failed Operation in Somalia and the (Lack of) Reflection on Culture in UN Operations

In the past, the role of culture has often been examined retrospectively in connection with operations, merely in order to figure out why a mission failed (entirely or partially).[17] Operations abroad bring together many diverse groups: military personnel from a vast variety of countries, representatives of other international organizations (IOs), representatives of non-governmental organizations, and – last but not least – the population in the country of deployment. All of them are variously informed by their personal experiences and qualities, as well as, most importantly by their national and/or regional, or even local and institutional cultures. With such an array of cultural diversity, conflicts and tensions easily arise, which must be recognized and addressed right away during the planning and execution stages and not just after the fact.[18] This applies in particular to the UN as well as to NATO and the EU, which make a point of bringing together players from the most diverse organizations and nations in the course of their civil-military missions in order to promote stability and peace in the conflict region by using the symbolic power of the multiculturalism as one of their tools.

The precursor of these current missions, the multinational 'classical peacekeeping operations,' where the "blue helmets" were only allowed to use weapons for self-defense purposes, has become an important touchstone – and presumably the most important symbol of the United Nations (UN). The UN represents a normative-moral, global force, which is effective only insofar as it involves as many nations as possible.[19] However, the image of the United Nations as a peacemaking, multicultural world organization was seriously damaged by the UNOSOM operation in Somalia in the early 1990s. In particular after a sixteen-year old boy was tortured to death by Canadian peacekeepers in March of 1993,[20] the failure of the mission was partially attributed to latent racism on the part of the peacekeeping forces, which ultimately resulted in the inhumane treatment of the Somalis. "The most shocking turn of the day for those in the West came in the form of reports and videos of jubilant Somalis dragging American corpses through the streets. These images were perhaps especially shocking for those in the

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17   Cf. **Hohe** 2002a, **Duffey** 2002.

18   Cf. **Rubinstein** 2003.

19   **Rubinstein** 2008, p. 3.

20   **Bercuson** 1996.

West, because they could not understand how Somalis could act so violently against people who were 'only trying to help them'."[21]

It is evident that during the Somalia operation – just as in other operations abroad – the image that the deployment forces have of themselves, in some cases, may differ considerably from how they are perceived by the local population.[22] Whereas soldiers and representatives of civilian organizations define themselves as "helpers"[23] and an important stabilizing force, they may rather be perceived by large sections of the local population as occupants and imperialist intruders.[24] These missions are often perceived as continuations of old, hated (colonial, imperialist) political patterns: "there is a deep sentiment that the UN and INGOs [international nongovernmental organizations] form a secondary occupying force," as the ethnologist Robert Rubinstein notes.[25] David Last[26] also sees that the boundary between imperial colonial policy and peace policy can become quickly blurred by international organizations, and that the latter may quite often contain beginnings of the former.

The potential gap between self-image and perception by others should not only be familiar to the forces in the field but should also be recognized during the initial planning stage of operations. By taking cultural aspects into account at the strategic-political *and* at the tactical-operational levels, as well as by making the civilian population an equal partner to the greatest extent possible, the 'potential for tensions arising from cultural issues' can be minimized as much as possible.[27]

2. Change of Paradigm in Afghanistan?

While the aspect of culture was largely ignored in the missions abroad of the 1990s, and was 'merely' the pretext for some scientific analyses, the situation in the first decade of this century is somewhat improved. The interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan have illustrated once more that stability and peace cannot be made sustainable without taking into account the cultures

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[21] **Rubinstein** 2008, p. 7.

[22] Cf. **Thomas, Kammhuber, Layes** 1997.

[23] Cf. **Tomforde** 2005.

[24] Cf. **Zürcher, Koehler** 2007.

[25] **Rubinstein** 2008, p. 135.

[26] **Last** 2006, pp. 63.

[27] **Weiss** 1999; **Slim** 1996, for experience from development cooperation see **Bliss, Merten, Schmidt** 2007.

encountered in the theater. In his speech at the Munich Security Conference on 8 February 2009, General David Petraeus, the US commander in charge of the Middle East, pointed out that: "This requires listening …. and it also requires cups of tea."[28] He was alluding to the wide-spread tradition in Afghanistan of establishing trust and relations through tea-drinking sessions, putting deliberate emphasis on a cultural particularity of the country. Moreover, he also emphasized: "First and foremost, our forces have to strive to secure and *serve* the population; serving and securing the people requires that our forces be good neighbors." The quote, however, contains an inherent contradiction, since 'serving' describes a power relationship and a neighborhood is based on the principle of equality. The question arises whether Afghans really consider foreign troops to be equal 'neighbors' and whether they also feel that they are treated as equal partners by the military. What is interesting about Petraeus' approach, despite the contradiction, is the fact that the Afghan population is to be involved more extensively in the stabilization of the country. It is at last to be treated as an equal partner[29], which is just what President Hamid Karsai called for, and what was necessary too, in light of the increasing number of civilian victims at that time.[30] Petraeus' concept of service requires the soldiers to subordinate themselves to the local population or rather to their needs and to make these their priority. In order to be able to fulfil this premise, the military forces deployed in Afghanistan needed be aware of the local cultures. Moreover, the entire ISAF operation was structured in such a way as to ensure that the will and the needs of the Afghan 'neighbor' were taken into account. Instead, the boundaries between anti-terror operations under the mandate of operation "Enduring Freedom (OEF)" and the ISAF became more and more blurred. Consequently, the foreign soldiers were not perceived as 'serving neighbors' but rather as a reckless occupying force, whose personnel strength was actually being massively reinforced.[31] "This resulted in the readiness to use violence and a breeding ground for armed groups."[32]

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[28]   Quoted in **Süddeutsche Zeitung** 2009, p. 6.

[29]   Cf. **Lanik** (in print), p. 133.

[30]   Quoted in **Süddeutsche Zeitung** 2009, p. 6.

[31]   In mid-2008, 65,000 foreign soldiers were serving in Afghanistan – four times as many as in 2004. And yet the force strength was still below the level that was considered necessary for military purposes. US President Barack Obama is seeking to massively increase the forces at the Hindukush. Cf. **Rühle** 2009, p. 3; **Hippler** 2008.

[32]   **Lieser, Runge** 2009, p. 34.

Despite (or even due to?) increasing troop strengths, the security situation for the civil population began deteriorating rapidly,[33] to such an extent that a fundamental change of paradigm [34] was required in Afghanistan, as was indirectly alluded to at the NATO summit in Bucharest in April 2008.[35] It was becoming evident that Afghanistan would not become a central state in the classical European sense in the foreseeable future. What was, and still is, required instead is patience and time, as well as the true involvement of the Afghan population, a consideration of cultural particularities and a dialog with neighboring states to ensure *sustainable* stability and security in the country. In the light of the imminent failure [36] of the ISAF operation, the focus is shifting more and more to geopolitical realities and local circumstances. The "act of Western arrogance"[37] in pursuing a "nation-building" project in Afghanistan following a Western model without taking Afghan tribal traditions and loyalty structures or the complex historical background of Afghanistan and its neighbors into account is being questioned to an increasing extent.

3. What is the Value of Pocket Cards on Culture?

The difficulties that are still inherent to Afghanistan (and Iraq) have also been attributed, to a considerable extent, to a lack of cultural knowledge. In order to prevent another failure like Somalia, Western armed forces are working more and more on concepts to increase intercultural competence among soldiers and to better integrate local cultural potential into stabilization

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[33]   According to **ACBAR** 2008, the umbrella organization of the relief organizations operating actively in Afghanistan, 1,000 civilians died as a result of combat action in the first seven months of 2008 alone.

[34]   Cf. **Münkler** 2009, p. 11.

[35]   The "Strategic Vision", is a treatise comprised of four core elements: 1. a long-term commitment in Afghanistan, 2. the increasing assumption of responsibility by the Afghans themselves, 3. the comprehensive civil-military approach, and 4. the stronger involvement of Afghanistan's neighbors. It was presented at the NATO summit, and is the first attempt to create a holistic NATO concept for the country. See **ISAF's Strategic Vision,** 3.4.2008, http://www.nato.int/docu/pr/2008/p08-052e.html.

[36]   Michael Rühle notes that the "international community has the authority of definition of the success or failure of its commitment" and that it always has the option "to declare the Afghanistan project a success and to justify a withdrawal referring to the urgently required Afghanization of the further development." **Rühle** 2009, p. 5. See also **Lanik (**in print), p. 131.

[37]   **Rühle** 2009, p. 2.

measures.[38] Already since 2006, there have been debates about which concept of culture the armed forces should utilize, as well as how to best familiarize soldiers with an open, broad-based cultural concept, which does not define culture as a static, clearly confinable 'matter' that can be collected by means of a questionnaire.[39] It is, however, part of military culture and logic to call for clear delineations and instructions, especially in foreign and potentially dangerous environs; hence, ethnological references to intracultural differences, ethnic diversity and the adaptability of local cultures often meet with a lack of understanding.[40] Soldiers rather tend to ask for curricular contents that can be quickly grasped, such as in the form of information pocket cards. The "Iraq Culture Smart Card" of the United States Marine Corps[41] is a good example of a "pocket card on culture," which is designed to provide the soldier with the essentials of Iraqi culture and a basic Arab vocabulary, all in the space of two A4 pages.[42] Such pocket cards are highly controversial among scientists, and time and time again have been the catalyst for heated debates at expert conferences. On the one side, there are those who advocate

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[38]   In the United States, in particular, all the service branches have been urgently searching, since 2006, for ethnologists who would not only conduct intercultural competence training at Air Force, Navy and Army schools but also provide soldiers with a general understanding of culture.

[39]   In March 2009, the British 'Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre (*DCDC*)' published a new doctrine (JDN 1/09) entitled "The Significance of Culture to the Military." The goals of the doctrine are as follows: 1. To ensure coherence with regard to intercultural competence concepts, political guidelines and training measures, 2. to provide military personnel with an understanding of the significance of culture, and 3. to provide guidance for the operational level (p. V). Cf. also the text of the U.S. Strategic Studies Institute on the subject "On the Uses of Cultural Knowledge" by **Jager** 2007. While in the new Joint Service Regulation ZDv 10/1 of the Bundeswehr governing "Leadership Development and Civic Education" or "Innere Führung" intercultural competence is referred to, this is done only in two small sections, see **BMVg** 2008. There is no directive on intercultural competence that would be comparable with the British doctrine.

[40]   Cf. **Lanik** (in print), p. 135.

[41]   Can be downloaded at:
<http//:www.fas.org/blog/secrecy/2006/07/a_new_iraq_culture_smart_card.html>.

[42]   So far the Bundeswehr has not published any pocket cards. There are only the "Ten Golden Rules for Soldiers Deployed Abroad," which contain general cultural behavioral guidance and can be consulted on the Bundeswehr Intranet (source: **Intranet Bw**, **Dienstvorschriften-Online**, <http//:dv-online.bundeswehr.org/heeresamt/antra_ausbildungshilfsmittel/pdf/0001_96000_01_ausbhilfe_auftreten_und_verhalten_do_donts.pdf>, slides 9–12). The Military History Research Institute publishes continuously updated "history guides" to the individual countries of deployment; for Afghanistan see **Chiari** 2009, which in addition to historical data also include information about local structures and lifeworlds. Superiors can obtain these instructive books free of charge for all members of their unit.

for such concise information. They hold the view that it would be better to hand out such a pocket card to soldiers for a mission in order to provide *all* of them with a certain basic knowledge on which the specialists can base additional training. On the other side there are critics, who consider the static, stereotypical cultural concept, on which the pocket cards are based, to be highly questionable. They rather define culture as an internalized, dynamic, sociomorphous orientation system, which influences but does not determine our existence, our thinking, believing, feeling, interaction and action.[43] This open cultural concept, which is also the basis of this paper, can also be used to explain considerable *intra*cultural differences.[44] Critics of the concise form of cultural information conveyance even consider the two pages of cultural and language instruction to be dangerous, maintaining that they provide (false) confidence of action – as the pocket cards are based on an essentialist cultural concept, which may result in simplifications and ignorance vis-à-vis inter- and intracultural diversity. In this respect, Robert Rubinstein[45] notes: "These are stereotyped instructions that focus on the surface elements of culture, most often on those surface aspects that are different or exotic from the perspective of the person giving the instruction."

The "Iraq Culture Smart Card," for instance, contains stereotypical instructions on culturally acceptable and unacceptable behavior (the "dos and don'ts"). However, interpretations of the common gestures that are shown on the pocket card can differ considerably in the various regions of Iraq. For example, in one region of Iraq, the extended right hand with the fingers pointing upwards and touching each other may mean that one should be patient or drive more slowly, whereas in a different region it may be a major insult and a disparaging sign that should be avoided at all costs.[46]

In the future it will also be necessary to discuss whether all deployed soldiers should be provided with a grasp of such a broad concept of culture in general, and with differentiated views of local cultures in particular or whether learning to deal with culture is a long-term endeavor which the

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[43] Cf. **Ingold** 2002, p. XX; **Bourdieu** 1990; **d'Andrade** 1984, p. 116.

[44] Cf. **Barth** 2002.

[45] **Rubinstein** 2008, p. 12.

[46] Ethnologists of the international "Mil_Ant_Net-Yahoo group" referred to this fact in 2008 in the course of lively discussions about cultural diversity in Iraq. The Yahoo group on the subject area of "Military and Ethnology" was founded in 2005 by the Canadian military sociologist Brian Selmeski and has more than 500 members now – with an upward tendency (personal conversation with Selmeski in June 2008).

military must pursue at several levels.[47] Moreover, the question arises as to whether better access to the local culture can be achieved at all, especially in cases of more robust operations that also involve combat action.[48] Because of the negative experience the US military has had in the last few years in Afghanistan (and in Iraq) – on the cultural front as well –, General Petraeus established the "Human Terrain System" (HTS) in 2006. It utilizes uniformed social and cultural scientists, many of whom are ethnologists, to accompany and advise the forces as 'embedded scientists' during their visits to villages. The concept is highly controversial, not only among ethnologists but also among other social scientists.[49] Due to serious ethical concerns, the "Network of Concerned Anthropologists" (NCA) was founded in the United States. The network has tasked itself with informing ethnologists about the HTS in the areas of operations of Iraq and Afghanistan occupied by US forces and establishing a counterweight to the new policy of the Pentagon.[50] As far as dealing with local cultures in Afghanistan is concerned, the Bundeswehr is currently opting for the 'middle ground' between an essentialist pocket card on culture and the elaborate "Human Terrain Teams," as the following section will show.

4. Local Problems: "You've got the clock, we've got the time"

"You have to know the local area well to be able to help." This was the slogan of a Caritas International advertisement poster displayed in German train stations and other locations in the winter of 2008/2009, showing a large-sized bird's-eye view of a labyrinth of clay roofs reminiscent of the city of Sana'a in Yemen. As directives and training phases at the individual military colleges prove, the focus is shifting more and more to knowing the local area well – not only in geographical but also in cultural terms.[51] In the field, Bundeswehr soldiers, too, continue to be faced with the question of how to apply what they have learned in theory and toward culturally significant interactions with the civilian population. Dealing with the unfamiliar remains a challenge – all the more so if it is not clear who is friend and who is foe and

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[47] Cf. **Tomforde** 2008b.

[48] Cf. **Hajjar** 2006; **Varhola, Varhola** 2006.

[49] See **González** 2008, **Rohde** 2007.

[50] See **Gusterson** 2008, <http://www.concerned.anthropologists.googlepages.com/home>.

[51] See, for instance, **DCDC** 2009; **Jager** 2007*;* **BCG** 2007; **Kammhuber** 2007.

what the threat level is.[52] Soldiers often do not have the time for three cups of tea during their mission. They come into a village, speak with the locals and at the same time must ensure the safety of their comrades (drivers etc.). In addition, deployed soldiers must continue to maintain a culturally open outlook despite being faced with economic and technological development differences, the low value of human life and the partially criminal and corrupt structures of a society deeply affected by decades of war. What makes things even more difficult are unfamiliar conversation patterns (indirect, paraphrasing, informal), which Germans with their direct, straightforward, but at the same time formal communication forms often find difficult to comprehend when in contact with the local population. The following section will analyze which intercultural challenges Bundeswehr soldiers are faced with during their deployment to Afghanistan and which strategies they develop to cope with them.

4.1. The Continuum: Between Rejection and Absolute Adaptation

There are many ways that a person may deal with a culture in a country of deployment. These may range from extreme rejection and stereotyping of Afghan culture to extraordinary adaptation and renunciation of one's own cultural identity and ways of life. Of the multinationally oriented peace missions, Bundeswehr soldiers are the ones considered the most capable of winning the 'minds and hearts' of the local people.[53] Nevertheless, some of them do not understand why intercultural competence is necessary at all and, why they are expected to make 'advance concessions' to the Afghan population. According to their understanding, they are sacrificing their (life) time and energy to a country characterized by war, corruption and medieval traditions. They do not understand why, in addition to the assistance they provide, they should show cultural sensitivity if the opposite side tends to ignore them and their values. For other soldiers, intercultural competence means, as an interviewed major underscored, "signalizing to the counterpart that you respect him, even if this is not the case." To other soldiers, intercultural competence means the ability to integrate as much as possible into a new environment for the sake of one's own safety. Some military personnel even undergo a process of adaptation: these men grow full beards and learn Pashtu or Dari. They prefer spending time sitting in a hut or on the desert

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[52] Cf. **Tomforde** 2008b, p. 146.

[53] Cf. **Zürcher, Koehler** 2007.

sand palavering with Afghan dignitaries to being far away from 'operation reality,' at a desk for instance, in an air-conditioned HQ building in the camp in Mazar-e-Sharif. They adapt so well to the Afghan way of life that more often than not they initially find it difficult to return to 'organized life' at home in Germany and may even experience a 'returnee's cultural shock.'

The fact that Bundeswehr soldiers are held in high regard among the local population despite the wide range of attitudes adopted towards intercultural competence (IC) is due not only to the relevant pre-mission training, which definitely could be optimized and extended in many respects.[54] There are at least three other factors that account for this. First of all, the soldiers' 'sensitive' behavior can be explained by their fear "of doing something wrong in the field and, consequently, facing problems in Germany," as one colonel underscored in an interview. Secondly, the burden of 'historical guilt,' which still continues to shape the action of many soldiers abroad, contributes to making them want to appear, as "helpers"[55] rather than as an occupying force. Thirdly, maintaining helpful, constructive contact with the local population enables soldiers to make sense of their mission in the field despite the deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan.[56]

Thus, it can be noted that military personnel are worried about missteps that might have legal consequences. The following aspects also determined their behavior: (unconscious) 'historical guilt,' the search for a sense of meaning in the mission, and a political-military approach that puts the emphasis on stabilization and reconstruction. Together with IC training, this combination of individual factors contributes to the culturally sensitive behavior of many soldiers.[57] To some extent, however, the Bundeswehr soldiers display a 'hypersensitivity vis-à-vis the unfamiliar' that may also be detrimental to the development of a good intercultural understanding. An example of this is the fact that the place of worship built in Camp Feyzabad was not initially called

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[54] Basic Training (BT), as well as Conflict Prevention and Crisis Management Training (CPCM training) comprise the core of IC teaching, and in some cases does not go beyond a two-hour presentation which often runs late in the evening. Cf. **BGS** 2007.

[55] **Tomforde** 2005, pp. 580.

[56] The aspect of assistance was already at the forefront during the Bundeswehr mission in Somalia. This was the first deployment of German soldiers outside Germany since 1945, and was characterized by mishaps and failures in both the military and political spheres. In order to still give the mission a purpose, the Bundeswehr soldiers acted as development aid workers and helped to build streets, bridges and schools and thus stepped into a role that has been quite acceptable to the German population. Cf. **Kühne** 2007 and the papers of **Mohrmann** and **Biehl, Keller** in this volume.

[57] Cf. **Tomforde** 2008b, pp. 145.

a church, but a "House of Silence." The Bundeswehr personnel in charge of naming the house worried that building a church in a predonminantly Islamic environment might entail problems. However, it is the very fact of not having a faith that is met with incomprehension among Muslims, and not an openly, and clearly declared belief in a different religion. In the meantime, the "House of Silence" is now called a "church" and has been dedicated to the Patron-Saint Michael (conqueror of the devil and evil).[58]

It is evident that the Bundeswehr and its soldiers in the field not only need intensive intercultural counselling but that the mission also raises many fundamental questions that a soldier may ask himself, such as: how open do I have to be towards the unfamiliar? Do I really need to initiate contact with the Afghanis and develop intercultural competence, even though I am constantly shot at and cheated by local residents? How can I be involved with a foreign culture, if I have taken the oath as a Bundeswehr soldier to 'defend the law and the freedom of the German people'? What are we doing in such a culturally unfamiliar and complex country as Afghanistan, and what can we actually achieve there? Do we as Christians actually have a real chance to enter into a genuine dialogue with Muslims? These questions and many more are brought up time and time again by the interviewed soldiers.

What Bundeswehr soldiers also consider problematic is the fact that they are expected to further improve their intercultural competence, yet are unable to fully apply it in the same way as members of relief organizations, who are in constant contact with the local population. On patrols through vast areas, soldiers often lack the opportunity and time to establish trust and confidence and to identify the 'right' people and cultivate contact persons. To some extent, establishing trust and confidence even proves to be difficult when it comes to the selection of local residents employed in the camp as local wage rate employees or as linguists. It cannot always be clearly determined whether in an emergency an individual may be obliged for moral-social reasons to act against his/her employer, the 'Bundeswehr', in the interests of a network of relatives. It goes without saying that it contributes to a soldier's despair and demotivation if (once again) a local worker has to be dismissed because things have been stolen from the camp, a booby trap has been detonated, or sensitive information has been smuggled out. It is hard for the Bundeswehr personnel to come to terms with the fact that they are exploited and deceived in this way when the local wage rate employees are paid good wages, the

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[58] Cf. **Boczek** 2008, p. 18.

employees receive assistance in many – including immaterial – respects,[59] and the Bundesweher seeks to make a contribution toward building up the country by their presence, even though this obviously is not appreciated by all local residents.

4.2. The Dilemma of Intercultural Competence

German soldiers take an oath "to defend the law and the freedom of the German people,"[60] and, as they understand it (and if politically desired), are compelled to do so in the Hindukush, or in Mali, too, if need be. This basic assumption initially makes it difficult for some soldiers to deal with the culture of the country they are deployed to. According to their reasoning, they do not go to Afghanistan to understand the local culture and to facilitate progress that is tailored to that culture, but rather they go to Afghanistan because they want to transport the Western-style democracy model and human rights to the country in order to enhance Germany's own security. At the same time, international operations are a symbol of a type of political space and social responsibility.[61] According to this ideological concept, local cultures play a subordinate role. Nevertheless, the hearts and minds of the people in the area must be won at least in order to ensure that good contact with the population is established and the security of the troops is ensured to the greatest extent possible through broad-based support. Accordingly, many soldiers face an intercultural dilemma: at the level of the highest military command, and at the political level, intercultural considerations are only taken into consideration when a fatal mishap has occurred (see below). And yet soldiers are expected to have a sufficient level of intercultural competence when dealing with the local population in order to avoid putting themselves or innocent people at risk. Any adaptation beyond that scope and any integration into Afghan culture, as can be observed among many representatives of civilian organizations in Afghanistan, is neither politically-militarily desirable nor possible. Marianne Heiberg writes on this dilemma: "Stated in a nutshell: a relationship to local civilians built on communication and confidence is a

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[59] See, for instance, the "Lachen helfen e.V.," association which emerged out of a private initiative, in which German soldiers and policemen independently organize humanitarian aid for children in war and crisis zones (http://www.lachen-helfen.de).

[60] Article 7 of the Legal Status of Military Personnel Act reads: "I swear to loyally serve the Federal Republic of Germany and to bravely defend the law and the freedom of the German people."

[61] **Rubinstein** 2008, p. 72.

necessary factor for success; a relationship characterized by mounting hostility, suspicion and lack of communication is a sufficient cause for failure."[62]

Even though they or their leaders do not actually like it, soldiers must have a certain basic knowledge of intercultural competence and an understanding of the culture of the country they are deployed to, otherwise they run the risk of ignoring cultural particularities, which as a result can seriously jeopardize their security. Basic cultural knowledge also prevents the emergence of prejudices and stereotypes: "From an ethnological perspective, an understanding of the significance of symbolic capital in Afghan society is more helpful in an everyday context than an interpretation of cultural symbols, for instance physiognomy or clothes, which results in misleading attributions."[63]

Moreover, it is necessary to know that in Afghanistan it takes a good deal of time and at least three cups of tea to establish trust and confidence. With our Western monochronous concept of time we hit a brick wall in societies such as Afghanistan's whenever we try to arrange appointments quickly and expect 'absolute punctuality.' In polychronous societies, time does not proceed in a linear fashion, but instead curves and arcs.[64] Planning remains flexible and is adjusted to the needs and circumstances of the moment; distractions and 'delays' are possible and are not perceived as disturbances, because there is an 'endless' amount of time available. Soldiers who are not familiar with this polychronous concept of time but consider time a valuable commodity, and who want to avoid any disturbances in (long-term) scheduling at all costs and are governed by their appointment book, may be frustrated and lack understanding when dealing with polychronous societies such as the Afghanistan's. Cultural ignorance may have a deleterious effect on the motivation and the basic attitude of the deployed soldiers. Robert Rubinstein remarked on this phenomenon in other conflict contexts: "In the Gaza and Wanwaylen incidents, peacekeepers' efforts were frustrated because they did not understand the local cultures and thus could not interpret correctly or respond properly to the actions of the people they were sent to assist. Without knowing local cultural patterns of behaviour and interpretation, peacekeepers too easily react in inappropriate ways, even when they mean well. These examples […] are but two of literally thousands of examples of intercultural misunderstandings that lead to conflict between peacekeepers and local populations."[65]

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[62] **Heiberg** 1990, p. 148.

[63] **Lanik** (in print), p. 137.

[64] See **Levine** 1999.

[65] **Rubinstein** 2008, p. 36.

The US forces had a similar experience when they took Baghdad in April 2003 and tore Saddam Hussein's statue from its socle in a 'spontaneous' action. In the course of this act, an officer covered the head of the statue with the flag of the United States – an act that later was considered to be one of the reasons why the Americans came to be perceived as an occupying army marching triumphantly in, and they were referred to as 'Yankee Murderers' by large groups of the population.[66]

So far the Bundeswehr in Afghanistan has not committed such grave intercultural missteps. The pictures of German soldiers posing with skulls, which went through the press in November 2006, did not cause any reactions in Afghanistan, since the bones were obviously Russian. One does not dare to imagine what would have happened if these skulls had actually been those of deceased Afghanis. When in November 2008 a German soldier shot and killed a woman and her two children at a checkpoint, the Bundeswehr was able to avert severe consequences by paying reparations in the amount of 20,000 US dollars to the bereaved family. This was done to prevent the recourse to blood vengeance. However, the Bundeswehr failed to offer an apology to the relatives and so the incident nevertheless resulted in negative perception of the Bundeswehr among the population. In the field, the Bundeswehr commanders are advised by Cultural Advisers (CULADs) and instructed on cultural particularities, which is precisely the kind of support many deployed soldiers interacting with the local population every day would also find beneficial. For this reason, the local linguists, who accompany the military personnel outside the camp, are also often used in an informal way as cultural mediators. Even if many soldiers are not fully convinced that intercultural competence is now a "key qualification"[67] for operational soldiers, many of them have now realized that culturally insensitive behavior may have serious consequences both in Afghanistan and in Germany. The question arises as to whether 'respect' can be 'simulated,' as the aforementioned major suggested, or whether a real change of strategy at all levels is actually required – a change of strategy that already takes Afghani structures and cultural particularities into account at the politico-strategic level and really integrates the local population as equal 'neighbors' into planning and implementing the reconstruction and stabilization efforts. Such a change of paradigm would also terminate the 'intercultural hybrid situation' of the soldiers in the field. It would replace the signals from the political-strategic

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[66] Cf. **Sengupta** 2003.

[67] Cf. **Haußer** 2006, p. 441, **Berns, Wöhrle-Chon** (2004), p. 323, **Bil** 2003, p. 58.

side to the effect that they only need IC only for their own safety with the messages that only serious respect and taking local cultural circumstance into account can ensure the sustainability of the stabilization measures. It is necessary to incorporate culture as a dynamic significance/orientation system into the planning and implementation of future operations and to achieve continuity between the politico-strategic level and the microlevel of the individual deployed soldier: "This means that in thinking about peacekeeping, culture is not a peripheral subject; it should be a core policy consideration."[68] The future will show whether the politicians, the military leadership and deployed soldiers are really prepared for this change of paradigm and the 'three cups of tea.'

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68   **Rubinstein** 2008, p. 42.

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