



Army Museums: Military Identity in Question

military-Earth thinking notebook

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L'Armée de Terre dans la société

Army museums are at the heart of identity issues within the military community. They shed light on the needs, questions and evolution of this community.

In France, museums in general have a rather negative image that presents them as fixed institutions, far removed from the major preoccupations of their time and most often reserved for an elite. Yet they deserve a great deal of attention because they are so rich in information about the societies or human communities from which they emanate. But in general, they remain complex and ambiguous institutions. Their complexity is due first of all to their great variety: from "fine arts museums to science museums, from ecomuseums to history museums", their typology is uncertain and changing. Secondly, their ambiguity stems from the museum's subtle links with concepts such as heritage and the past. Far from being merely a showcase or showcase, the museum also participates in constructing them, selecting them and above all giving them meaning.

It is from this perspective that the military museum is approached. In this case, the manifest development over the last thirty years of army museums - formerly called museums of traditions or commonly known as weapons museums - raises questions because of its sudden and unusual character. What are the reasons and the meaning of this "museum inflation" [1]? What do these museums also reveal about the military community itself?

After underlining the characteristic evolution of the military museums over the last thirty years, the main methods of museum development will be described. The main mechanisms at work in army museums will be described, followed by the questions they also raise about the military community itself.

A museum inflation in the form of an awakening of identity

First of all, it is within the framework of the "identity revivals" specific to the Army in a general context marked by an extension of the cultural field that the military museum fact develops significantly from the 1980s.

During this decade, a dozen museums were inaugurated in the army. Three others will be opened during the 1990s [2]. Admittedly, this development does not mark the genesis of military museum practice, since some museums were already several decades old at the time, while the Army Museum was approaching its centenary. But, with the exception of the latter, most of these institutions are similar to the "halls of honour" of military academies with an exclusively limited influence. to military personnel, or even conservatories accumulating collections of technical equipment (armoured vehicles, artillery pieces) for training purposes. As for the army museum, although it remains a place of France's military memory, the definition it gives itself of itself makes it more of a "museum of fine arts, of the arts and of the military".and a repository of archaeology" turned towards "the tragic hours (...) of national history" [3]. All these examples have little to do with weapons museums as they exist today. The period in question thus sees an undeniable multiplication of military museums, most of which were created from scratch, while others proceeded from the transformation of former "rooms of honour" or conservatories and the renovation of older museums. In 1996, the army had 21 museums known as "museums of tradition", now placed under the supervision of the Delegation for Cultural and Historical Heritage of the Army, created in 1993, which ensures its overall coherence. All in all, the rather sudden scale of this development tends to constitute a real break in the military museum system: it therefore raises questions because it is so characteristic of the Army's recent history. Several lines of thought may also help to explain this phenomenon.

First of all, it is necessary to recall the general context of French society, which at the beginning of the 1980s was marked by a vast movement of "manifestations of ethnic, regional or local identities" [4]. 4] Invoking local particularities and "buried cultural forms" [5], the phenomenon takes on the accent of diffuse regionalisms against a background of an exaltation of an "all-cultural" characteristic of the decade that was beginning. In the same perspective, the year 1980, declared the "year of heritage" by the Council of Ministers, marked the beginning of a "widening of the heritage field" [6]. From 1981 onwards, the active policy of Minister Jack Lang confirmed the trend: remnants of the past that had hitherto remained without value were now elevated to the status of agricultural, local, traditional, industrial or regional heritage, before being exhibited in museums of the same name.

At the same time, in the Army, a dynamic of cultural and institutional reforms is in full swing. The semantics of the time summed up the state of mind, in line with the major socio-cultural changes that took place after 1968: "the army, a company like any other". At the time," explains André Thiéblemont, "the military was undergoing a kind of *aggiornamento*" that the institution undertook in a societal context that called into question the "social and economic status of the army".The whole against a backdrop of "miserable military service" [7] and latent anti-militarism. But the "somewhat radical" [8] movement [8] of normalization and openness that is consequently undertaken by the Army produces in the ranks a more or less diffuse feeling of "military service" [9] and a latent anti-militarism. But the "somewhat radical" [8] movement of normalization and

openness that is consequently being undertaken by the army is producing a more or less diffuse feeling in the ranks of a functionalization and a sort of trivialization of the soldier's job in an army that has become a simple defence tool stripped of all reference to traditions.

It is precisely in this general context that "a movement of identity expression" [9] can be observed in the units, of which the rise of museums tends to be one of the occurrences. Indeed, during the 1980s and 1990s, the phenomenon took very diverse forms: unbridled production of insignia, development of halls of honour, reappropriation of the traditions of the African army (68th RAA, 1st RCA, 31st^{me} RG...), creation of units with a marked identity (1st Rifle Regiment), "popotes" displaying memories of operations. The 1990s confirmed this trend by allowing a form of "military specificity" to be reaffirmed through professionalization and especially the conflicts in the Gulf and the former Yugoslavia, which allowed the Army to return to the essence of the profession. And if, at the beginning of the 1980s, "talking about military culture is irrelevant (...)" [10], fifteen years later it is now a question of a "culture (...)" and a heritage of the Army" [11].

However, on this last point, it was far from being a foregone conclusion, as it is true that before 1980 the notion of heritage generally referred only to works of art in public collections and monuments [12]. [12] Nevertheless, if the term now appears, it is in the sense of a single culture, that of the army, and it is in a mainly moral use - that of "bringing an ethic" [13] - that the term is understood. According to André Thiéblemont, this inclusion in the official discourse comes late. And if it is possible to affirm that the awakening of arms cultures is at the origin of this awareness, it is only later still that they are evoked in the sense of their standardization, in particular by the publication in 2003 of the Green Paper".Esprit de corps, traditions and identities in the Army».

Heritage, a question of identity

At this stage, although it is not possible to formally affirm that these manifestations of identity are at the origin of the development of military museums, they nevertheless appear to be closely linked to the notion of collective identity from which these manifestations stem. This collective identity is to be understood in the sense that the social sciences attribute to it, namely that of a social intention coming from the groups that seek to claim a place and to be recognized in the social space[14]. [14] By considering the army as a social space in its own right, the collective identity of the weapons would manifest a form of resistance to the normalizing pressures of the institution mentioned above. Finally, this identity would be articulated "on the basis of the awareness of particularisms (...); there is a collective identity because the members identify with something common" [15].

[15] It is on this last dimension of collective identity - the need to have something in common - that the museums are most likely to find themselves. Military museums probably act, in particular by promoting or building up a heritage whose materiality gives particular strength to the collective consciousness and to the identification of each individual with this identity. In this logic, the museum is no longer just a tool for exhibiting heritage, but a means of creating heritage, of "patrimonializing" objects of no apparent value. By selecting an object for its evocative value, putting it in the museum gives it a chosen meaning, a message. The value of the museum or heritage object is therefore not in a sense based on the value it would de facto carry. Rather, it is based more on the

meaning that is attributed to these objects at a particular moment in time, which then leads to their being considered as heritage and exhibited in a museum. A clod of earth will thus have no value in itself. But if it is a Waterloo clod, its value will appear quite different. However, the value will still be very variable and even radically different if it is displayed in a museum on either side of the Channel. If heritage thus appears at first glance as a *sui generis* notion, it is in fact a cultural practice whose history since antiquity demonstrates the variations according to civilisations and eras [16]. 16] In this sense, it appears as a very relative and eminently subjective notion. Above all, as a cultural practice, heritage refers to the collective representations, socio-political and cultural needs that underlie its constitution at a given moment in the history of a community or social body.

The reason for this phenomenon is probably that the object "is more easily shared than an intrinsic idea" [17]. 17] Above all, as soon as it is exhibited in a museum, "patrimonialized", the object "provokes in the spectators a phenomenon of identification and empathy" [18]. 18] Its materiality becomes a tangible proof of the idea it carries, of the meaning attributed to it and which it helps to make the visitor objective. The value assumed by the object seems so inseparable from the object itself that the process of "patrimonialization" that led to its constitution is erased in the face of this same value. The heritage character of the museum object tends to be permanent, immutable. The passage of time, the value attributed to the event of which the object is the evocation, the cult even sometimes developing around it, only reinforce the sacredness with which it can sometimes be invested. The case of Captain Danjou's hand exhibited in the Foreign Legion Museum is quite significant of this idea. The ceremony to which this object - though a simple articulated wooden prosthesis - gives rise along the sacred path, is somewhat akin to a cult. The analogy with the processions of relics of saints in Christianity, or even with those which, according to legend, the Athenians in the boat of Theseus - the national hero of Greek Antiquity - made to the Athenians - seems eloquent.

All in all, the identity and quasi-mystical dimension that heritage can thus cover is in fact a real "cultural process constituting a meaning, a mentality" [19] for a given community. 19] Beyond this, one may wonder whether heritage does not act in the sense of the formulation of a common destiny, or even at the collective level in that of an eschatology that would participate in giving meaning to the existence, death and life of the community that shares it. Now, "because it is susceptible to disintegrative violence, the vitality of the military corps is perhaps more dependent on its culture than that of other social groups" [20]. 20] [20] Therefore, heritage and related practices would respond to the need for culture and identity. They would contribute to the formulation of a common history and destiny that would be meaningful to military communities at a time in their history when perhaps this meaning would no longer be self-evident. Envisaged as "a privileged link between past, present and future, [heritage] becomes a stabilizing factor" [21].

21] It is probably in this perspective that we must place the fact of the military museum and the development of which it has been the object over the last thirty years. The heritage gathered in the military museums thus makes it possible to strengthen a collective identity, to "historicize" it and consequently to give it authenticity. By presenting what is conceived as the legacy of past generations, the museum heritage makes each person an "heir" [22], the delegate of a set of assets, but above all of a set of values and practices. Finally, because it is symbolically the property of a collectivity constituted as a legal person, it creates links between its members and seals a common destiny.

The plethora of approaches in the French Army are aimed at "patrimonializing" the slightest memory, the slightest remnant of the past - from the simple memory of an operation to the company's meals on hand to the showcase of traditions, via the in situ "museumization" of an armoured vehicle at the entrance to the district - demonstrate the importance and necessity of heritage practices for the military. And these practices, thanks to a favourable context specific to the army and society in general, do not seem to have stopped developing over the last thirty years.

However, the mechanisms implemented by military museums and the notions evoked in them also underline the many contradictions carried by the army itself as well as the relations it maintains with the major trends of its time and with society. It is in the form of lines of thought that these elements are addressed here.

Museum and heritage, dissonant images of reality

If the military museum is intimately linked to military cultures[23], whose heritage it symbolically gathers for each of them, it also manifests through its materiality the most salient features of these cultures. In this context, the museum seems to act in an eminently symbolic field by formulating a meaningful image of military reality rather than an exact reflection of that reality. This process of reproducing reality is, moreover, at the heart of museums in general [24]. 24] In the case of the army, however, the analysis of this mechanism is very enlightening in more than one respect.

In the first place, in fact, museums give the soldiers themselves the feeling of belonging to a community within a historical temporality and process, the history of France and the construction of the nation. In this context, the recent development of museums would seem to postulate the idea of a greater need for the insertion of the military fact in national history and, for the community, in the history of France. military community, the need to highlight the legitimacy of its existence at a time when precisely this legitimacy would be less obvious. Beyond this, the emphasis with which certain key messages - such as "patriotism, (...), individual commitment, the fight for freedom" - are being emphasised. 25] or the sense of sacrifice and the cult of the hero[26]- are delivered in army museums refers in a sense to the apparent retreat of these notions in the public space. In this perspective, it could be said that army museums would in fact formulate an image of the nation, of France and its de facto history that is out of step with the representations made of it and formulated in society. This discrepancy would be all the stronger as the army is in the process of "territorial, social and cultural retraction" [27]. In such a perspective, museums would be like veritable conservatories of values, of a history and a vision of the nation and the republic that are ultimately at odds with the rest of society. An examination of the civic school curricula of middle and high schools[28] is quite explicit from this point of view, as it shows a notable discrepancy between the pedagogy implemented by the national education system and that of the army museums in terms of republican values. This discrepancy is, moreover, to some extent intrinsic to the heritage insofar as the construction and management of the heritage are based on an interpretation of history that seeks to give it meaning. In other words, the military museum is basically a form of "appropriation of history" [29] by the community from which it emanates and which becomes heir to that history. This history is thus reconstructed or envisaged in some of its aspects for cultural and identity purposes, at the risk of appearing at odds with other historiographic visions of the same past. The museum of naval troops seems to be able to give a good illustration of this idea insofar as it evokes a

recent part of national history - the colonial period - whose legacy and appropriation still pose precisely this problem. The museums that deal with this theme - namely the Museum of the Arts and Civilizations of Africa, Asia, Oceania and the Americas and the Museum of the City of Immigration, both founded in The museums that deal with this theme - namely the Museum of Arts and Civilizations of Africa, Asia, Oceania and the Americas and the Museum of the City of Immigration, both founded on the collections of the former Museum of the Colonies - do so through an approach that once again shows a desire to evoke the same history from at least different angles.

Secondly, the need to have recourse to the past also emerges from certain strictly military uses, which invoke heritage to create identity. The principles of filiation between units and the process by which, for example, a new regiment is created are fairly exemplary of this idea. It is by reawakening the identity, traditions and heritage of a disbanded regiment that a new regiment tends to emerge today. One of the emblematic cases is that of the 1st Riflemen created in 1994. In this case, the re-creation of this unit was accompanied by a process that could be described as taking a heritage out of the museum and making it, according to the accepted term, "a living tradition". This is indeed what was implemented during the setting up of the famous shindig of this regiment. The return to service of a uniform dating from the 1840s, until then on display in the infantry museum until its closure, to dress the musicians of this regiment is indeed quite characteristic of an intention that aims to invoke the past to give meaning to the present. In spite of appearances, it is possible to wonder whether the procedure is really part of a tradition, since the uniform did not already equip the musicians with the necessary equipment. The last existing noubas in the 1950s were no longer equipped with uniforms and these formations lost their meaning when they were no longer armed by North African riflemen. The term "living tradition" could reflect the ambiguity of such practices. Indeed, they do not appear to be strictly speaking customs passed down through the generations, but rather new practices which, in a context of identity uncertainty, literally exhume the past to explicitly manifest an identity which, in some respects, again manifests itself in a very dissonant way.

Finally, this dissonance could be reflected in the very scenography of museums. It is thus through solemn places of recollection, notably the "crypts" that most museums are equipped with, that military museum discourse exalts the virtues and values previously mentioned. But, if the "crypt" has a meaning for the military generally initiated in the place (this kind of space exists in many regiments), the understanding of the "crypt" is not always clear. The understanding that the non-military visitor may have of it deserves to be truly appreciated, as the practice it constitutes now appears to be outside the common language. The etymology of the term (from the Latin crypta, which is hidden) is also reminiscent of the religious character that surrounds the heritage, whether tangible or, in this case, intangible. A place hidden in the substructures of a building to shelter the graves of martyrs or saints from the profane gaze, the crypt has both an esoteric and a religious dimension. By presenting such places to the visitor, the museum once again expresses a certain discordance between military culture and the global representations of society. It is even possible to imagine that "crypts" are interpreted for the uninitiated, i.e. the general public visitor, as a form of military folklore, in the sense that the practice that they constitute is a tradition that no one - with a few exceptions - has any experience of anymore. In such a perspective, the military museum no longer appears only as a museum exhibiting military traditions, it becomes itself a constituted tradition whose meaning is as much to be made explicit as that of the objects it contains.

In short, the fact of a military museum means that the army is no longer considered as a "vertical" institution. On the contrary, through its museums, it appears as a set of organic human communities whose vitality, needs and, beyond that, contradictions are revealed. Moreover, if the army museums seem to draw the contours of a military institution suspended between its past and its present, they prove - in the image of their addition, if army museums seem to draw the contours of a military institution suspended between its past and present, they prove - like the ancient Anchise which, fleeing Troy in flames for a new land, takes with it the "penates of the fatherland" - that the conservation of the past is perhaps the prerequisite and indispensable condition for envisaging the future.

1] According to Colonel (H) Thiéblemont André, "Réveils identitaires dans l'armée de Terre" in *Inflexions*. September 2009, n°11, p. 73 to 85. (Article reproduced in No. 19 of the CESAT Papers of March 2010).

2] Museums of the navy troops (1981), the train (1981), pigeon racing (1981), the ALAT (1983), the parachutists (1983), military symbolism (1985), children of troops (1985), non-commissioned officers (1986), mountain troops (1988), spahis (1988), the police station (1993), equipment (1997), transmissions (1999). (source: Quid, Robert Laffont, 1995).

3] "Le musée de l'armée a cent ans" in *L'Écho du Dôme*, special edition, October 2005, p. 24.

4] Thiéblemont André, op. cit. p. 75.

5] Idem.

6] Leniaud Jean-Michel. «The archipelagos of the past». Paris, Fayard, 2002, p. 304.

7] Thiéblemont André, op. cit. p. 74.

[8] Ditto.

9] Among the most convincing signs of this movement, André Thiéblemont mentions the development of military symbolism and the creation of insignia, which during these years became "totally uncontrollable", or the more uncomplicated wearing of uniforms.

10] "The first protocol of agreement between defence and culture signed in 1983 (...) in an exhibition of contemporary art...". (...) dealt [then] only with a single culture, that of the arts and letters", in Thiéblemont André, op.cit., p. 81.

11] General Cousin, "Armée de Terre et patrimoine" in *Terre Magazine*, No. 205, November 1995, p. 15.

12] According to Leniaud Jean-Michel, op.cit., chap. XII.

13] General Cousin, idem.

14] Wittorski Richard. «The notion of collective identity». Paris, L'Harmattan, 2008, p. 1.

15] Freund Julien. «Small essay of sociological phenomenology on collective identity». Paris, Beauchard, 1979, p. 74.

16] Read on the subject Leniaud Jean-Michel, op. cit.

17] Joly Marie-Hélène, idem.

18] Idem.

19] Barrère Christian. The three stages of the patrimony. Regards Laboratory, University of Reims Champagne Ardenne.

20] Thiéblemont André (ed.). *Cultures et logiques militaires*, Paris, PUF, 1999, p. 3.

[21] **Yekpon G. Th.** Le partage du patrimoine culturel national et les perspectives de participation des structures éducatives. 1995, Dissertation, Senghor University of **Egypt**, p. 10.

22] On this subject, see Alain Finkielkraut, L'identité malheureuse, in which the author defends the idea that "there is no identity without heirs".

23] See on the subject "Cultures militaires, culture du militaire" in Inflexions, n°11, June 2009, la Documentation Française.

24] According to Bernard Deloche in "Mythologie dumusée: de l'uchronie à l'utopie". Paris, Le Cavalier Bleu, 2010, p.28.

25] Report by Lieutenant-Colonel Champeaux to the High Council of Museums of France for the authorization "Musée de France" for the Musée des troupes de marine.

26] See notably on the subject: "Que sont les héros devenus" in Inflexions, n°16, April 2011, la Documentation Française.

27] Thiéblemont André (ed.). «Military cultures and logics»Paris, PUF, 1999, p. 191.

28] Available at: <http://eduscol.education.fr/pid23208/histoire-geographie-education-civique-ecjs.html>

29] Barrère Christian. The three times of the patrimony. Laboratoire Regards, Univ. de Reims Champagne Ardennes, p. 13.

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