A critique of military culture that is both hit and miss

Abel Esterhuise, Francois Vrëy and Thomas Mandrup (eds), *On Military Culture: Theory, Practice and African Armed Forces*
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The origins of this book lie in the productive collaboration between the Strategy Department of the Faculty of Military Science, Stellenbosch University and the Faculty of the Royal Danish Defence College, with two editors, Abel Esterhuise and Francois Vrëy, hailing from the former institution and Thomas Mandrup from the latter. In particular, the publication benefited from a conference that was hosted by the two institutions in 2011 on military culture and African armed forces and the chapters are largely based on papers presented at this conference. This explains the nature of the edited volume.

The reader will not find "a main argument" or "a key theme" on military culture and African armed forces proffered here; rather the contributions in the book speak broadly to the topic of military culture from different angles. These include a rich variety of theoretical underpinnings, methodological approaches, as well as diverse contexts of military culture with an effort to relate most contributions in some way to African armed forces. The editors note: "Scarcity [of contemporary scholarly literature on African military culture], dated views and African contributions thus form three arguments underpinning the rationale for introducing this publication" (p xv). With one caveat the book succeeds in what it sets out to do, namely to fill the void(s) identified in this quotation (more about the caveat later).

The book opens with an introductory chapter by the three editors which provides a useful discussion on what military culture is. It then poses two sets of questions which, we are told, drive the debate on military culture. The first set focuses on "how culture informs the strategic and security outlook of a society and thus, the employment of the armed forces within a particular security context" (p xvii). These questions relate to the "culture as context" notion favoured by Colin Gray.[9] The second set, which the editors aver are of greater relevance to the publication, "relate to the role of culture in the institutional make up and nature of armed forces" (p xviii). This reviewer disagrees with the preference attached to the second set of questions and actually thinks that the contributions made by the book relating to the myths, discourses and (taken for granted) organising principles that come to structure societies' expectations of militaries are equally, if not more, interesting.

Three chapters address the issue of changing societal expectations of the military and its impact on military culture. Chapter 1 by Hudson and Henk provides an overview of how the post Cold War "broadening" of the concept "security" resulted in new roles for the armed forces, a topic also addressed by Dandeker in chapter 2. Both these chapters could have benefited from the literature on world

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9.   C.S. Gray, *Modern Strategy* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999).

military cultural norms and how these norms come into being, evolve and diffuse.[10] Invoking the Canadian experience, Okros in chapter 3, also proposes a model for how military culture can adapt to dynamic societal expectations. Another excellent contribution speaking to "culture as context" is McKinley's dissection and fundamental critique of security culture based on the widely held belief of the "blood sacrifice" soldiers make in the name of duty. The chapter shakes our common sensibilities of the military in a way reminiscent of Franco Fornari's *The Psychoanalysis of War*, but does so more through a cultural studies lens than Fornari's psychological one.[11]

And then there is the exceptional contribution by Musambayi Katumanga, a scholar based at the University of Nairobi and Kenya's National Defence College. Katumanga's chapter ticks all the boxes of what this reviewer understands the editors wanted to achieve with this volume. Like McKinley, he moves beyond mainstream theory, using a critical theory framework, in particular the notions of mirror images and inverted mirror images of military culture, to explain "mutating insecurity challenges in Kenya" (p 129). In doing so, he provides a fresh African insider's perspective on a set of cultural drivers that are usually superficially boxed under the label "weak states" or "state fragility" by mainstream Western scholarship (for a typical example of the treatment of these drivers by Western scholars, see Hudson and Henk's chapter in this volume). Feeding his framework with the cultural impact of the colonial condition and its post colonial triggers in Kenyan history, the chapter identifies a military cultural nexus that is a breeding ground for "oligopoly (as opposed to monopoly) of violence" and the concomitant weakening of the state in Kenya. His framework could productively be applied to other cases in Africa.

The editors loosely group contributions to the volume into two sections. Section one addresses the theory of military culture and its relationship to society (chapters 2 to 5) and section two 'operationalises' military culture through a number of case studies (chapters 6 to 13). This does not mean that section two does not contribute to our conceptual or theoretical understanding of military culture, but rather that the focus is on specific country contexts. Most of the chapters in section two also address the second set of questions posed by the editors in the introduction, namely the role of culture in the institutional make up of armed forces.

The case studies include Australia (Jans), Kenya (Katumanga), Ethiopia (Berhe) and five contributions on South Africa by South African scholars (six if Vrëy's chapter on strategic culture and its application to post apartheid South Africa, which is grouped in section one, is included). A reader looking for a more balanced distribution of contributions in terms of "African armed forces" as the title of the book teases, will rightfully be disappointed. However, if we excuse the South African numerical bias and take the chapters on South Africa at face value, they provide an impressively comprehensive introspection of South African military culture from respectively, a historical (Van der Waag); institutional (Nathan and Esterhuise); theoretical (Vale); and sociological (Heinecken) perspective.

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10.   For example, T. Ferrell, "World Culture and Military Power", *Security Studies*, 14, 3, 2005, pp 448 88.
11.   F. Fornari, *The Psychoanalysis of War* (Doubleday, New York, 1974).

The editors conclude in the final chapter that the arguments by most of the contributing authors highlight two issues. Firstly, militaries are "instruments of war" and this necessitates a particular cultural orientation that relates to a war fighting ethos, setting soldiering apart from other professions with the resultant need for internal cohesion reflected in military professionalism. This may be referred to as the trans societal military cultural dimension. Secondly, militaries serve their societies and as such need to reflect societal specific values and norms, which in turn wins them external legitimacy from their societies. The interaction, and at times tension, between these two issues and the need to balance them, impact military culture in terms of civil military relations, military effectiveness and the value base of the military (p 268).

And now for the caveat: The editors' aim was to fill a void in the literature on military culture and African armed forces, which is sparse and dated. Although this was largely achieved in an ultimately readable book, the editors conclude with a normative and somewhat uncritical prescription of what is deemed "necessary" to get military culture "right". Peter Vale in chapter 10 makes a strong case for more reflexivity in scholars' choice of theory and approach, in particular to move beyond mainstream Anglo American dominance in this area of scholarship. But the editors are guilty of falling back on precisely that, feeling the need to artificially tie together the energised messiness of the debates on military culture presented by the contributors to the volume in a neat positivist bow:

> This means, in short, that societal imperatives define the ethos and conduct of military personnel in operations, whereas military professional imperatives drive the ethos and behaviour of soldiers in the barracks during times of force development and training. Getting this right is the concentrated essence of military culture (p 269).

But is it really? Or is this the cultural horizon (or mirror image) beyond which the editors and many Western educated and trained scholars and practitioners in this field for that matter, struggle to see?

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