

# HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT: RITUAL ITEMS AS INHIBITORS TO CULTURE CHANGE

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## Introduction

The incidents of racism and sexual misconduct in the military that have surfaced, and been exposed by news media, are now recognized as issues that go beyond the actions of individuals within the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF).<sup>1</sup> After years of repeated and failed attempts to address the problem, there seems to finally be acknowledgement that much of the problem lies with the existing culture in the CAF.<sup>2</sup> This recognition can be found most clearly in the report from the Minister of National Defence's Advisory Panel on Systemic Racism and Discrimination: "Racism in Canada is not a glitch in the system; it is the system. Colonialism and intersecting systems such as patriarchy, heteronormativity and ableism constitute the root causes of inequality within Canada."<sup>3</sup> The report further states:

The Defence Team's foundational values were chiselled from Canadian ones, and formed the basis of all its practices, assumptions and approaches. The Defence Team's work schedules and holidays which are mostly based on its Christian traditions, the food prepared in mess halls which often revolves around traditional recipes from Euro-Canadian meals, and the gendered language of French – and of some English words – these are all cornerstones of unintentional biases. These practices are codified, personally and collectively, into the daily lives of each member of the Defence Team.<sup>4</sup>

In this paper, I argue for paying more attention to nuanced elements of culture, such as the role that traditions and rituals play in the maintenance and transmission of culture. There is an unspoken culture that exists at all levels which escapes notice, but which is lived—a culture that has to be experienced and witnessed in order to be understood, a culture that exists below the surface, hidden in plain sight, even for those who live it.<sup>5</sup>

In what follows, I focus on two particular cultural examples hidden in plain sight: (1) ritual items that exist on the periphery, almost invisible, until they are brought forth and utilized in traditional activities

like regimental dinners; and (2) the battle honours that regiments carry to commemorate their history, especially the language used to describe that history. These examples are drawn from personal experience during my service as a health care administration officer in the CAF (2001-2010) and my observations during a long-term ethnographic project with veterans of the CAF as part of my doctoral research. This project has involved extensive, prolonged, and repeated interaction with close to 40 key informants over the past decade, with open-ended two-way ongoing contact between myself and my interlocutors, as well as regular participant-observation of social media groups dedicated to current-serving members and veterans. Participants cover a range of service periods from the 1960s to 2020, come from a variety of ethnocultural backgrounds, and from across the spectrum of sex, gender, and sexual orientation. Veterans play a key role in the maintenance and transmission of culture within the CAF, yet their role seems to be missing from official government analyses and the overall effort directed at culture change.

### “Ritual” Items: Colonel Nobody

An example of these semi-hidden aspects of culture is the existence of what could be understood as “ritual items”. I am referring to items that are used to transmit and convey tradition and culture, items that do not operate in the everyday but are brought out during special occasions and play a role in initiations or other ceremonies.<sup>6</sup> These are items that may reside on the shelves of senior members of regiments, or in curio display cases in demarcated social spaces like messes, or in regimental museums large and small, items that reside simultaneously within sight but also in the periphery until they are brought out for special occasions, such as regimental dinners. The question is: what are these items, and how is their function understood and explained within the regiment, especially when they have a controversial or problematic story attached to them? Unless one is present when these items are brought out and the stories are told, one would miss their significance within the regiment. The very act of being present when these items are brought out marks the individual as being an insider, as being fully part of the group, in

comparison to outsiders who are not granted access to the knowledge and meanings conveyed by these items. Within my own regiment we had some of these ritual items.<sup>7</sup> One example in particular that I draw upon is: Colonel Nobody.

I was first introduced to Colonel Nobody when I was called into the Commanding Officer's (CO) office and briefed on what my duties were going to be as the newest and most junior officer at one of our upcoming regimental dinners. I was going to be responsible for Colonel Nobody, and to introduce "him" to all the members of the regiment, past and present, who would be in attendance. My CO briefly told me the history of Colonel Nobody and I was placed immediately in a very difficult position, one that caused friction between me and the other officers in my regiment: Colonel Nobody was a human skull, with the top of the skull on a hinge and with a snuff box contained inside. But Colonel Nobody was not just "any" skull, for the tale of the skull held it to be that of a Zulu Warrior who had been defeated by members of the regiment during the Boer War. While I had been with the regiment for the better part of the year by this point, this was the first time that I had encountered Colonel Nobody, or heard anything about this item. In the end, I made the decision to refuse to be Colonel Nobody's escort. Thankfully, that CO was willing to listen as I explained the ethical problems I had with the use of a human skull as a war-trophy, and the way it was used in our regimental dinners. I was relieved of that responsibility, and when the regimental dinner occurred, Colonel Nobody did not make an appearance. A number of members of the regiment, especially from within the officer cadre, made known their complaints about the breach of tradition. However, a number of the Black members of the regiment privately thanked me for having put an end to something that always made them feel unwelcome, given who Colonel Nobody was supposed to have been and the casual racism underpinning the grotesque use of this skull as a trinket of ceremony.<sup>8</sup>

In order to address the existence of ritual items such as Colonel Nobody, to determine where these items are and their significance,

included requires an intensive and prolonged effort at exploring the hidden elements of CAF culture. Given the ephemeral nature of these items, existing on the periphery until they are brought forth and used in traditional rituals, they will go unnoticed until they are directly encountered or experienced. By not noticing their existence in a liminal space until brought forth, their role as emblems of regimental culture, and how that culture adapts or resists macro-level culture change will also continue to be ignored.

## Battle Honours

Continuing at the regimental level, I provide another example of where the desire to enact culture change in the CAF can be inhibited: the existence and role of “battle honours”. Battle honours have a long tradition in the CAF, with a lineage traced directly back to the British crown prior to Confederacy and the creation of Canada. Such honours “are awarded to provide public recognition of the deeds and activities of formed military bodies, beyond the demands of normal duty and the high standards expected of Canadian Forces (CF) members”<sup>9</sup> and “to publicly commemorate a battle or campaign, the memory of which will be a constant source of pride for the unit involved”.<sup>10</sup> As such, battle honours hold a privileged place within regiment traditions and history.

The issue of specific battle honours, notably those granted to units that were mobilized in response to the Northwest Rebellion/Resistance, is a key example of how such items can serve to inhibit culture. The very name used to refer to this incident is indicative of how commemoration itself can be a source of tension and conflict between tradition/colonialism (Rebellion), and Indigenous peoples (Resistance). The very choice of term has implications for reconciliation, in that the colonial term continues to subjugate, while the Indigenous-preferred term provides an entry point to understanding the complex nuances of this moment in Canadian history by disrupting the taken-for-granted colonial perspective.<sup>11</sup> The controversy surrounding these particular battle

honours was also raised by the Minister of National Defence's Advisory Panel on Systemic Racism and Discrimination, which recommended the "elimination of current and historical references of First Nations People as enemies of Canada."<sup>12</sup> As it argued:

Symbols, names of distinguished people or historical references are often used in the interest of creating pride in and belonging to a specific unit or base. Within the CAF, these references sometimes include battle honours or hero worship of people who fought against Indigenous Peoples. Flags, statues, commemorative coins and names of bases or teams need to be revised if they portray only the colonialist/settler perspective and symbolize a system of "us against them". There should be no honour in flying a unit flag that bears symbols of victory against this nation's original peoples.<sup>13</sup>

Based on observations made over the last decade of my ethnographic research with CAF veterans, I have noticed that the maintenance of a regiment's history is frequently delegated by the active component of the regiment to the veterans who make up the regimental association, and part of this responsibility includes teaching newer members of the regiment and the general public about this history.

While almost every single one of the regimental associations representing the eighteen regiments that hold battle honours for the Northwest Resistance make some reference to their regiment's participation in that campaign, most of them do not go into detail. One notable exception is the Queen's Own Rifles (QOR), currently a Reserve Force infantry regiment located in downtown Toronto. On the webpage for the QOR Museum, the regimental association of the QOR, a lengthy description of the regiment's actions are provided, along with links to a number of historical texts written by previous members of the regiment. Within this particular digital text is this passage that attempts to explain why the military was mobilized:

In Ottawa the politicians hit the roof. It looked like the whole west was on the verge of rebellion. Sir John A. MacDonald's plan to secure the west with the Canadian Pacific Railway was supposed to protect us from the threat of American expansionism. Now the west was in danger of being lost to Meti [sic] and natives. Ottawa mobilized the army.<sup>14</sup>

Unfortunately, this type of problematic and uncritical representation of history is not simply something of the distant past. During Remembrance Week 2022, at an event honouring the history and traditions of the QOR, I saw displays of memorabilia from the regiment associated with this particular action. No one seemed at all phased by the language in the display materials or that these items even were on display in the first place, particularly without any material to provide a more nuanced contextualization of the events.

The framing of Indigenous peoples as enemies, in texts and displays uncritically celebrating the historic actions and traditions of this particular regiment, is perhaps what the Minister of National Defence's Advisory Panel on Systemic Racism and Discrimination was referring to in the explanation for their recommendation that such battle honours be eliminated. Veterans who have acted as key informants in the course of my research have relayed stories of the efforts they have made while involved in other regimental associations (particularly that of the Royal Canadian Regiment) to at least shift the battle honours to a less prominent position, and not to be central components of the regiment's "colours" (flags), if they are to be retained. Other efforts are being made to provide more balanced context to the narratives surrounding the Northwest Resistance, including referring to it as such instead of under the colonial name of Northwest Rebellion. Currently, the way that these honours are displayed and are part of the cultural history and heritage of these regiments reveals the racist overtones evident both implicitly and explicitly. This example highlights another moment in which the potential for open resistance to culture change efforts within the CAF is apparent.



## Culture Change: Possible, But Challenging

This paper has provided two examples of the types of hidden culture and associated behaviour that exist within the CAF, both of which demonstrate that there are aspects of culture and behaviour that exist in a more liminal form, on the edges of awareness and in ways where they remain unquestioned. From ritual items that reinforce elements of tradition, to symbols of tradition, it is evident that objects entrenched in old ways have the possibility to create resistance towards culture change. So long as they are left in place, even on the periphery, hidden in plain sight, they hold significance. The new *CAF Ethos: Trusted to Serve* states that: “It is equally important to recognize past inequities and exclusion in CAF history and traditions, and to humbly work to change them in order to realize a more competent national institution that embodies our ethos.”<sup>15</sup> While noting this role of history and tradition, and the potential to correct it, the way that history and tradition can exist on the periphery and be relayed by or through items rather than verbal communication indicates a need to actively look for moments, places, and things that demonstrate and reinforce the problems that the CAF acknowledges exist. In each of these examples, there are moments of possibility for change or resistance. Knowing where these moments are, where these sticky points reside, will better enable the CAF to finally have a chance at succeeding in changing its culture. Having these moments continue to exist unidentified and unexamined on the periphery, in liminal spaces, runs the risk of limiting significant and meaningful change in the CAF.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The presence of a systemic problem within the culture of the Canadian Armed Forces has been highlighted and explained in-depth in four extensive reports: Marie Deschamps, *External Review into Sexual Misconduct and Sexual Harassment in the Canadian Armed Forces*. External Review Authority, 2015; Morris J. Fish, *Report of the Third Independent Review Authority to the Minister of National Defence*. Department of National Defence, 202; Louise Arbour, *Report of the Independent External Comprehensive Review of the Department of National Defence and the Canadian Armed Forces*. Borden Ladner Gervais, 2022; Department of National Defence, *Minister of National Defence Advisory Panel on Systemic Racism and Discrimination – Final Report*, 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Karen D. Davis, “Socio-Cultural Dynamics in Gender and Military Contexts: Seeking and Understanding Change,” *Journal of Military, Veteran and Family Health* 8, supplement 1 (2022): 66-74; Charlotte Duval-Lantoine, *The Ones We Let Down: Toxic Leadership and Gender Integration in the Canadian Forces* (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2022); and Marcia Kovitz, “Sexual (mis)conduct in the Canadian Forces,” *Critical Military Studies* 7, no. 1 (2021): 79-99.

<sup>3</sup> Department of National Defence, *Minister of National Defence Advisory Panel*, 21.

<sup>4</sup> Department of National Defence, *Minister of National Defence Advisory Panel*, 21.

<sup>5</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge University Press, 1977).

<sup>6</sup> Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Aldine Publishing, 1969).

<sup>7</sup> In the course of my doctoral research, CAF veterans have made me aware of a number of such items. Because of the potential risk of retribution that could result from openly discussing the problems associated with such items, risk that I do not think I can ethically subject any of my interlocutors to, I have chosen to use this example from my own personal experience.

<sup>8</sup> After presenting this paper at the Inter-University Seminar on Armed Forces & Society in Ottawa, Ontario in October 2022, the Canadian Armed Forces queried the existence of “Colonel Nobody”. The official response that I received as a result of this query was that it had been determined that this item was a carefully constructed replica and not an actual human skull, that it had been donated to the regiment in 1963, and that it has been placed in storage until a proper means of disposing of it can be determined. While this is of some comfort, it does not address the extremely problematic story that had become attached to this item. I have since heard from two other former members of that regiment that this item had been prominently displayed behind the bar in the mess, and brought out on special occasions, as recently as November 2019.

<sup>9</sup> Department of National Defence, *The Heritage Structure of the Canadian Forces*, 1999, Chapter 3.1.1.

<sup>10</sup> Department of National Defence, *The Heritage Structure*, Chapter 3.2.18.

<sup>11</sup> For deeper analysis, see: Janet C. Gaudet, “Dismantling the Patriarchal Altar from Within,” *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples* 10, no. 1 (2014): 58-66; Cody Groat and Kim Anderson, “Holding place: Resistance, reframing, and relationality in the representation of Indigenous history,” *Canadian Historical Review* 102, no. 3 (2021): 465-484; and Matthew J. McRae, “Remembering Rebellion, Remembering Resistance: Collective Memory, Identity, and the Veterans of 1869-1870 and 1885,” Dissertation, University of Western Ontario, 2018.

<sup>12</sup> Department of National Defence, *Minister of National Defence Advisory Panel*, 35.

<sup>13</sup> While the Minister of National Defence Advisory Panel on Systemic Racism and Discrimination made this recommendation, they did not directly name those regiments that fly colours holding battle honours from the Northwest Resistance. Unfortunately, due to space limitations, I cannot include a list of those regiments here, but it is available upon request. Department of National Defence, *Minister of National Defence Advisory Panel*.

<sup>14</sup> “Northwest Rebellion 1885”, The Queen’s Own Rifles of Canada Regimental Museum and Archive, accessed December 26, 2022, <https://qormuseum.org/history/timeline-1856-1899/northwest-rebellion-1885/>.

<sup>15</sup> Department of National Defence, *Canadian Armed Forces Ethos: Trusted to Serve* (2022), 51.

## Author Bio

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Walter Callaghan is a PhD candidate in medical anthropology at the University of Toronto. His doctoral research has focused on how veterans come to understand, explain, and make meaning of psychological distress, particularly moral injuries. He previously served as a health care administration officer in the Canadian Armed Forces, 2001-2010.