



Book Review of “Military Anthropology: Soldiers, Scholars and Subjects at the Margins of Empire” Edited by Montgomery McFate¹

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I really looked forward to the publication of a book that provides insight into some of the detailed case studies of American military anthropologists, working as an anthropologist myself for the Hungarian Defence Forces. Since there is a huge difference between the Hungarian Defence Forces and the United States Army, it is impossible – and I do not wish – to make a comparison regarding their purpose, strength, size, historical background and experience. However, any issues arising from military presence can equally affect the soldiers of both countries in the present and in the future, in which case this book can serve as a good basis for preparation.

My name is Krisztián Sztankai, I work as a senior lecturer at the Faculty of Military Science and Officer Training at the National Public Service University in Hungary. I graduated from the University of Miskolc as a cultural anthropologist in 2006, then in 2008 I joined the Hungarian Defence Forces and served in four different operation areas: as a Tactical PSYOPS Team commander in Kosovo in 2009, as a CIMIC officer in Afghanistan in 2011, and as a military observer both in the Central African Republic in 2016 as well as in the Western Sahara in 2022. Being the one and only military anthropologist in my country's armed forces, I have been unable to achieve significant progress so far, but I am determined to strengthen this cooperation, introduce the notion of cultural awareness as part of university education and trainings, as well as to conduct research that can gather up-to-date information in military operation areas. I find myself in the very special position that a continuous cooperation has been maintained with the social science faculties and research centres of the five largest universities in Hungary since 2008, including the University of Miskolc, Eötvös Loránd University, University of Debrecen, University of Szeged and University of Pécs, which have been supporting the goals I articulated earlier, namely the cultural preparation of soldiers along with the reduction of insults and conflicts, which – as a preventive tool – can contribute to saving lives and ending the war more quickly.

Since I had been familiar with the author's studies, the book did not disappoint. As McFate puts it, each chapter presents the life of an anthropologist who worked directly with a certain organization of the army, focusing on a certain period of their lives, while covering a topic included in the military education curriculum. What made the book enjoyable for me to read is the fact that each chapter can be processed independently and, with minimal overlap, can be interpreted as a separate case study analysis. Although the author did not intend to address the military anthropological challenges,

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experience and cooperation in Iraq and Afghanistan when writing the book, the comparative study of modern challenges presented in the individual chapters was refreshing to read. As a matter of fact, the book mostly deals with examples of poorly executed military operations (McFate, 2018, p. 295).

The first chapter presents Gerald Hickey, whose experience in Vietnam is used as a reference during my university lectures, as the uphill battle he fought against the military leadership and mindset reflects my current challenges back home. This chapter depicts Hickey's fundamental insight and opinion about the affairs in Vietnam, and how his opinion was often ignored in the US military's Vietnam strategy. In addition, he also provides some insight into the details of the Strategic Hamlet Program, in which he personally participated. The chapter is an excellent portrayal of typical problems that occur whenever military organizations appear in a foreign cultural environment as well as the challenges caused by the lack of ethnographic research. Despite the considerable negative experience, it is interesting to see how resistant the military mindset is to change, and even though the importance of cultural awareness is emphasized in education and doctrines, the practical use of it is ignored, while there is a constant return to solutions that are in favour of using weapons and force.

The second chapter gives an account of the experience of Robert Sutherland Rattray, who describes how and to what extent the British colonial officials' misconceptions limited their understanding of the African political systems. As the author claims, this chapter begins with a brief discussion of the origins of European colonial expansion and the different manifestations of European rule. It is through Rattray's experience (*Ashanti - Golden Chair*) that we can learn about the difficulties of British colonial policy with which colonial administrators encountered in Africa. Reading Rattray's work, it was interesting to gain insight into the experience how he helped resolve the conflict between the British and the Ashanti, which is a shining example of how cultural information and knowledge can be used to resolve or prevent a conflict. Through the example of the "indirect rule", an experimental government system of the British Empire, it is well described how the British tried to win over the members of the community by influencing their local institutions. McFate himself admits that the United States also pursues a strategy abroad similar to indirect rule, and has tried – or perhaps is still trying – to intervene and influence the politics of foreign states. The questions – What is the political structure? How is power distributed throughout society? What are the institutions that govern people's lives? (McFate, 2018, p. 64.) –, raised in the case study, are all relevant to this day and bear significance in military education, provided that the establishment of cooperation with the civilian population and the leaders is considered a priority.

In the third chapter, what we can learn from Ursula Graham Bower's case study is how a foreign woman was able to make herself accepted by the Naga society – a violent and closed head-hunting tribe –, and through her actions, earn the Nagas' respect so much as to become their military leader. Among other things, the chapter deals with the concept of leadership along with its different versions. In addition, it discusses the



differences between male and female leaders. Ursula Graham Bower did not come to the Naga tribe as an anthropologist, only later did she become one. After enduring many hardships, Bower returned to Great Britain with her husband in 1948 and received a doctorate in anthropology from the University of London in 1950. This is a truly intriguing piece of text about the adventures of an unknown British woman, how she turned into the queen of the Naga, and how her struggles against the Japanese earned the recognition of the military in the British Empire.

From among those who are presented in this book, it is Gregory Bateson, besides Gerald Hickey, whose work I had already encountered during my research, so I was already familiar with the cases described in Chapter 4. Bateson's experience with the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) is perhaps the most well-known and most controversial of the nine cases mentioned. In this chapter, we can receive more insight into Information Operation (IO) and the capabilities of PSYOPS through Bateson's work. We can learn about the details of the development and application of schizogenesis as a scientific method. In this chapter, the reader can learn more about the failures of US Information Operations, presented through a few case studies. Although Bateson's role in black propaganda campaigns is to be condemned, his contribution to the development of Information Operations is undeniable. Moreover, he believed that social scientists had a direct and important role to play in national defence. "Our enemies in this war are applying social science on a large scale, for the first time in history," wrote Bateson in 1943. "They have a planned economy; and they are using various sorts of applied psychology in their propaganda, and they are doing this with quite sufficient success to make it essential that we use our own social scientists, both for defence and attack."³ Writing in his letter directly to OSS director "Wild Bill" Donovan, Bateson proposed that the United States create a third agency that would use covert operations, economic controls, and psychological pressure as part of the new warfare. This organization is now called the Central Intelligence Agency.

In chapter 5, irregular warfare is illustrated with the case of Tom Harrison, who fought against the Japanese in the jungles of Borneo with the help of local indigenous tribes during WWII. Although Harrison was not an anthropologist, he participated in expeditions under the auspices of the Oxford University Exploration Club, notably the 1932 expedition to Borneo followed by another expedition to the uncharted parts of the New Hebrides in the Pacific. When the rest of the group travelled home in 1934, Harrison remained on the islands and decided to immerse himself in the culture of the Big Nambas, a warring cannibal tribe, which he mastered during the 2-year period of his stay. Harrison came from an upper-class British family with military ancestry. The time spent in the New Hebrides proved to be a great help for him later in the jungles of Borneo. The chapter portrays Harrison as a difficult person, and while considered rather irritating by the British, he made a completely opposite impression on the inhabitants of the Borneo jungle, and thanks to him, the number of the native irregular

³ Bateson, G. (1943) 'The Science of Decency', *Philosophy of Science*, 10(2), p. 141. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1086/286802>, ISSN 0031-8248

fighters increased to nearly 2,000, who helped the British crown to suppress the rebellion in the region. His cooperation with the Dyaks of Borneo is a shining example of unconventional warfare, facilitating the preparation of the area as well as militant infiltration. He also contacted a resistance group recruiting his soldiers from the locals, whom he trained and equipped with weapons. This chapter also compares T.E. Lawrence's unconventional warfare with Harrison's, who also developed his own strategy, which he used effectively with the support of the native Kelabites fighting a war against the Japanese.

In chapter 6, we can learn about the United States' military governance strategy in the field of operations through the lens of John Useem's time spent in Palau, and we take a closer look at how the military presence shapes the social structure of the defeated nation. The concept the author discusses in this chapter is very complex and can vary from operation to operation. The appearance of military forces in a foreign culture requires government involvement, no matter how much it tries to stay away, the security situation requires political, civil and economic intervention. The writer puts emphasis on the training of commanders and military personnel, which aims at the cultural preparation for the given culturally different area. However, following the debacles of the interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, the trend in U.S. foreign policy circles is to eschew exporting democracy through occupation of foreign countries (McFate, 2018, p. 203). The writer emphasizes that one of the principles of military government, derived from The Hague and Geneva Conventions, is that occupying armies should strive to avoid interfering with local civilian, political and social institutions. In international humanitarian law, the relationship between occupier and occupied is seen as a contract in which occupying armies provide security and relief. Local civilians, in turn, should avoid interfering with the conquering army's mission. If these conditions are met, the army should not interfere with civilian institutions, allowing them to abide by their local laws and customs (McFate, 2018, p. 215). During the Second World War, the United States established training courses at several universities, where military personnel could learn about the cultural background of the given society, but after the war these were closed. According to the writer, what we can learn from the cases of Iraq and Afghanistan is that if these courses had been maintained and cultural awareness as well as anthropological knowledge had played a greater role in the education of the soldiers, then operations would have been approached with a different mindset in these two areas, which might have taken a different turn.

In chapter 7, we read about the rivalry between Jomo Kenyatta and Luis Leakley. The writer first studies the life of Jomo Kenyatta, a poor young Kenyan who made it as far as London, and had the chance to learn the methodology of ethnographic fieldwork from its developer, Malinowski himself. Kenyatta attempted to apply his anthropological studies to present the Gikuyuk society and culture as a unity with an independent political structure, which could facilitate the beginning of a negotiation between the British and the locals. However, this proved to be inadequate. Even though Kenyatta wrote several books about the culture of his own people, his attempts failed to make



the desired impact on the British administrators to view the Kenyan population as an equal party in the negotiations. While doing his studies, Kenyatta met Luis Leakley, the other character in this chapter, who – despite being British himself – had immense knowledge about the Gikoyuk culture, claiming that he spoke the Kikuyu language even better than English. Leakley was born in Kenya and grew up among the Kikuyu before relocating to England at the age of thirteen. Later, as Malinowski's student, he had an argument with Kenyatta in the Kikuyu language during one of their seminars. Just as Kenyatta used the science of anthropology against the British, so did the government in order to put down the Mau Mau insurgency with the help of Leakley. His book *Defeating Mau Mau* served as a good basis for the British to defeat the insurgents in the country. In this chapter, we can read in detail about the Mau Mau organization, the background of its establishment as well as the institution of the oath. We can learn about the concept of fantasy ideology, a cultural stereotype, which is utilized by one culture to (mis)treat another. This chapter is a perfect portrayal of the kind of modern military mindset that I also encountered wherever I served. The foreign soldiers who arrive to serve in a given conflict-ridden country approach the locals with disdain and negative stereotypes. In my experience, partially due to such perception, the resolution of the conflicts takes longer, because the lack of knowledge and the attitude of the military personnel serving on the location hinder the resolution of the conflict. Since professional soldiers work for money, only a few possess a sense of devotion, and therefore it is very difficult to make such staff understand the long-term effects of their actions and their impact on the operation.

Chapter 8 is the account of Don Marshall's experience in Vietnam. Marshall, a co-author of the *Program for the Pacification and Long-Term Development of Vietnam (PROVN)*, spent twenty-one months doing research in Vietnam. The establishment of the PROVN work group was considered important because it was necessary to prepare a new action plan based on the research of this study. Marshall wanted to contribute to Vietnamese culture and society being taken into account in the strategic rethinking of operations. As in many other chapters of this book, the very same idea occurs here in connection with Marshall, namely that the local culture and social structure are a decisive factor in the conflict, and that understanding these greatly contribute to the outcome of the war. The chapter presents the escalation of the Vietnam conflict and the attempt of the American decision makers to solve it with force and weapons through the concepts of social cohesion and change. The chapter compares the Bush administration's mission in Iraq with the Vietnam War and reveals that despite the many thousands of casualties of American soldiers had to suffer fighting the Viet Cong, it still proved insufficient to pay more attention to the political power of the local population later in Iraq. The central argument in this chapter is that social conditions should be considered along with other political, military, and economic strategic objectives in the military planning process. The reason is simple. "The object beyond war," as General Johnson noted, should be "the restoration of stability with the minimum of destruction, so that society and lawful government might proceed in an atmosphere of justice and

order (McFate, 2018, p. 313).

In the final chapter, the reader is presented with the case of David Prescott Barrow, who arrived in Siberia after the 1918 Bolshevik coup, when the new Bolshevik government took over power following the collapse of the Russian Empire due to the 1917 October Revolution (McFate, 2018, p. 315). Barrow might be the only U.S. military general with a doctorate in anthropology. He joined the army as a major at the age of 46 with the goal to make a difference in WWI. Barrow's claim, which the writer agrees with, is that it is Western arrogance and cultural intolerance that mostly affect human interactions, especially between two culturally different nations, groups or individuals.

In conclusion, it can be said that most chapters of the volume deal with the long-term consequences of foreign military interventions, formulating responses along with possible solutions, which serve as food for thought. As recounted so often in this book, in the interests of improving an indigenous system, a Western government had destroyed the very thing it hoped to create (McFate, 2018, p. 258). As a Hungarian military anthropologist, I can agree with the author, whose purpose with this book was to help the reader better understand how important it is for military organizations strategically to involve sociocultural research and researchers at different levels of military planning, and also to provide the reader a greater insight into the challenges of anthropologists who have ever actively participated in this cooperation. It cannot be emphasized enough that the military presence has immediate consequences in any given society (operation area), which can escalate further without proper training in cultural awareness. Not only do soldiers have to fight against the enemy, but also ethnocentrism and orientalism, which can negatively affect their cooperation with the civilian population. The writer also articulates, what I myself have experienced during military operations, that the environment where soldiers serve abroad is not empty, but an area inhabited by civilians with a unique language, culture, customs, traditions and social structure, which is essential to gain ample knowledge about. Civilian residents can be just as much partners as enemies of the foreign occupying soldiers. However, as enemies, they can be very dangerous, because they cannot be distinguished from other civilian residents and their attack will surely hit their target, causing serious destruction. To avoid such occurrence, increased attention should be paid to training soldiers cultural awareness and increasing tolerance in the military education and training of all nations. In my opinion, soldiers should not be sent to Foreign Service without developing cultural awareness. However, in order to achieve cultural awareness, up-to-date information is necessary, which requires socio-cultural research. I received my doctorate in 2020, and in my dissertation I formulated such a system-level methodology by which anthropological research can be integrated into military tasks. This system-level methodology not only involves operational planning and research to be carried out in the operational area, but also formulates the need for the integration of up-to-date knowledge into training and preparation. Furthermore, with the aid of an experience processing system, the information received is constantly fed back to the planning team,



leaders and military staff.

The book is more than a collection of case studies; by filling a void, it has become an essential piece of literature in military anthropology, because it raises such important issues that can be a perfect starting point for the development of modern military anthropology. I would like to close my thoughts with a quote that could even be the motto of military anthropology: “While military victory might be necessary for peace, it is often not sufficient to sustain it” (McFate, 2018, p. 321). I hope Montgomery McFate will not stop processing the case studies related to the past of military anthropology, because otherwise a foreign anthropologist like myself will never be provided the opportunity to familiarize with the experience and knowledge accumulated by the anthropologists and the military of the United States. Thank you for this book and good luck!