

# Cultural Topography Mapping Exercise

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Identifying the Operational Cultural Narrative

# Problem Set:

General sense that culture is important

-but-

- Cultures are complex
- Rife with internal contradictions
  - Multiple narratives
- Individuals within any particular group belong to or are influenced by multiple cultural layers
  - National, ethnic, religious, regional, tribal, socio-economic, generational, gendered, peer group, etc.
  - Some ascriptive, some constructed

# Problem Set:

So, from an operational standpoint, which parts of the culture matter?

Influenced by:

- Context
- Issue
- Recent events
- Opinion leaders

# Key Question

For the purposes of intelligence forecasting the question becomes:

Which of the cultural traits matter  
for **this actor**  
on **this issue**  
at **this point in time**?

In short: What is the **operational cultural narrative**?

# Cultural Topography Method

**The purpose:** Isolate and assess cultural factors at play on issues of policy interest and to distinguish the degree to which they are likely to influence decisionmaking and outcome.

Mapping exercises done across time, multiple issues, and on diverse groups within a society may aid in understanding that society's "Cultural Topography."

## Step 1:

# Identify an Issue of Policy Interest

**Issue:** Prospects for regime-threatening political opposition in Subaria during the next six months.

Avoid general profiles.

Cultural research should be issue-driven.

## Step 2: Select an Actor

**Issue:** Prospects for regime-threatening political opposition in Subaria during the next six months.

Actor:  
Leadership  
Cadre

Actor:  
Security Organization

Actor:  
Young males

Actor:  
Dissident  
Group

Actor:  
Prosperous  
Urban Elite

Actor:  
Ethnic  
grouping

Actor:  
Village  
Council

Actor:  
Nascent  
terrorist cell

Designate the actors who affect or are affected by the issue you selected.

Isolate **one of these** for cultural analysis. This actor may be the one you deem most important, one that is dangerously understudied, or one which may present a wild card for the future.

## Step 2: Select an Actor

**Issue:** Prospects for regime-threatening political opposition in Subaria during the next six months.

Actor:  
Leadership  
Figure

Actor:  
Bureaucracy

Actor:  
Housewives

Actor:  
**Dissident  
Group**

Actor:  
Prosperous  
Urban Elite

Actor:  
Ethnic  
grouping

Actor:  
Village  
Council

Actor:  
Nascent  
terrorist cell

Designate the actors who affect or are affected by the issue you selected.

Isolate one of these for cultural analysis. This actor may be the one you deem most important, one that is dangerously understudied, or one which may present a wild card for the future.



## Step 3:

# Amass a Range of Cultural Influences

**Issue:** Prospects for regime-threatening political opposition in Subaria during the next six months.



Map out the various cultural influences which may guide the behavior of members of this group within the context of the issue or question you're assessing. The possible influences provided here are illustrative. Remove those not relevant for your issue and add the range of influences which are.

## Step 4:

# Explore Cultural Data from Four Perspectives

**Issue:** Prospects for regime-threatening political opposition in Subaria during the next six months.



Begin to explore how these influences impact your actor's decisionmaking *on this issue* from four perspectives:

**Identity:** The character traits this group assigns to itself, the reputation it pursues, and individual roles and statuses it designates to members.

**Norms:** Accepted and expected modes of behavior.

**Values:** Material or ideational goods that are honored or confer increased status to members.

**Perceptual Lens:** The filter through which this group determines "facts" about others.

In specific terms ask:

## **Identity:**

- Which factors surrounding this issue would cause this actor's identity to be threatened or co-opted?
- Is group cohesion strong along identity lines in response to this issue? What would cause the group to fracture? Unite behind a common front?
- What roles and statuses might group members seek to protect?

## **Norms:**

- Are social institutions or common practices under threat?
- Which practices are deeply internalized and likely to cause push-back?
- Which practices are compatible with US interests on this issue?
- Would changes in this issue area offer members a way out of increasingly unpopular normative practices?

## Questions cont...:

### **Values:**

- What is considered “honorable” behavior in this issue area?
- Which values are under threat?
- Which values might be co-opted in moving US interests forward?
- Where might value differences between target groups present an opportunity to exploit cleavages?

### **Perceptual Lens:**

- What are the preconceived notions of this group concerning U.S. behavior? Character?
- What are group beliefs about the future?
- What hurdles must we overcome in messaging to this group on this issue?

## Possible Research Methods for Isolating Identity, Norms, Values and Perceptual Lens:

### Material culture

- Note street and school names, monuments, memorials in order to identify common heroes and important historical narratives.
- Identify what is voluntarily displayed in homes and find out what it means.
- Learn artistic and historic symbolism.

### Myth/Narrative – which is in play?

- Track gossip networks, hold focus groups, interview key keepers of local culture, identify patterns of “conventional wisdom,” and assess content analysis of blogs.

## Possible Research Methods for Isolating Identity, Norms, Values and Perceptual Lens:

### Media

- Watch sitcoms to identify norms under flux and classify common problem-solving devices.
- Dramas tackle behavior that is still taboo.
- Uncover themes in popular literature, poetry.
- Take note of popular response to musical performances/lyrics.

### Political Rhetoric

- Content analysis can highlight norm strength or isolate a value in play.
- Observe political rhetoric under stressful situations: which narratives do politicians draw on to legitimize their behavior? Pacify the public? Which work? Which don't?
- Follow the money: despite rhetoric, what do budget lines tell you about values, priorities?

## Possible Research Methods for Isolating Identity, Norms, Values and Perceptual Lens:

- Who attends social ceremonies, rituals? What do they mean?
- Assess gender relations.
- Isolate when, where culture is taught overtly, systematically.
  - Childhood texts (special emphasis on taught history), media, fables, songs, heroes.
- Employ secondary source interviews. Often outsiders who have experienced the culture for prolonged periods are more conscious of its norms and values than those indigenous to it.
- Isolate and track typical modes of dissent.

## Possible Research Methods for Isolating Identity, Norms, Values and Perceptual Lens:

- Map the social structure: what are typical roles and statuses within this community? Is there a hierarchy? How do members identify with one another?
  - Salutations helpful.
  - Role identities necessary to understanding social hierarchy.
- Action chains (what order of events make sense as problem solving devices in this culture?).
- Litmus test: do you understand the humor? What is okay to joke about? What not?
- Language (which concepts emphasized, which not?).
- Status—how are social rewards and punishments doled out?



## Step 5:

### Assemble Critical Cultural Factors

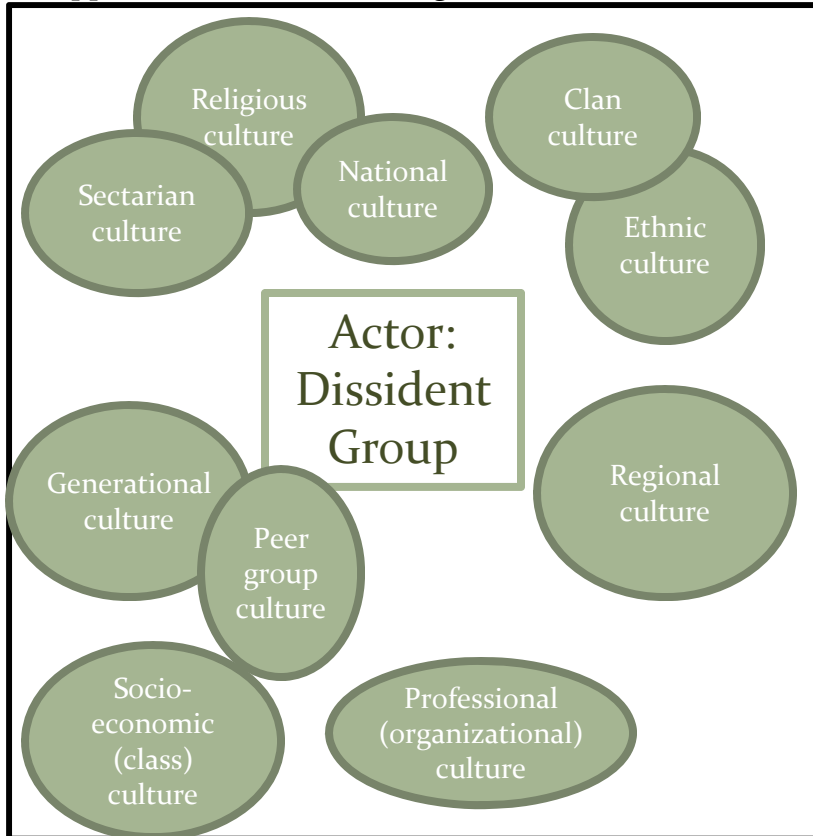
Scrutinize the data you have for signs of consistency in the areas of identity, norms, values, and perceptual lens. The more prominent the consistency, the more likely you've isolated a critical cultural factor.

For each cultural factor, evaluate:

1. **Relevance** for issue.
2. **Robustness** of the factor question.
  - How well established?
  - How widely shared amongst members of this group?
  - To what extent is opinion or behavior that is inconsistent with this aspect of identity, norms, values or perceptual lens rewarded or punished internally by other members of this group?
3. Likelihood of this factor to provoke a **Response** (cooperative or conflictual) when external actors engage this group on this issue.

## Step 6: Mapping

**Issue:** Prospects for regime-threatening political opposition in Subaria during the next six months.

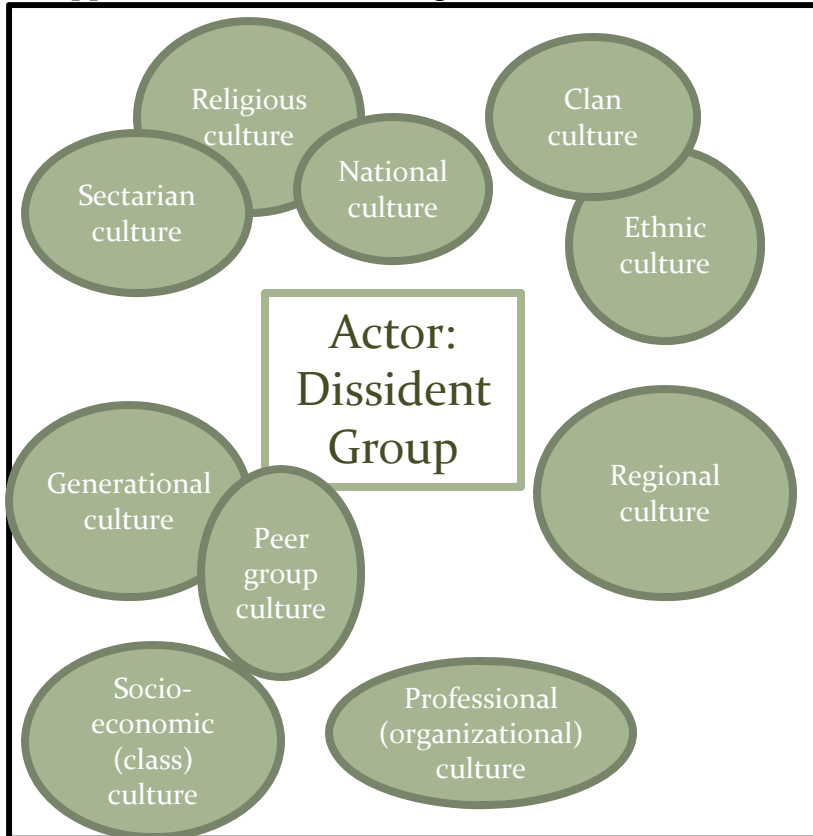


After you have isolated a set of critical cultural factors, map the origin of each from among the various cultural influences you identified in Step 3 (national, ethnic, tribal, professional, etceteras). Which tradition/influence serves as the primary source of each critical identity, norm, value or perceptual lens factor? Is this factor confined to that domain, or shared across other sources of cultural influence?

The purpose of this mapping exercise is to define for yourself and the audience of your eventual intelligence product the influence boundaries of these factors—within which domains are they key drivers, and within which are they not?

## Step 6: Mapping

**Issue:** Prospects for regime-threatening political opposition in Subaria during the next six months.



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Your mapping exercise may reveal that critical cultural factors are spread across the cultural landscape—they are not confined to a particular ethnic tradition or geographic region.

Alternatively, your mapping exercise may reveal an important concentration of critical factors stemming from one or two key cultural domains.

## Step 7: Assessing Results

Based on the outcome of your mapping exercise, a finished Cultural Topography analysis will identify which aspects of identity, norms, values and perceptual lens are most important to understand in engaging this actor on this issue.

- CCFs which represent points of possible leverage and cooperation.
- CCF red lines which are likely to spark conflict.
- Within which tradition ought our messages to this group on this issue be packaged?

## Step 7: Assessing Results

The probable influence boundaries of the critical cultural factors (CCFs) identified.

- Do most of the CCFs stem from one cultural tradition or source of influence? If so, what else do we need to know about this cultural domain in order to act effectively?
- Are the members of the group under study drawing from multiple cultural traditions/influences when they respond to this issue? Will it cause them to fracture when pressure on the myriad aspects of this issue is exerted?
- To what extent do adversarial groups in the region share the same cultural mapping, reflecting common sources of cultural influence, as does the group under study? Where not? How does that inform forecasting on future cooperation or divergence between these groups?