

## Cultural intelligence and conflict ethnography: The importance of the anthropological knowledge for military advisors in fighting international violent extremist groups

### *Inteligencia cultural y etnografía del conflicto: La importancia del conocimiento antropológico para los asesores militares en la lucha contra los grupos extremistas violentos internacionales*

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#### Abstract

The aim of this paper is twofold. That is, to present the Cultural Intelligence. A new method of anthropological analysis on the battlefield to support military intelligence in order to study subversive, terrorist and insurgent groups. Moreover, it is to define a new professional figure in military units and staffs: the ethnographer of war. A professional who, necessarily, must have a great military background and who must know how to apply the typical methodology of the ethnographic gathering to the analysis of unconventional military organizations that work to destabilize a state. A research that, therefore, has the ambition to give a small contribution to the technicians of the sector with the awareness that, in order to face the wars of the future, there will be an increasing need for an anthropological perspective.

**Keywords:** anthropology of war, negotiation strategies, war analysis, security studies, terrorism.

#### Resumen

*El objetivo del presente trabajo es doble. Por un lado, presenta la Inteligencia Cultural, un nuevo método de análisis antropológico en el campo de batalla para apoyar a la inteligencia militar en el estudio de los grupos subversivos, terroristas e insurgentes. Por otro, define una nueva figura profesional en las unidades y estados mayores militares: el etnógrafo de guerra. Un profesional que, necesariamente, debe tener un gran bagaje militar así como saber aplicar la metodología típica de la recolección etnográfica al análisis de organizaciones militares no convencionales que trabajan para desestabilizar un Estado. Se pretende que este trabajo pueda ser de ayuda a los técnicos del sector puesto que, para afrontar las guerras del futuro, será cada vez más necesaria una perspectiva antropológica.*

**Palabras clave:** antropología de la guerra, estrategias de negociación, análisis de la guerra, estudios de seguridad, terrorismo.

#### Summary

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## 1. What Cultural Intelligence is when applied to Armed Conflicts<sup>1</sup>

Cultural Intelligence applied to armed conflicts should not be confused with Cultural Intelligence as it was conceived by Soon Ang and Linn Van Dyne (Ang and Van Dyne, 2008) for the commercial world and known by its acronym CQ (Cultural Quotient).

Cultural Intelligence (CI) is pure Ethnology of Action. That is, a scientific discipline which, starting from what has already been achieved in the military field, develops an "applied ethnology" in war zones. With the term "Conflict Ethnography", however, I will indicate the ethnographic gathering necessary for the CI. Nevertheless, before giving precise definitions of the mentioned terms, I want to highlight the purpose of this theoretical construct. The intention is twofold: to outline a new discipline in support of military operations, Cultural Intelligence, and a new professional profile in the Armed Forces: The Ethnographer of War.

Furthermore, the military Cultural Intelligence aims to contribute to the etiological study of a conflict. Ethnography, therefore, does not merely serve to know the enemy, since traditional intelligence already exists for that. Instead, it serves to understand everything else. To understand what military intelligence is no longer able to study: the human terrain.

Just as Polemology studies war and the social phenomena related to it from a sociological point of view, so Cultural Intelligence does from an anthropological point of view. However, while Polemology was born as an academic need, Cultural Intelligence was born to address the knowledge gaps of cultural nature of the military staff<sup>2</sup>.

Staff that, nonetheless, will then have to put into practice this knowledge acquired, specifically during the planning and conduct phases of military operations.

Research in Cultural Intelligence, therefore, is multifocal. Its field of study is never a small and determined geographical space, but employs the specific analysis carried out by the ethnographers of war on certain geographic areas, to reconstruct an overview. Just as geopolitical scholars study the karstic and surface movements that determine the relationships between states and their areas of influence, so the Cultural Intelligence analysts must take into consideration a broad spectrum of contexts from which to obtain the information necessary for the analysis of a group<sup>3</sup>.

For example, in the case of Al Shabaab, the social networks, places of the Somali diaspora in the West, universities where Somali culture is studied, civil organizations abroad and locally, etc. All expressions of those research fields where the Ethnographer of War will be sent to support the analysis of the CI.

Cultural Intelligence therefore has a hermeneutic task. A task that is particularly urgent today where conflicts are increasingly cultural struggles or where, in any case, underestimating the cultural dimension leads to a lack of understanding of the overall causes of the conflict itself. This type of reflection, therefore, could not fail to start from anthropology.

As a matter of fact, anthropology is, in general terms, the gaze of man turned to the other. A gaze into which the other's relationship with war can legitimately be inserted. Describing how this other "is in the world" of war, as it was before and as it will be later is, in fact, an anthropological research. Understanding the customs and meanings of how the other lives the "being in the world" of war, also through a comparative method that goes beyond its limits, allows us to investigate in an interpretative way who is, from a cultural point of view, the enemy too.

Consequently, it is essential to start from a "dense description" as imagined by Clifford Geertz (Geertz, 1979). A description that aims to discover and reconstruct the non-explicit meanings of the contexts within social events that can take place. Only in this way does otherness become measurable, understandable and interpretable.

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<sup>1</sup> For those interested in deepening the anthropological analysis of Cultural Intelligence, in 2021 was published, in Italian language, Federico Prizzi's book entitled *Cultural Intelligence ed Etnografia di Guerra – il ruolo dell'antropologia nello studio dell'Information Warfare di Al Shabaab*. A book dedicated to the application of Cultural Intelligence to the Information Warfare of the Somali jihadist group Al Shabaab.

<sup>2</sup> The term Cultural Intelligence, although it has never had a specific definition, has been circulating in the Pentagon circles since 2004, to which, however, other terms used as synonyms were often added.

<sup>3</sup> In the CI, therefore, the ability to analyze is fundamental after verifying the information collected by the Ethnographer of War. This means that the analyses can be descriptive, explanatory or predictive, as well as quantitative or qualitative. Anyway, the analyst's experience is always fundamental.

Cultural Intelligence, therefore, is pure Applied Anthropology. Since it refers to a specific anthropological methodology, with its own theories and techniques, for essentially practical purposes: to support armies in winning wars. Furthermore, Applied Anthropology, as also demonstrated by recent historical uses, has always been linked, implicitly or explicitly, to ideological and political criteria. This is indispensable from the very nature of anthropology. Although post-World War II anthropology tried, sometimes rightly, to move away from the "colonialist" logic that gave rise to the birth of this discipline, it never managed to detach itself from its deeply ideological character. In fact, anthropology may have an ethnocentric or exocentric, ethical or emic, colonialist or anti-colonial gaze, but it will always have a political gaze.

A look that goes beyond the simple description of the uses and customs of specific people. Because it will always want to frame specific people in a larger context, even if it is only limited to the relationship with those close to them.

If anthropology has, therefore, an intrinsically political nature and war is the continuation of politics by other means, as Carl von Clausewitz argued (von Clausewitz, 1832), then it is legitimate to conceive Conflict Ethnography as functional and legitimately derived from the anthropological approach. An approach that, as Ethnography teaches, is inseparable from the historical one as well as from the cognitive one.

The first one, based on what the famous Italian Historian of Religions Angelo Brelich pointed out. That the only engine of history is human creativity and that also wars are proof of this (Brelich, 1966). Furthermore, for Brelich, knowing the historical genesis of phenomena becomes fundamental in order to then understand the cultural component (Brelich, 1966). This, through an anthropological comparison focused on cultural diversity rather than on the identification of similarities. Indeed, are the historical reasons that determine the presence of certain cultural phenomena.

Regarding the cognitive aspect, through the understanding of the cultural metaphor hidden in the common language, as in the propaganda one, we are able to comprehend what kind of emotions are at stake and, consequently, what is that world vision to which the human terrain does not intend to give up. This, therefore, is the true emic approach to conflicts. This is what the ethnographer of war must seek on the ground: perceive events through the eyes of the population living in a context of war.

Cultural Intelligence, however, cannot limit itself only to this. The anthropological analysis grid is also useful for the study of the implementation modalities of the war from a cultural point of view. In fact, there is no single way to make war, be it conventional or unconventional. War, being a cultural product, is always susceptible to adaptations and different behaviours depending on the people who decide to fight it. This is not only a technical difference, it is also a psychological difference. For instance, one cannot really be surprised that political alliances and the alignments between opposing armies often change during the same conflict. War is not static, it is fluidity. Even the Second World War (the model par excellence of war for the number of deaths, the countries involved and the different types of armament used) saw a continuous mobility of coalitions, alliances and fronts.

It follows that the aspects of ethnopsychiatry, the discipline that studies the relationship between psychopathology and culture, become fundamental in Cultural Intelligence. In particular, with regards the anthropological studies on the complex phenomenon of terrorism. Furthermore, like Ethnoscience, at least as it was initially conceived by George P. Murdock (Murdock, 1981) and later by the Yale School, it has sought to understand those mental maps that allow a culture to classify local knowledge. A knowledge, for instance, related to botany or to zoology, in the same way Cultural Intelligence must be able to create its own ethnotaxonomy. That is, an understanding of how the human group studied relates to the surrounding environment even when this environment is virtual, such as with social media.

For what has been highlighted so far, however, we must now give definitions in order to be able to continue more easily within the scope of the paper itself. That is, to clarify the concepts of Cultural Intelligence, Conflict Ethnography and Ethnographer of War.

1. *Cultural Intelligence* (or Ethnology of Action) is the socio-cultural analysis, at a tactical and operational level, made by qualified military personnel who study the human terrain on the basis of data collected during the ethnographic research in war zones (*Combat Ethnography*).
2. The Cultural Intelligence analyst is a staff officer who has already worked as an Ethnographer of War and whose task is to direct ethnographic research functional to the cognitive deepening of the human terrain for operational purposes.

3. The CI analyst can also be the Cultural Advisor (CULAD) of a military staff. A figure already present within the NATO staffs, from the tactical to the strategic level. CULAD has the function of advising the Commander in charge of a specific Area of Operation, basically a General, who has at his disposal a pool of experts who advise him on specific sectors of knowledge.
4. This pool is called the Special Advisory Team and is composed, among the various advisors, of two key figures who help him to understand the local cultural and the political context: The Cultural Advisor and the Political Advisor (POLAD). The professional background of these specialists in recent decades has been almost entirely the prerogative of experts in International Relations, Political Sciences. Area experts with specific professional and linguistic curriculum matured in the field, but never with a purely anthropological training.
5. Precisely, CULAD provides specific knowledge of the area of operation to the Mission Commander and his staff with information on the cultural aspects, implications, consequences and possible actions to be taken following particular events. In addition, CULAD supports the planning process of military operations by analysing their cultural impact on the human environment (Human Terrain). Therefore, a CI analyst, being a regional expert, can also become the Cultural Advisor of a military contingent employed abroad.
6. *Combat Ethnography*, is the ethnographic research in war zones conducted by military personnel in support of the military operations. It consists in a collection of information and data useful for a military unit for the performance of its mission. This ethnographic gathering is made by the Ethnographer of War <sup>4</sup>.
7. The Ethnographer of War is a military anthropologist<sup>5</sup>, that is a soldier of a conventional army of a sovereign state who has been assigned by his hierarchical chain to carry out ethnographic field researches in order to support the planning and conduct of military operations. The Ethnographer of War is part of a military unit and wears a military uniform during these researches. It therefore respects all the parameters provided by the International Law of Armed Conflicts.

## 2. The object of the study and the methodology: the human terrain

A military intervention always interferes with the local society, therefore, understanding how the civilian population perceives the foreign military presence is fundamental for any army, especially if we take into account that the wars of the 21<sup>st</sup> century will increasingly be in urban centers and in the midst of the local population. That means in places where the difference between combatants and non-combatants will be increasingly blurred.

However, while in a conventional war what is predominant is the study of the physical terrain in order to win the opponent during a battle, in asymmetrical warfare in order to win one must study the human terrain more. But what is meant today by human terrain?

There are many definitions and each army provides its own explanation. However, in this study it can be defined as that social, political and economic environment, shaped by history and characterized by one or more cultures that over time have developed specific forms of interaction. A physical and virtual space in which military personnel can operate during a conflict or for its prevention. It corresponds to the area of operations of a contingent. An area that becomes also the ethnographic research field.

From this, it follows that the object of this study are cultures, religions, myths, legends, languages, music, literatures and everything that is shaped by a precise *Weltanschauung*.

While human terrain is a place, its analysis is a process through which we study how it develops. For example, the analyst will try to understand what the local concept of time is, the religious and civil calendars, what the rhythms of life are, the rush hours, when the market takes place, what kind of people are involved in these time frames, as well as how many people there are and what it is that unites them. A complex

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<sup>4</sup> The term deliberately recalls that of War Correspondent. That is, a foreign journalist who moves on the ground during a conflict to collect useful information to create news that allows him to tell what is happening in real time in a certain place and how this is conditioning the life of the local population and of the fighters. A War Correspondent well reflects certain ways of working on the ground of our Ethnographer of War.

<sup>5</sup> The Cultural Intelligence analyst and the Ethnographer of War, depending on their expertise, can also be employed as Military Advisers in foreign armed forces in the context of bilateral agreements. In the event of legal or political limitations, this function aimed at training and drilling foreign armed forces involved or not in war operations can also be carried out by contractors of Private Military Companies (PMCs) with similar professional experience.

analysis, which obviously cannot fall on a single analyst but which requires staff work. A staff made up of experts who go to the field to collect information useful for their studies.

About the methodology used in this research, it is a pure qualitative methodology based entirely on first-hand experiences conducted in Central Asia, the Middle East and the Balkans, through the development of a Civil-Military Cooperation (CIMIC) activity, within NATO and the United Nations, in the context of Crisis Response Operations (CROs).

### 3. Cultural Intelligence and the ethnographic writing

A book that can be considered the inspiration for the way in which Cultural Intelligence products can be made is certainly *The Study of Culture at a Distance* written by Margaret Mead and Rhoda Métraux and published in 1953. A book that was the result of the study carried out by American anthropologists in support of the war effort during World War II. A text, which then continued to provide analysis tools, primarily to military analysts. In particular, on the impact caused by the changing geopolitical scenarios on various populations.

In fact, in addition to giving interesting insights into different cultures, including the Italian one, it first outlines a method. A method that allows to study a culture from a military perspective without having anthropologists in the field. A constant, this, typical of conflicts due to the fact that it is not always possible to develop a participant observation where one's enemy is.

However, at the same time, it is also evident from Mead's book, that a military anthropologist who studies a human terrain remotely can still work on the products coming from the units operating on the ground. In particular, basing his analysis on the reports from the units in combat and in the rear lines, on information from intelligence, on the mutation of political equilibrium, on information gathered through media analysis, etc.

A remote study that is nevertheless fundamental not only to start research, but also to develop a theory. Which, of course, will then be validated or not with the data collected in the field.

However, with what has been stated so far, we do not want to fall into the error that distance learning is a self-sufficient model, to be used always and in any case. It represents only an alternative due to the physical impossibility for the anthropologists to go to the site.

In fact, what makes the Cultural Intelligence product peculiar is having a military technician, the Ethnographer of War, in the field. An operator who already knows how and what he must collect to provide useful products to the military staff. Data which, however, must not be provided in a crude way but processed through a precise technical-expressive method.

Specifically, when the Ethnographer of War goes to the field, in his role as author of an ethnographic monograph he will not be inspired by the typical models of the anthropological tradition, but by those of military reporting. An aseptic model, therefore, devoid of the narrating ego. There is therefore no "diary disease", no need to give vent to a literary restlessness, no need to talk about oneself, just as there is no journalistic complacency of the "I-witness". This is not travel literature, on the contrary, due to its expressive methods it is more like a technical manual. Furthermore, unlike the anthropologist, the Ethnographer of War does not have to convince his reader that he has been there. There is therefore no documentary need. Just as there is no need for a "signature" on the text. The work of an Ethnographer of War is impersonal. It does not have the purpose of making the author visible, but everything is functional to ensure military planning in the best possible way.

However, not wanting to write a book of literature does not mean that the document produced by Cultural Intelligence, which we could call "Assessment", is not in any case imbued with a clear descriptive and analytical capacity. I.e., composed of an *ars intelligendi* (the art of understanding) and an *ars explicandi* (the art of presentation). Quite the opposite, the Ethnographer of War will have to demonstrate that he has an overview of the course of the conflict. This ability is similar to the anthropologist's "ethnographic authority".

An authority that will be confirmed when he manages to convince the military staff of the veracity of his analysis and his anthropological reconstruction of the human terrain. A reconstruction that will always be

subjective. Also conditioned by his interaction with several people in the field, with the comparison with informants, with specialists from other sectors like, for example: CIMIC<sup>6</sup>, PSYOPS<sup>7</sup> or HUMINT<sup>8</sup>.

However, similarly to the “anthropologist as author”, a “doubt of the ethnographer” may appear in the Ethnographer of War. That is, a reflection inherent in one’s description of the human terrain. Specifically, “about how one can know if what is said with respect to other forms of life is in reality just like that” (Geertz, 1990, p. 78).

In partial consolation for the “ethnographic doubt”, the Ethnographer of War knows that he will never be a single being left to himself on foreign territory. In other words, he should never be confronted with the locals as a *uniquum*. In fact, he will always be part of a staff, of a larger and more complex organization.

In addition to this, the task of the staff is precisely the horizontal confrontation between all the experts who, at their own level, must provide the pieces useful to frame the operational scenario. The “ethnographer’s doubt” will thus be smoothly cushioned and balanced.

#### 4. Outline of a professional figure

The Ethnographer of War is an “ethnographer collector”. An anthropologist who describes a conflict in real time, from the battlefield, similar to what a war correspondent does. However, while the latter describes a conflict in real time and then gives this story to the public who follows the media, the Ethnographer of War collects data for the military staff and units that are deployed on the ground. This is to facilitate the planning and conduct of military operations. However, unlike the traditional anthropologist, the Ethnographer of War is a soldier in permanent and effective service. A graduate in anthropology, who moves on the ground in accordance with the provisions of the International Law of Armed Conflicts regarding the figure of the legitimate fighter. Therefore, the Ethnographer of War will not present himself to the interviewees as an anthropologist or researcher, but as a member of a military contingent framed in a specific mission with an international mandate. In the context of this paper, he was called ethnographer because he applies the knowledge and the methodologies typical of anthropology to study the human terrain.

In particular, the research of the Ethnographer of War is made in a context strongly conditioned by violence, where the premises with which he relates in his daily work can be people traumatized by the brutality of the conflict. A violence that is often irrational and an end in itself. Which reproduces violence by the simple fact of being itself a result of violence. A violence that alters the perception of the events and therefore of the memories. Violence that affects the interpretation of the facts by those who lived them too.

The Ethnographer of War, therefore, must understand that his research will always be conditioned by emotions and traumas. Traumas, to which the same ethnographer could be subjected too. In his participant observation the anthropologist could himself become a victim of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) like the people of his studies. This possibility, however, must always be examined by medical personnel once the ethnographer has returned to his homeland.

The research field is, therefore, an emotional field. In which the Ethnographer of War must know how to immerse himself while remaining emotionally involved as little as possible. In these specific circumstances, an ethic approach cannot be completely ruled out. Since an excessive identification with the native’s point of view would lead the emic analysis to turn into a memoir of little use to an analysis of Cultural Intelligence. Therefore, the Ethnographer of War’s approach must balance in a non-rigid way between the ethic and the emic one. Although more unbalanced towards the latter. An analytical ability which, however, can only be achieved after a long experience in the field.

Moreover, it must always take into account that every conflict has its own dynamics and logics that are not always reproducible. Even from an emotional point of view.

A fundamental element will therefore be the method of selection of the ones who will one day be an Ethnographer of War.

Ideally, individuals who are too young, i.e. under 35 years old or have less than 10 years of military experience, should be excluded. Similarly, bachelors or married men without children should also be excluded. This means having personnel who, in their professional and human growth, have followed all the

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<sup>6</sup> Civil-Military Cooperation (CIMIC).

<sup>7</sup> Psychological Operations (PSYOPS).

<sup>8</sup> Human Intelligence (HUMINT).

phases of a "normal" life. It is essential to have an operator on the ground who, thanks to his or her personal experiences, has an adequate analysis capacity for the context in which he/she will be placed. Indeed, it would be ridiculous to have an anthropologist who studies kinship systems, marriage or transgenerational ties, without ever having been a father or husband. Furthermore, the very fact that he is father and husband allows the Ethnographer of War to empathically understand better those emotions that an armed conflict can produce within a family context.

It follows, as we have already seen above, that the Ethnographer of War is a distant figure from the pure anthropologist. Not only for the modalities and purposes of his research, but also for the psychological profile. Consequently, the criticisms of the academic world towards the Ethnographer of War would not make sense, because there is nothing like it. If not, perhaps, a common passion for the knowledge of others and a common training in that literary knowledge which, however, is part of the very foundations of anthropology. Nothing more.

Finally, even theoretically, the military cannot be prevented from understanding the cultural and anthropological context in which units move in a combat zone. Just as the police forces cannot be prohibited from understanding the cultural and social causes that characterize a specific criminal phenomenon. In fact, as Marc Augé says, anthropology is "the gaze of one world on the other" (Augé, 2004), so it is natural that this gaze is also aimed at the military culture of the other.

## 5. Working methodology

The working methodology of the Ethnographer of War is based on five main aspects: (a) the participant immersion; (b) the ethnographic gathering; (c) interviews with informants; (d) the ethnographic interpretation; and (e) the ethnographic writing.

### *(a) The participant immersion*

The Ethnographer of War, like the anthropologist, studies groups of individuals with whom he has various kinds of relationships, including conflictual ones. Relationships that are not only between the group and the anthropologist or between the members of the group, but also between the anthropologist and the surrounding environment<sup>9</sup>. This network of relationships, together with the beliefs, laws, customs, artifacts, arts and various knowledge possessed by the group itself, define its culture. Similarly, to know the culture of a subversive group it is necessary to know its relationships (networks) with what surrounds it. A type of knowledge that is only possible with "being there" to detect the details of the behaviour of subjects within their social context, understanding what determines their cohesion.

Just as with Geertz the centrality of the ethnographer on the scene is reaffirmed, with Cultural Intelligence it becomes essential to live in the community to be able to study it for a fairly long period and not less than 6/9 months<sup>10</sup>.

In particular, with the presence in the field it is necessary to carry out a participant observation as a study of individual and collective actions combined with the ability to collect data, select and classify them not on the basis of scientific neutrality (never feasible), but thanks to a precise hermeneutic process. A process of interpretation that however passes through a sensorial anthropology. In other words, an ethnography of sensations that is nothing more than the result of an autonomous and pedagogical process intentionally

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<sup>9</sup> For the Cultural Intelligence, studying the relationship between culture and the environment is fundamental. To this aim, human geography and urban anthropology studies could also support researches on the cultural impact of military structures like: green zones (Iraq), prisons (Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo), checkpoints, separation barriers (USA-Mexico, Ceuta and Melilla, the "Moroccan wall") or demarcation lines such as those between Israel and Lebanon (Blue Line) or the one between Israel and the neighbouring countries (Green Line).

<sup>10</sup> In the employment of Ethnographers of War, working hours, physical and mental stress, the risks to the safety for operators, the costs/benefits deriving from the great exposure that field research entails, must always be taken into consideration.

aimed at re-educating oneself to use one's senses in order to perceive emically the otherness and its environment<sup>11</sup>.

A total camouflage, which, if not mastered, especially in a war zone, risks losing the ethnographer not only as a soldier operating on the battlefield, but as a complete individual. Because participant immersion involves an emotional and cultural impregnation which, as such, is above all unconscious<sup>12</sup>.

It is an empathic ability to immerse oneself in emotionally involving events by adapting one's own behaviour and bodily attitudes to those of the others. This means knowing how to pay attention to the nuances, the right tone of voice, the bodily practices, the multiple rules of control and expression of feelings (Pennaccini, 2014: 271).

Therefore, the observation of the Ethnographer of War is a solitary observation. A full immersion in a foreign context focused on a predominantly subjective and non-objective interpretation. Since the latter is not feasible on a battlefield. A chimera, whose credibility had already been questioned by Geertz's "Hermeneutic Perspective" (Geertz, 1979).

In fact, to understand the mentality that characterizes the guerrilla one must become a *guerrillero*. To study extremisms, one must have experienced first-hand what extremism means, just as one cannot speak of pregnancy and childbirth if one has never experienced them. There are contexts that are not understandable if they are not lived.

The Ethnographer of War, in order to find those cultural levers useful for the pacification of a territory, or aimed at disrupting a terrorist or insurgent group, must develop a true anthropology of emotions. An anthropology that, if properly dosed and calibrated, can be a very useful means of gathering information<sup>13</sup>.

Nevertheless, this use of the Anthropology of Emotions for military purposes should not lead us to think, that we want to induce the Ethnographer of War into a cynical or hypocritical attitude. On the contrary, we want the operator on the ground to develop sincere and lasting relationships with the locals. However, in a context saturated with emotions deriving from the exasperated violence present in the research field, the worst thing that can happen to the researcher is to identify himself with the political vision of the group he studied or the victims of that same group. Such emotional identification is the worst virus that can grip the heart and mind of the military analyst<sup>14</sup>.

Furthermore, direct observation by the ethnographer is not enough. It must necessarily be integrated with those "reproduced observations" by others such as, for example: from the testimonies of the diaspora, from the material collected from the media and from the products of visual anthropology, from the monographs of other ethnographers, from myths, legends, etc.

Ideally, research should be done as a team. A team that sees in addition to the Ethnographer of War, his local informant and another Ethnographer of War. To these, we must then add the escort or, at least, a guardian angel. Finally, the team should possibly be included in a military unit of the Host Nation. This, in order to avoid an external intrusion during the research activity.

### (b) *The Ethnographic Gathering*

The ethnographic collection although it is generally linked to material culture, for Cultural Intelligence it is, in particular, of an informative type. That means also that there is a certain correspondence with Tactical

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<sup>11</sup> A practical example of Cultural Intelligence applied to empathy towards locals and aimed at understanding physical pain and illness as culturally perceived by locals are the so-called Medical Civic Action Programs (MEDCAP) and the Veterinary Civic Action Programs (VETCAP). Activities, generally conducted by military medical personnel with CIMIC operators. Which, notoriously, also contribute to the development of a real Medical Intelligence.

<sup>12</sup> The first impression must never be a starting point, it must always be weighed and re-examined in order not to be influenced and misled. Empathic misunderstanding must always be taken into account already at the planning stage. Planning that must deepen precisely the cultural dynamics in order not to fall into superficial judgments. In fact, a naive and superficial use of empathy will certainly lead to misunderstanding. As well as the lack of knowledge of the expressive modalities of emotions of the studied groups.

<sup>13</sup> For instance, at this regard, the importance of forensic anthropology has to be considered for a correct reconstruction of events during a conflict. Which happened in the cases of genocide, ethnic cleansing and the discovery of mass graves in Bosnia, Iraq or Syria.

<sup>14</sup> A cinematographic example that sums up this individual crisis is well represented by the famous Colonel Walter E. Kurtz. Character of the film *Apocalypse Now* directed in 1979 by Francis Ford Coppola and inspired by the famous novel *Heart of Darkness* written by Joseph Conrad.



Intelligence (TI). That is, that military intelligence in support of combat used to make decisions on the ground in a short time. An intelligence that produces concrete information, of rapid consumption, aimed at facing the immediate threats arising from the phases of the combat. Nevertheless, often, TI is the least accurate of the forms of intelligence, since the information gathered is very perishable. Furthermore, it merely focuses on the SENA (Size, Entity, Nature, Attitude) of the opponent and it is subject to the events of the moment.

Like TI, Conflict Ethnography can also be a tool to facilitate decisions on the ground in times of emergency. However, the difference with TI is that it applies its method to the ethnographic findings such as, for example, equipment, armaments, documents, propaganda material, etc.<sup>15</sup>, adding a cultural interpretation on their own functional aspects.

### (c) Interviews with informants

In Cultural Intelligence there are two different types of informants: the embedded ones and those interviewed with Key Leader Engagement or simply engagement activities.

The embedded informer is never a simple interpreter. He is not only asked to translate what the natives say. Although the knowledge of the local language by the Ethnographer of War is desirable, this is not always possible.

Therefore, the importance of having a local collaborator is also to have a confrontation with him. This, in order to make a contribution to the ethnographer's analysis, to understand the unspoken, the apparent, the non-verbal, for the interpretation of postures and gazes that often only a native can grasp with spontaneity.

However, whether or not the native language is mastered, the Ethnographer of War cannot fail to understand the ethnolinguistic aspects that characterize the language or languages of the object of study. Since the cultural aspects that can be deduced from a language are extraordinary keys to access the heart of the culture itself. For example, taking into account how important it is from a military point of view to know the revolutionary terminology employed by a terrorist or insurgent group. Knowing the words means understanding the ideological and cultural meaning behind the actions of a particular armed group.

Furthermore, for an Ethnographer of War, studying a language also means understanding what are, or what have been, the interventions on a language through linguistic policies. Through the relationship with the languages of ethnic minorities, or dialects, with the presence or absence of multilingualism, or Pidgin or Creole languages. As well as, the possible presence of a "women's language". It is also fundamental to understand the relationship between linguistics and identity politics. That is, how the language of a minority is defended and promoted, what is the linguistic stratification and lexical coverage. If there are loanwords, special, professional, religious, caste languages, as well as jargons. What is the use of proverbs, songs, poetry.

Furthermore, even if the native language is not mastered, we must take into account what we can understand about our counterpart during an interview. Not only through verbal language, but also through extraverbal language, as taught by Ethnopragmatics.

Consequently, it becomes essential to understand what the "weight of words" is, the use of timbre, tone, proxemics, interpersonal interaction, the so-called "art of speaking". That is, the use of pet names, silences, pauses, speaking in a low voice, gazing, forms of humour, linguistic ceremonial, linguistic courtesy and forms of rudeness. All elements which, if mastered, simplify the cultural perception of the environment and of the people during engagement activities, going beyond the intrinsic limits of the interviews.

The experience of the Human Terrain System (HTS) has demonstrated an ethnographic propensity to use semi-structured interviews to conduct data collection in the field. These interviews were generally addressed to local Key Leaders as it was believed that being at the top of the indigenous communities they were able to provide accurate information. For example, regarding services such as electricity, waste disposal, drinking water, social structure, local history, etc. A research methodology that, however, is more reminiscent of that made by CIMIC staff than by ethnographers. However, Key Leaders aren't always easy to find<sup>16</sup>.

They often remain in the shadows, especially in areas strongly characterized by violence. They have a protective cord and are only exposed when necessary. Often protected by intermediaries who perform the

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<sup>15</sup> The ethnographic collection is also done on the web using the typical methodology of the *Open Source Intelligence* (OSINT).

<sup>16</sup> Key Leaders aren't exclusively men. On the contrary, women's ability to make decisions and influence communities must never be underestimated. Even in cultural contexts where there are strong gender disparities too. Therefore, having women among the Ethnographers of War is fundamental, although it is not easy to employ them in war contexts.

function of filters. Interviews with the local population are also not easy. Because the timing and modalities of the military patrols sometimes prevent the possibility of having long interviews with the locals. In fact, these activities often have to be interrupted for safety reasons or operational needs<sup>17</sup>.

This implies that, in these circumstances, the Ethnographer of War must know how to work quickly and with partial information in order to produce summary works useful for planning and conducting military operations.

Furthermore, interviewing locals can have dual negative consequences. The first, in terms of physical security for the locals. The second, the deception of the Ethnographer of War.

Let's start with the first case. An individual, whom here for simplicity we will call Ali, is a merchant who lives in an Iraqi village with his family. He does not participate in the war, he simply wants to survive it. However, he knows the direct and indirect risks of that war. Insurgents and counter-insurgents are everywhere. And they fight each other. The only chance of survival for him and his loved ones is to belong to a community. A community that is not necessarily armed.

One day, a column of military vehicles of foreign soldiers enters his village. People are terrified, because they do not know if the insurgents will take the opportunity to attack the foreigners. The tension is palpable in the air, no one would want to be there at that moment. Everything becomes therefore electric. It is in this context that foreign soldiers break into Ali's home. It is not a violent break-in. They are not looking for weapons or terrorists. The soldiers do not have an aggressive attitude, but they are armed, they are wearing helmets and bulletproof vests, and are facing Ali. Some of them are checking around the house to make sure no one is shooting them, or worse, ready to blow himself up. In this context, they start to ask him questions regarding ordinary life, for example, what are the problems of the village from a social and economic point of view. Ali has to answer to questions which he sincerely does not understand, because they are about the price of goods on the market, about the sewer system that does not work, if the children go to school or if religious services are carried out regularly. Questions that must be answered quickly, through an interpreter, a person who speaks his language, but which he does not know. After a few minutes the soldiers leave his house. Maybe they'll go into other houses, but they won't stay in the village for long. The one who has to stay there is Ali, with his family. From his front door, he sees the military column moving away. As he moves away, however, the looks around him increase.

He doesn't hear them, but he can imagine the questions of those inquisitive eyes. Suspicion spreads in the community: "Why did the foreign soldiers choose Ali's house?", "What did he tell them?", "Ali is an informer of foreigners, what did he say about us?"

Ali returns home aware that the community in which he placed the safety of his family will not protect him when the insurgents arrive in the village. And the insurgents, soon, will arrive. They will also come to talk to Ali. All this, for answering to an anthropology questionnaire.

Here, you have a brief explanation of what it means to do anthropological or social interviews in a war zone: putting people's lives at risk. Expose lives for often futile reasons. But then how can anthropological research be conducted in war zones without talking to the locals and without exposing them to risks?<sup>18</sup>

Lessons learned from the HTS suggested speaking only with the Key Leaders. Not only in order to have more "truthful" information, but also to avoid exposing individuals within their communities. However, this is not always a perfect solution. Because there is absolutely nothing perfect in war. In fact, it may happen that the Key Leader has purposes that do not necessarily coincide with the well-being of the community it represents. Instead, he wants to take the opportunity of the interview to manipulate the information. In a conflict this is very easy. It is enough to be accredited with a military contingent as an informed person that

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<sup>17</sup> Based on lessons learned from Human Terrain Teams (HTT) in Iraq and Afghanistan, the average length of an interview with locals with structured or semi-structured interviews was seven minutes. Absolutely an insufficient time for any activity, not just for anthropological researches.

<sup>18</sup> Cultural Intelligence can also be applied to own military forces together with military psychology. Indeed, it can help to reflect on the behaviour of soldiers, for example, during night combat. That is, on how the use of night vision goggles transform the battlefield in the fighter perception as surreal, as emotionally distant. A distance between him and the local population accentuated by technology and by the atavistic perception of darkness as danger. This is a context, where visual anthropology could significantly contribute in making an analytical input. Similarly, it could also be studied how the use of drones for targeting operations, or the launch of missiles, or bombings conducted by military aircrafts, have a cultural impact on the operators. A relapse not only of the psychological nature. Contexts in which to understand the image-war-culture relationship, especially in a world where the virtual dimension is increasingly present, it becomes progressively necessary for all the armed forces.

can help in gathering information on the insurgents. It is enough to leverage the military's desire to obtain such information quickly. And if the source speaks English or better our language, this simplifies, in the eyes of the soldiers, their effort. Because the risk of their exposure decreases.

However, it must be borne in mind that often there are more personal interests than idealistic ones in tip offs. Often someone just wants to hit a business rival, or avenge a wrong done right away. Therefore, what better way than to associate one's opponents with supporters of ISIS, Al Qaeda or Al Shabaab?

Interviewing informants in a war context is consequently very difficult<sup>19</sup>. For this reason, the ethnographer before each meeting must at least have a complete dossier on his counterpart, just as the information obtained from the interviews must always be compared with that from other military assets.

Furthermore, structured interviews should be avoided. Just as in asking questions, the interviewee should never be forced in the direction in which we intend to go. The interviewee must receive open-ended questions, to which he must answer without conditioning.

This is because the ethnographic interview is not the equivalent of an intelligence interrogation. The two must never be confused. The Ethnographer of War is not an interrogator. There are already specialized personnel to do this. The Ethnographer of War studies the human terrain that creates the context in which the insurgents or terrorist groups move. He doesn't look for the terrorists himself, that's not his job. This is why HUMINT and the agents of the secret services exist. Who are no other than the Ethnographer of War.

An example of an interview conducted by the Ethnographer of War could be the "Neighbourhood Ethnography". That is, that type of field research created to have a systematic collection of data in specific social surveys.

Generally, it is conducted in urban areas and it is aimed at understanding how the social system guarantees citizens access to services and forms of assistance. At the basis of this survey methodology there are questionnaires which aim to collect data of interest.

The research methodology focuses on interviews with key figures of the local community, as well as attending neighbourhood meetings, collecting citizen testimonials, attending local voluntary associations and the markets (or supermarkets), reading the local press, etc.

This data is then inserted into programs that use computerized information systems such as the Geographic Information System (GIS). Programs that, once populated with the data collected by ethnographic research, allow their association to specific geographical positions on the earth's surface. This, with obvious advantages for the subsequent processing of the information obtained. This way of combining ethnographic research with the GIS system is called Geo-ethnography.

#### *(d) The ethnographic interpretation*

The first problem that an Ethnographer of War must face in the study of unconventional conflicts and, generally, of asymmetrical threats, is to be able to free himself from the "Counterinsurgency mentality". Especially for how it was conceived in the Anglo-Saxon context. Although in Iraq and Afghanistan there has been a laudable attempt by some generals to overcome that type of conflict, the Counterinsurgency (COIN), especially in its Population-Centric conception, has been a complete failure.

Unfortunately, this theoretical model still remains standing in Military Academies and Army Staff Colleges of Western countries.

Instead, we must try to understand the Human Terrain with different analysis grids. This means that, even in formulating the questions during the interviews on the ground, one must not refer strictly to the Counterinsurgency narrative. Since this tends to reduce the conflict to a kind of dualistic struggle: good/evil. This was seen in particular in Afghanistan (ISAF/Taliban) and Somalia (AMISOM/Al Shabaab). The reality of a conflict, on the contrary, is increasingly complex: Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, but also Syria, Libya, Yemen, are not wars fought by two opposing factions, as the journalistic narrative often tends to present reductively. Furthermore, even the historical parallels with the wars that broke out during the Cold War and the Decolonization (Indochina, Vietnam, Algeria, Congo, to name the most famous) are not useful for an understanding of the phenomenon. Today, asymmetrical wars rather than being the struggle between two actors for the division and control of a territory, are real civil wars fought by many different actors. Wars that have sudden changes in the alignment of militias and leaders, as well as of clans and religious groups,

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<sup>19</sup> Besides, it is not always possible to interview someone. Sometimes, there are taboos, limits imposed by culture regarding the prohibitions of gender, age, subject matter or social status.

according to needs and interests. Therefore, enemies are not always enemies, just as friends are not always allies. These constant changes make it difficult for many analysts, trained in Counterinsurgency during the Global War on Terror, to have a real understanding of the Human Terrain and the armed groups associated with them. This "COIN mentality", as already mentioned, is misleading because it is nothing more than an ethnocentric reading of the conflict itself.

Furthermore, one of the greatest risks that can arise from not knowing how to recognize the boundary between one's ideas and the local reality, is that particular strategic blindness that I would define as the "blind strategist". That is to say that of a military man who by bias is convinced that the conflict he is fighting corresponds to the type of conflict he would like to fight. If a General wants to fight a COIN he will apply a COIN approach to the reality he is in. Regardless of whether it is true or not. If the successor instead wants to wage a war in conventional ways, in the same type of scenario as his predecessor, he will apply the latter model instead of the COIN. The "blind strategist" will thus drag his men to a definite defeat. History, even the recent one, is full of these examples.

The interpretation of the Ethnographer of War must instead be inductive, comparative and emic. In addition, anthropological research, although subjective, personal and, in some respects, unrepeatable in order to be standardized, must be supported by the ethnographer's ability to demonstrate the logic of the steps that led to the analysis produced. A complex analysis, which must also be able to grasp the right moment. Since the analysis of conflicts carried out in the field, from an anthropological point of view, is very difficult. If carried out during the conflict, the dangers to which the ethnographer exposes himself for his research risk limiting his analytical lucidity. If, on the other hand, his research takes place after the conflict, the study in the field risks becoming a mere memorialist rather than an analysis of a complex phenomenon.

A possible solution to these and other dilemmas in which the Ethnographer of War could run into the ethnographic interpretation of a conflict is given by Clifford Geertz's "Hermeneutic Perspective". Who, first of all, argued that Social Sciences are Interpretative Sciences and that interpretive anthropology is such because it seeks meanings through the symbols that characterize collective psychic life. Which, they hide behind social interactions. This emphasis on understanding and interpretation implicitly leads to the "translation" of one culture to another. Translation, because it tries to make sense of what is foreign, making the act performed by the local, familiar to the military staff.

The Ethnographer of War, therefore, fits into this "cultural translation". However, this translation does not mean the implementation of a mere comparative method. Rather, as taught by Geertz, one must focus one's attention on the local meanings of cultural facts (Geertz, 1979). Which can only be understood within the symbolic framework that produced them. Through a "dense description" the complexity of non-explicit meanings is discovered and reconstructed. Contextualizing them and translating them into useful information for the planning and conduct of military operations. Therefore, Geertz's research method allows the military staff not to focus only on the behaviour of the locals since they, as such, only capture the physical manifestations of social action, however losing their essence.

#### *(e) The ethnographic writing*

The Ethnographer of War, in the ethnographic description of terrorist groups and insurgents, must always use the "ethnographic present". Although it is a narrative method that harks back to colonial era monographs, it is best suited to military planning and intelligence narrative. Because the information is valid for a specific historical, temporal, geographical juncture. After that, it becomes old and unusable. Or hardly usable.

Furthermore, this ethnographic report is closely linked to the date imposed on the report (Assessment) because it is what historically contextualizes it and will consequently be the reference parameter for those who will then have to work on that same product.

This ethnographic present, however, must not lead to the error of considering the Assessment as a form of anthropological literature. As already highlighted, the anthropologist's romantic encounter with native culture is not a moment of reflection on oneself. The Ethnographer of War is not a man on the run tormented by his own shadows and in search of existentialist answers or to experience extreme emotions. The Ethnographer of War is an individual with a formed, complete personality, with his own vision of life that is not susceptible to exotic changes. An individual selected by virtue of their own intense personal and

professional experience, combined with a specific cultural path. Essential ingredients for the creation of a military anthropologist *tout-court*.

## 6. Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was twofold. To present a new method of anthropological analysis on the battlefield, the Cultural Intelligence, and to outline a new professional figure in military staff and units: The Ethnographer of War. That is, a military adviser who, following his anthropological training, can help military intelligence to study the human terrain and the International Violent Extremist Groups whether or not there is a hybrid threat.

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## Brief CV of the author

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