

Efforts to aid US roil anthropology Some object to project on Iraq, Afghanistan

By Bryan Bender, Globe Staff | October 8, 2007

WASHINGTON - A new project in which university anthropologists study tribal customs in Iraq and Afghanistan for the US military has prompted a fierce backlash among academics, some of whom accuse their colleagues of engaging in a wartime effort that violates their professional ethics.

The handful of anthropologists working with so-called human terrain teams designed to help commanders navigate the cultural thickets of both countries are being accused of "prostituting science" and presiding over the "militarization of anthropology," the study of the social practices and cultural origins of humans.

Internet blogs oppose the project, urging "anthropologists of the world, unite!" Academic journal articles with titles such as "Anthropologists as Spies" criticize the efforts. And some of the scientists under attack fear they could be blackballed by their profession.

Felix Moos, who has been an anthropology professor at the University of Kansas for 47 years, is helping train the human terrain teams at nearby Fort Leavenworth. Colleagues who oppose his actions have called him a "killer for hire."

"Academia looks at me as being too close to the military," he said in recent interview in his crowded campus office, copies of the Nepali Manual of Insurgency and Counterinsurgency strewn about. "It has affected me negatively. I have been accused of introducing spies into academia."

At issue is a longstanding code of ethics for the discipline, one which decrees that anthropological research should never be used to inflict harm, must always have the consent of the population being studied, and must not be conducted in secret.

The debate over the role of anthropology in national security is expected to come to a head next month in an American Anthropological Association report examining the ethical questions of cooperating with the military.

Last week, a group calling itself the Network of Concerned Anthropologists urged colleagues to sign a "pledge of nonparticipation in counterinsurgency."

While anthropology conducted on behalf of the military is "often presented by its proponents as work that builds a more secure world, protects US soldiers on the battlefield or promotes cross-cultural understanding," the pledge states, "at base it contributes instead to a brutal war of occupation which has entailed massive casualties."

Such work "breaches relations of openness and trust with the people anthropologists work with around the world," it added.

One of its authors is David Price, a professor at Saint Martin's University in Lacey, Wash., who is also a member of the ethics commission set to report in November.

"I am not sure that adequate consent [from the research subjects] is going on," said Price. He said he believes it will be difficult to know how the military and intelligence agencies will use the

population studies.

"I am not opposed to anthropologists engaging with the military, but I am very concerned when it happens under conditions of secrecy," he said. "There will always be spies but it shouldn't be anthropologists who are doing it."

The military's own descriptions of the new teams give pause to Price and others - such as one Pentagon official who likened them to the Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support project during the Vietnam War. That effort helped identify Vietnamese suspected as communists and Viet Cong collaborators; some were later assassinated by the United States.

But some anthropologists in favor of the program urge their colleagues to look beyond stereotypes and assess the military's new efforts firsthand.

"The military is changing in a dramatic way," said Brian Selmeski, an anthropology researcher at the Royal Military College of Canada who consults with the US Army and Air Force. "It is reevaluating itself not just to make war but to fix some profound deficiencies."

He stressed that the highly controversial human terrain teams are just one way anthropologists assist the military. Others include teaching at military colleges and helping draft cultural training programs for soldiers operating overseas.

"I don't want to help them kill people," Selmeski said. "What I want to do is help them avoid conflict."

The US forces' superficial understanding of local tribal customs and ancient ethnic and sectarian rivalries has hampered their efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan. An outstretched arm, palm facing forward, for example, means "stop" in most Western cultures, but in Iraq it's considered a sign of welcome. Confusion over the signal has had deadly consequences, leading US troops to open fire at Iraqi civilians who didn't stop at checkpoints.

Authorities hope the human terrain project, which plans to create 26 teams by next summer, can help avoid such potentially disastrous misunderstandings, according to Jim Greer, the deputy program manager. One seven-person team is working in Afghanistan and five teams are on the ground in Iraq.

But Greer worries that unless the academic world can get past its deep suspicions about the military's intentions, finding enough brainpower to make the project work "could get tough."

Greer maintains that the project is sensitive to anthropologists' concerns, pointing to the fact that the anthropologists' work - if not the military's - will be unclassified and their findings available for publication.

"It's all open-source research," said Greer, who has a master's degree in education. "They are not spies. They don't have informants running around."

Selmeski of the Royal Military College of Canada believes the US armed forces must do more to ease anthropologists' concerns, and more independent monitoring of the project could help. "There is no charter or civilian oversight or a human subjects review board," he said.

Kerry Fosher, recently hired as the command social scientist at the Marine Corps Intelligence Activity in Quantico, Va., has been pleased so far with her dealings with the military. "I asked a lot

of really hard questions about what kind of freedoms I would have," she said.

But she said it's still unclear whether the military bureaucracy will tolerate her approach.

"One thing I will not give up is my ability to step back . . . and get the long view," Fosher said. "That's why they want us but it is very difficult" for the military's rigid hierarchy to accept their methods.

Specific guidelines are needed for the relationship to work, she added.

Jim Peacock, an anthropologist at the University of North Carolina who is chairman of the ethics commission, says he believes there is enough room to help the military if there is enough transparency and oversight to make anthropologists more comfortable. Using anthropological data for use in a military offensive would probably "violate the code," he said. But teaching cultural sensitivities to military personnel before they deploy "might not do harm and it might even diminish harm."

Bryan Bender can be reached at bender@globe.com. ■

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