

Ritual Ethnography: Uniforms in the Air Force

The ritual I am analyzing is the wearing of uniforms in the military, particularly in the Air Force. Two of my closest friends are a part of the Air Force Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) and they spend a few days a week in uniform and have official events, classes, and labs that they have to attend. What I found interesting about their uniform is how it affects their adherence to rules and laws and increases their attention to how they are perceived when they wear it outside Air Force settings, such as on sidewalks or in dining halls. For example, they are not to express political opinions or break any simple civilian laws such as jay-walking while in uniform, because their actions in uniform are representative of that of the military. In essence, their uniforms are an emblem of their community, the Air Force, and when they practice the “ritual” of wearing their uniforms in public, they themselves become a symbol of the United States and military in turn. ROTC is a rite of passage in that it is a training program to enter into the military, so I was particularly interested in how their independent and critical thinking minds, often a prevailing personality trait at MIT, dealt with the collective uniformity that is mandated and drilled by the Air Force both physically with uniforms and with the uniformity of thoughts.

The Air Force ROTC is divided by rankings and roles given to each cadet, or trainee, following the Field Training Program they participate in as sophomores in college. In their first 2 years in ROTC, they serve as unranked cadets with their primary roles being to learn the rules and requirements of the Air Force. Following their Field Training, they are assigned ranks to teach younger students until they graduate and commission in the military. In this way, Field Training also serves as a rite of passage for the ROTC students to begin teaching and choosing their careers for service in the Air Force. The Air Force ROTC program is guided by tradition, ceremonies, and leadership labs that instill the values of the Air Force into their cadets. The cadets are expected to wear uniform to class and in public on specific days of the week when they are to participate in various training and leadership workshops. Not only are they required to show physical uniformity in their uniforms, but they also cannot

express their own political opinions or speak negatively of anyone in their chain of command above them, including the President. When they are in uniform, which is the totemic emblem of the Air Force, they themselves become emblems of the Air Force and the United States. Their rank is indicated by a symbol with lines on their uniform and determines how they are saluted or how they are supposed to salute to other cadets and officers. Only in uniform does the lower ranked ROTC cadet have to salute the higher ranked cadet or officer. These salutations and expectations of the cadets are enforced when they are in uniform to model for their behavior as commissioned officers in the future. I was curious however as to how these ROTC cadets, as MIT students, felt about this enforced uniformity of speech and behavior and if it conflicted with their individual points of view. I interviewed my friends and they talked about how they often struggle with the discord between their ties to the military and their individual points of view, including understanding that the military-industrial complex necessitates their jobs. They also explained that they are sometimes criticized for their service and affiliation depending on the social climate or movements. This criticism seems to exacerbate their feelings of dissonance of being in the military while disagreeing with the United States or its policies, for example.

I wanted to learn more about how they felt about their behavior representing the United States and they pointed out to me that they felt their service was more about the goal and mission of serving as opposed to the country they represented while doing it. The military is often viewed from the outside as a collective that completes tasks assigned to them by the military for the purposes of protecting the country. Serving in the military is viewed as the ultimate act of service and patriotism, where they support their country and want to protect it while reserving their right to be critical of the nation they are serving. This felt similar to observation and practice of religion in the traditional sense. For me, I have been taught that blind faith in my religion is not the correct way to practice but that I should continually question the purpose of our rituals and values, which is similar to the feelings of the cadets that I interviewed. They are fully aware of the reasons for practices and rules and how some long-standing practices are based on tradition. In this way, the Air Force ROTC is very

similar to initiation into a religion where they are encouraged to question what they are entering before completing the traditions and paperwork that commission them to join.

Furthermore, the act of wearing the uniform in societal settings such as class, dining halls, or while walking and sitting in airports was the ritual I was most interested in. The wearing of the uniform is the collective representation that garners attention and respect and is sacred, while the profane lies in their classes and day-to-day lives. When they wear their uniforms in various settings outside of MIT and the Air Force communities however, the line between the collective and individual becomes more nuanced. They recounted to me that while practicing training in Boston at another college, they heard of hateful and negative comments directed at them online. This criticism and hate hurt my friends deeply and they were confused as to why this was directed at them. They then realized it was because of their uniforms and what they represented. In the current climate, with the war in Ukraine, heavy criticism of misuse of military power, and the deployment of many American military branches, there has been a rising sentiment against the actions of the military often directed at any individuals in uniform. While my friends said they strongly agreed with the sentiments against the war in Ukraine, the hateful comments directed at them made them feel especially dissonant with their identity in the Air Force. When they are in an environment where they are known as individuals to others, such as MIT, they feel that their identity is more connected to the individual but when they leave the bubble that is MIT and Harvard, they are met with people who see them as symbols of their clan, the Air Force, and they are viewed to be a part of their collective. People who do not know them as individuals or MIT Students, view them as symbols of the military, while they tend to see themselves as more independent thinkers and individuals.

In order to further understand the ranks and purposes of the symbols on their uniforms, I attended one of their leadership labs where they were practicing for Air Force field training. There I found them practicing leadership and team building as well as walking in units. I wanted to see how their uniforms and rules actually functioned in practicing field training. The most interesting drill I saw them complete was meant for maintenance of

formation, where they would yell every 5 minutes “If the cadet in front of you is taller, tap their shoulder and move forward...” in order to eventually create an advantageous unit formation. In directing this drill, I saw the younger unranked cadets follow the commands of the upperclassmen ranked cadets. In Durkheim’s “Origins of Totemic Beliefs”, he mentions that in order to function as society, people are willing to learn to obey commands and follow certain rules of action to a point where following those commands is done without hesitation. In this case, the cadets, the trainees of this “religion,” are taught to obey commands that are “short and sharp”. Durkheim discusses that an individual or collective is given respect because of the power bestowed upon the representation that expresses it. In this case the representation that expresses commands or rules is the higher ranked officer to whom the cadets are trained to show respect while in uniform. This is meant to prepare the cadets for the Air Force as well as Field Training where they are expected to automatically defer to those officers who are of higher rank. Essentially, the cadets are trained for mental pressure and to automatically show respect every time an officer with higher rank is observed. In this way, the officers are not obeyed because of any moral authority or deliberation that has placed them in power but because of the automatic respect that they have been trained to feel. My friends talked about how the salutations and greetings and recognition of rankings have become implicit for them over the years as it was mandated and learned. This respect for authority within the military to obey a certain collective is their role in uniform but the individual is separate from these rules and requirements when out of uniform. This makes it appear as though the uniform is the main totemic emblem that places them in this “religion” and requires them to follow its stipulations. In this way, the ritual of wearing uniform is not an optional or additional tradition or ceremony as a ritual is viewed by most people, but is made to be a ritual because of what it symbolizes.

The Air Force is a military branch, which, like all other branches, requires officers to be prepared to work together and obey commands. The chain of command and uniformity of thoughts and actions is necessary for the cultural effervescence they are to demonstrate in the field. The uniform sets the boundary between when they are individuals and when they are a

part of the collective effervescence of moving, walking, and fighting as a unit. It is the difference between them being in and out of their role. Their motto is “Integrity first, service before self, and excellence in all that we do.” They have a unique set of collective values based on tradition and a set of skills, maneuvers, and uniform actions that guide them when they are participating in Air Force activities. These traditions, handbooks, and rules are as old as the Air Force itself and are meant to be respected and followed while cadets are in uniform. The Air Force is the religion and the uniform is the totemic emblem of membership, but it is also what places them in their role and makes them a symbol themselves. The ritual of wearing uniform is a physical rite of passage and initiation into the mental state and feeling of being a part of the Air Force.

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