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# Branding the Nations: A Graphic Designer Looks at Flags and Marketing

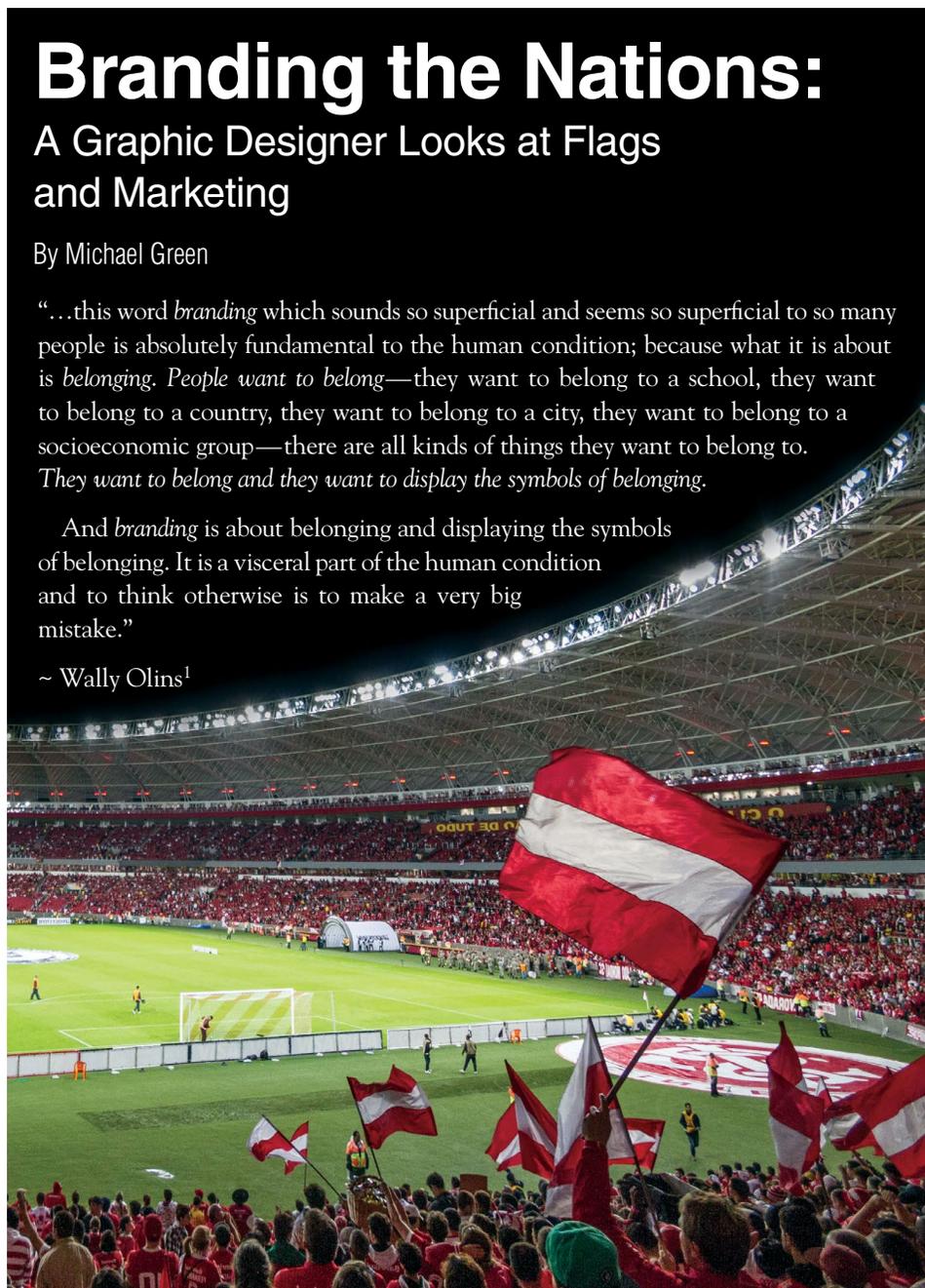
By Michael Green

“...this word *branding* which sounds so superficial and seems so superficial to so many people is absolutely fundamental to the human condition; because what it is about is *belonging*. People want to belong—they want to belong to a school, they want to belong to a country, they want to belong to a city, they want to belong to a socioeconomic group—there are all kinds of things they want to belong to. They want to belong and they want to display the symbols of belonging.

And *branding* is about belonging and displaying the symbols of belonging. It is a visceral part of the human condition and to think otherwise is to make a very big mistake.”

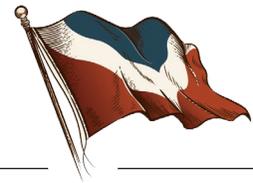
~ Wally Olins<sup>1</sup>

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## Editor's Note / Note de la rédaction

We are witnessing a trend in the United States and England, as numerous cities and counties are adopting or changing their flags. (Attendees at the International Congress of Vexillology in London, or the Annual Meeting of NAVA in Boston, will have the chance to hear more about these developments.) These changes make the timing of the articles in this issue of *Flag Research Quarterly* (FRQ) particularly appropriate.

Vexillology concerns itself not only with the very interesting questions of aesthetics and distinctiveness, but also the cultural contexts in which their designers operate. Flags are, ultimately, objects of social and political use; therefore, social and political considerations must also factor into their design. In this era of renewed interest in flag design, we have an opportunity to examine such considerations in flag design *ab origine*. As our readers follow the progress of flag adoption or reform in local communities, it is to be hoped that they will ask appropriate questions of flag designers, government officials, and community members, to elicit useful information not only about the graphic elements of the flag, but also the intended meaning and purpose of the flags.

In asking those questions, vexillologists may avail themselves of numerous modes of inquiry. Some classic articles on the influence of context on flag design include those by Whitney Smith, Perry Dane, Sasha Weitman, Karen Cerulo, and Don Healy.<sup>1</sup> In addition, this issue of *FRQ* offers two other approaches that may be useful in efforts to assess the latest new flags.

Flags, of course, serve to help bind citizens to their governments through a shared visual identity—or in other words, a “brand.” Michael Green considers flags from the perspective of a marketing specialist in “Branding the Nations.” His inventive interpretation of the intersection between flags, sports, and “pride” in one’s locality offers a mode of analysis that future vexillologists will likely build upon in discussions of flag design and flag display.

Flags also serve to demonstrate connections—whether aspirational or established—between communities or political entities. “Coloniality, Westphalian Sovereignty, and Flag Design” offers a historical and geopolitical look at the flags adopted by former French colonies in West Africa, and suggests that the popularity of the tribar design was not simply coincidental. (Perhaps analyses such as this one will serve to illuminate the discussion around the confusion between the flags of Chad and Romania, which—judging from prominent media outlets—seems to neglect any consideration of *why* each country adopted a tricolor.)<sup>2</sup>

In this exciting era for vexillologists, various methods of analysis, whether well-established or emerging, can be useful to understanding flags in the early twenty-first century. As your research develops, I hope that you will consider *Flag Research Quarterly* as an option to publish your findings. We look forward to learning more about the flags, new and old, that add so much to the social, political, and cultural life of every community.

Steven A. Knowlton  
Co-editor, *FRQ*

<sup>1</sup> Whitney Smith, “American Perspectives in Heraldry and Vexillology”, *Raven* 6 (1999): 41–53; Perry Dane, “Flags in Context: A Discussion of Design, Genre, and Aesthetics,” *Raven* 15 (2008): 43–80; Sasha R. Weitman, “National Flags: A Sociological Overview”, *Semiotica* 8, no. 4 (1973): 328–67; Don Healy, “Evolutionary Vexillology: One Flag’s Influence in Modern Design”, *Raven* 1 (1994): 41–64; Karen A. Cerulo, “Symbols and the World System: National Anthems and Flags”, *Sociological Forum*, 8, no. 2 (1993): 243–71.

<sup>2</sup> For example, see Drew Hinshaw, “Does This Flag Look Hot to You? It Should—Romania Lifted It,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 15, 2017, A1.

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## Green: Branding the Nations: A Graphic Designer Looks at Flags and Marketing *continued from page 1*

### We All Desire Belonging

My attention to the branding achieved by flag design developed because I grew up in Texas, the birthplace of “taking state pride too far.” I grew up around people who were very proud to be Texan, and I feel that I saw more Texas flags than U.S. ones. But as I traveled the country, I realized that this was not the case in other states. My family in Louisiana, for instance, always proudly displayed Louisiana State University (LSU) flags and fleur-de-lis stickers on their cars, but never a Louisiana flag. My wife lived in upstate New York for over a year and, to this day, cannot tell you what the state flag looks like.

Looking to understand the human need to belong, and display symbols of belonging, I explored this phenomenon of how we choose identity symbols that we feel define us.

This paper explores the relationship among three things: personal identity, flags, and sports brands. First, I will show that having a strong national or state brand, through flag design, can affect the personal adoption of the symbol into one’s identity. Second, I will demonstrate that brands (and in this case, sports teams) can use the strength of a flag, or lack of a strong flag, to their advantage. And third, I will examine the shrinking market space between the branding of a nation and the branding of its national sports team.

To start this exploration into designing for belonging, we should start with looking at a concept termed “symbolic self-completion theory.” This theory suggests that “individuals use symbols and other socially recognized indicators to communicate aspects of their desired personal identity or self-image to others.”<sup>2</sup>

Since it is unusual to have a personal logo or flag to fly on one’s car or house, most people use existing symbols and brands that they feel help define their identity, and adopt them as part of who they are and who they want other people to perceive them to be. These symbols range from the brand of shoes they wear to the countries in their passports, from concrete items to completely abstract ideas.

The idea of a nation is by far the most abstract and grandiose—which makes the symbols we use to define our ideas of nationhood even more fascinating. In fact, this field of “nation branding” is one of my obsessions. By showing flags, passport designs, currency, and seals, my blog *Branding the Nations* explores how this branding gives a visual identity to a large collective idea.<sup>3</sup>

In the words of Christian von Scheve and his colleagues, “...symbols are important to nation building because of their capacity to represent feelings of belonging and to ‘embody’ the nation as an imagined community. Likewise, [studies]

suggests that symbols visualize and emphasize citizens’ basic concepts of national belonging and grant concreteness to the rather abstract concept of a nation.”<sup>4</sup>

But what happens when a symbol is ugly? What if a group outgrows a historical symbol which no longer seems to embody the imagined community?

### The Pride Funnel

As I traveled the country and saw how other states displayed their pride, I noticed trends. Being a vexillologist and designer, I saw a correlation between states with well-designed flags and more state pride.

In 2014, I wrote an article on *Medium* about this correlation.<sup>5</sup> In it, I summarized a hypothesis that I named the “pride funnel.” Just as a funnel is larger at the top and smaller at the bottom, in this concept a passionate citizen most strongly identifies with the geographic/political structures encompassing the most citizens. From strongest to least strong, here are the affiliations a citizen may internalize, and also express through display of flags or other iconography:

### NATION → STATE → CITY → TEAM

However, flag design may affect the level of affiliation at which citizens exhibit their pride. More recognizable flag designs lead to expression of pride at whichever level the design is most compelling—and indistinctive designs will cause citizens to move their expression of pride to use of flags and other iconography of entities lower in the funnel.

In states where there is no well-designed flag for visual branding, citizens do not often fly the state flag. One might at first think that residents of these states have less state pride. In some cases, a large city’s well-designed flag supplants the state flag. Illinois is an example of this: Chicago’s flag is used far more often than the plain white state flag which has a detailed seal in the center.

In many cases, college and professional sports teams, with their appealing logos, traditions, and colors, become the visual branding of a state. The teams fill the identity void the state has left itself. People want to belong and to display the symbols of belonging, but when those symbols are poorly designed, I submit that they will jump down the “funnel” and use, and identify with, the better designs.

Examples of this phenomenon include:

- **Nebraska** – The University of Nebraska and the “Big Red Nation” dominate the state’s branding from an external perspective.
- **Louisiana** – The purple and gold of Mardi Gras come out in LSU’s branding. The fleur-de-lis symbol, used by the

New Orleans Saints, has also risen to define the state in many ways.

- **Washington** – The Seattle Seahawks’ recent success has made their green and blue colors more prevalent than any state branding.
- **New York** – New York has a passionate populace but no unified state branding. There is a plethora of competing identities, from sports teams to the “I ♥ New York” brand.

This “identity void,” or more specifically a “well-designed-identity-that-people-want-to-adopt void” is great for sports teams. Were this a game, the loser would be the state.

However, states with poorly designed flags do not lose much, at least not much of what governments care about. Unlike sports teams’ revenues, taxes aren’t paid depending on how much people like or identify with your state (although that would be quite an interesting tax policy). State governments wanting to redesign the state flag do not stand to gain much monetarily, which is one reason why politicians are so unwilling to fight the red tape and bureaucracy to change even the ugliest of flags. (Other reasons include inertia and popular protest against changing flag designs.)

Having a strong state brand is not just for the benefit of souvenir shops and flag makers. States lacking such a brand lose the chance to own their state’s visual story. Any other type of organization would fight hard to win this marketing battle.

Luckily for these states without brands, a citizen’s identity and sense of belonging isn’t a zero-sum game. Citizens use team brands to express their state pride because they want to display well-designed symbols of belonging. Give them one, and they will use it, even while continuing to support their cities or favorite teams. Even the teams currently dominating their state’s identities would welcome the change, because

the benefits of good design trickle down the pride funnel.

As a demonstration of this phenomenon, we will examine examples of states with well-designed and well-regarded flags. In states like Texas, Arizona, and Colorado, you can see a trend of teams adopting state symbols and versions of the flag in their own visual identity (figure 1).

It is so powerful, in fact, that teams have gone to extreme lengths to do so. The Florida Panthers of the National Hockey League wanted to utilize the Florida flag, but realized the state seal in the center was a bit unwieldy, and redesigned it to fit their needs (and did a great job, in my opinion) (figure 2).

But does it really matter for the team? I think it is too much to say that design has a direct effect on game-



Figure 2. Sleeve patch for the Florida Panthers (NHL).

play. However, there is one aspect where having good local iconography and visual culture can win teams another type of victory: new fans.

Here is a hypothetical personal example. I am from College Station, a town sandwiched between all the major metropolitan areas of Texas. If I move to Portland, Oregon, where the successful Portland Timbers of Major League Soccer are very popular, in order to assimilate into the new culture, I may decide to get into soccer to help me adjust and make new friends.

Sports are much more fun to watch when the spectators have a personal interest in one of the teams. So I then will decide which team or teams I will support and eventually feel a sense of belonging to, as they become part of my identity.



Figure 1. Professional sports team logos derived from state flags (left to right: Arizona Coyotes (National Hockey League [NHL]), Tennessee Titans (National Football League [NFL]), Columbus Blue Jackets (NHL), Houston Texans (NFL), Colorado Rockies (former NHL team, now called the New Jersey Devils), Baltimore Ravens (NFL)).

In this example, I first would most likely choose the Portland Timbers, based on my ability to access live games, to better fit into my new surroundings, and to help me make a few new friends.

Next, since most of my personal identity still lies in Texas, I will look to choose a soccer team from the Lone Star State to keep my roots alive. The two clubs in Texas are the Houston Dynamo and FC Dallas. College Station has no affiliation with either Houston or Dallas and it is common for residents there to be fans of professional teams from several metropolitan areas. So with all regional ties being equal, no knowledge of past won-lost records, no affinity for any individual player or having much previous exposure to the sport, I will most likely choose whichever team's branding I would rather wear on a t-shirt (figure 3).



Figure 3. Logos of Major League Soccer team FC Dallas and the Houston Dynamos.

Looking at these two brands, it should be obvious which one I will choose in this hypothetical example. By using the colors and symbolism of the Texas flag, FC Dallas allows me, as a new fan, to immediately feel included since I am already a Texan. Entering a new social group is hard for everyone, so lowering barriers of entry is a great strategy for a group's long-term success. Also, I have an added sense of pride while wearing any FC Dallas paraphernalia as it represents my state as well as my team.

It is my hypothesis that because FC Dallas leverages the “Texas” brand, they have an advantage over the orange Houston Dynamo in attracting new fans like my hypothetical self. (Although the Dynamo's orange may have been selected to recall the University of Texas Longhorns' uniforms.)

College sports use this approach quite a bit. Cornhuskers, Sooners, Hoosiers—all these names are used because of their existing identity relationship to the people they are targeting. Because recruiting young players and harnessing new fans are their top priorities, we are seeing more and more universities race to somehow “own the state.”

You may have seen the University of Maryland's controversial flag uniforms which did wonders for their prominence in the crowded college football market (figure 4). Texas Tech, probably the third most popular college football team in Texas, made a bold move using a Texas flag-themed uniform when playing the University of Texas, the team most people associate with the state (figure 5). Indiana University used the state flag on their helmets to compete with the other local recruiting strongholds, Purdue and Notre Dame (figure 6).

These well-designed state flags would have made Wally Olins proud because they fill the “visceral” desire for a symbol of belonging that people and organizations *want* to display. In these states, good design trickles down the pride funnel, more entities benefit, and frankly, they have fewer eyesores.

Although the examples above demonstrate how design affects expression of state pride, expression of national identity can also be influenced by design.

### National Identity: Cases Where the National Pride Diverges from Sports Pride

The “pride funnel” as applied to the question of national flags, operates differently outside of the United States. In western societies where globalization has blurred the distinction of national citizenship, rituals with flags, meant to strengthen feelings of belonging, are becoming rarer. It is my observation that in peacetime, lacking common goals or



Figure 4: University of Maryland football uniforms.



Figure 5: Texas Tech in state flag-themed football uniforms.



Figure 6: Indiana University in state flag-themed football helmets.

enemies, nationalism is less evident. Sport, however, is one aspect of national identity, national pageantry, and national belonging that *has* remained and even grown in importance.<sup>6</sup>

Von Scheve and his colleagues write that: “[Sports stadiums] ...are some of the few places in western societies in which emotional entrainment is experienced on a regular basis. Importantly, at international tournaments these emotions can be projected onto national symbols, which are omnipresent throughout stadiums and public places.”<sup>7</sup>

I believe that nationality and sports affiliation are two sources of the most deeply held outside symbols we attach to our identities. On the national scale, sports and national identity are virtually inseparable, at least in the American experience.

In 2016, we got to watch the Union of European Football Associations’ “Euro Tournament”, the *Confederación Sudamericana de Fútbol*’s “Copa América”, and the Summer Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro. Around the world, TV anchors had to brush up on their geography, broadcasters had to triple check that flags were correct, and uniform designers were busy converting national identity into clothing.

Adam Martin, sports designer and host of the podcast *Makers of Sport*, watched the United States in the Copa América Tournament. As he told me, his young son sat next



Figure 10. New Zealand athletes in black uniforms with silver fern motifs.

to him and asked which team they should be rooting for. Adam replied, “The U.S.A., of course!” His son then asked, “Well, which one is the U.S.A.?” “The black team,” Adam replied. And with no hesitation, his son said, “Dad, black isn’t our colors...” (figure 7).<sup>8</sup>

From the traditional marketers’ point of view, this is not a breakdown of the pride funnel, it is brand confusion at the national level. Either the flag should match the sporting identity, or vice versa. Imagine if Coca-Cola aired a commercial on television with its famous red color scheme, but in the store the cans on the shelves were blue. If nations like the Netherlands or Australia (or the United States in the Copa América) were companies, the Chief Marketing Officer would say, “Pick the identity that most people identify with and go with that one!” Since international sports are some of the only remaining peaceful world pageants, a team at the Olympics may define that nation’s brand perception to billions of people for the next four years. Presenting an inconsistent identity muddies the national brand.



Figure 11. New Zealand passport.

The most prominent example of this national brand confusion in recent history is New Zealand. When I traveled to New Zealand in 2010, I was amazed at how consistent their national brand, which originated with sports uniforms, was (figure 10). The fern appears on government websites, tourism promotions, and even passports (figure 11). The fern was everywhere! Everywhere except on top of flagpoles.

When I heard that New Zealand was holding a flag referendum, it seemed obvious to me that the fern should have a place on the new flag.

Prime Minister John Key urged a new flag, because he “wanted



Figure 7. (top) United States men’s soccer team in black uniforms for the 2016 Copa América tournament.

Figure 8. (bottom left) Netherlands athletes in orange uniforms.

Figure 9. (bottom right) Australian athletes in gold and green uniforms.

to see 'overt patriotism' in New Zealand in the same way countries like the United States turned up to sporting events with jerseys, scarfs and hats emblazoned with stars and stripes."<sup>9</sup>

When the referendum on the new flag was defeated, it became apparent that not all New Zealanders agree with Key or me. As Matthew Dallas wrote, "New Zealand is Not a Sports Franchise;" he explains that Kiwis have a more "subtle" and "thoughtful" patriotism compared to the more overt displays seen in the United States. He continues by saying "the 'go team' nationalism of the United States, like all sports fandom...tends to run blind and belligerent..."<sup>10</sup>

New Zealanders still want to belong and still want to display symbols of belonging, but some Kiwis separate their sport affiliation and their nationalism, and enjoy having two visual identities. I now understand that our American model of patriotism isn't the envy of everyone in the world. Another dissenting voice from my stance that a single-design approach to national branding is best for all is Tim O'Shaughnessy, the Broadcast Art Director for the sports broadcasting network ESPN. He has been tasked many times with taking a country's flag and visual identity and bringing it alive on screen (figure 12). O'Shaughnessy was strongly *against* changing the New Zealand flag.

He told me, "Flags are sacred, they should be stable."<sup>11</sup> In Tim's mind, sports serve a temporary, euphoric purpose. The success and failure of a game or a season gives sports fans the momentary dopamine they crave. A nation, on the other hand, should fundamentally be a stable, unchanging reality in our lives.

Those who think like Dallas and O'Shaughnessy are, in my view, missing an important point about marketing. Visual brand identity is more than mere hype; it serves to promote personal identification with larger polities. To be sure, I agree with O'Shaughnessy that the government of the United States should be stable and reliable. But in today's world, temporary euphoric feelings engendered by national sports are one of the few ways a political entity can market its brand to its own citizens.



Figure 12. Examples of Tim O'Shaughnessy's animations of national flags for ESPN broadcasts.

In terms of identity and belonging, there are pieces we can choose and those we can't. Nationality is often related to our place of birth and is the hardest to change, but that doesn't mean it should just be a fact on our identification cards. It is better for the nation and the citizen that nationality should be felt. Nations need to foster feelings of belonging to make good citizens who will support, fight for, and make their homelands prosperous.

In New Zealand, there was a prime minister who envied the passion people had for the country's sports identity. Even though his compatriots voted to keep the current flag, they continue to vote for the silver fern with their wallets. To quote a common philosophical principle, "Meaning comes from use."<sup>12</sup> As New Zealanders continue to produce, sell and use more silver fern items, they strengthen that design and weaken the current flag.

Flags are the "logos" of the abstract ideas we call states and nations, and it cannot be overstated how their designs affect citizens' personal adoption of these symbols into our own concepts of self. Olins said, "People want to belong and they want to display the symbols of belonging." If they do not feel a symbol represents them, they will find another that does.

*Note: this paper was originally presented at the 50th Annual Meeting of NAVA on October 15, 2016 in San José, California.*

<sup>1</sup> Wally Olins, "The Art and Science of Branding," interview by William Channer, *Dorm Room Tycoon*, podcast audio, July 3, 2011, <https://soundcloud.com/dormroomtycoon/wally-olins>. Italics are the author's transcription of the audio file.

<sup>2</sup> Shannon P. Callahan and Alison Ledgerwood, "On the Psychological Function of Flags and Logos: Group Identity Symbols Increase Perceived Entitativity," *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology* 110, no. 4 (2016): 529.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Green, "Branding the Nations: A Designer's Ramblings About Flags", <https://medium.com/branding-the-nations>

<sup>4</sup> Christian von Scheve, Manuela Beyer, Sven Ismer, Marta Kozłowska, and Carmen Morawetz, "Emotional Entrainment, National Symbols, And Identification: A Naturalistic Study Around The Men's Football World Cup," *Current Sociology* 62, no. 1 (2014): 5.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Green, "The Good, the 'Meh' and the Ugly: A Designer's Look at US State Flags," *Medium*, October 31, 2014, <https://medium.com/branding-the-nations/the-good-the-meh-and-the-ugly-3efb49195591#gp8ppq49rb>

<sup>6</sup> John S. Hunter, "Flying the Flag: Identities, the Nation, and Sport," *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 10, no. 4 (2003): 409–25.

<sup>7</sup> Scheve, et al., "Emotional Entrainment, National Symbols, And Identification," 7.

<sup>8</sup> For more information about Adam Martin, see [makersofsport.com](http://makersofsport.com).

<sup>9</sup> Jo Moir, "Key Lists Reasons for Change of Flag," *The Press* (Christchurch, New Zealand), August 21, 2015, A7.

<sup>10</sup> Matthew Dallas, "New Zealand is not a sports franchise." *Manawatu Standard* (Palmerston North, New Zealand), August 21, 2015, 11.

<sup>11</sup> Thanks to Tim O'Shaughnessy for permission to reproduce his work. For more information. see [Rustedhouse.com](http://Rustedhouse.com).

<sup>12</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (New York: Macmillan, 1953).

# Coloniality, Westphalian Sovereignty, and Flag Design: The Francophone African Case

by Steven A. Knowlton

Vexillology encompasses the study of flags from their grandest moments—leading the troops in victorious battle, or raised high on an independence day—to the most picayune of details, such as the proper Pantone Matching System standard for a flag’s colors. Sometimes it is the tiny details of vexillology that can be quite revealing—if patterns are found in them. This paper takes as its starting point a survey of flag proportions.

While the independent states of the world assign to their flags many different ratios of height to width, flag proportions are not randomly distributed.

Instead, the proportions of the flags of colonizing countries exert a powerful influence on post-colonial flags, even when those flags of independence bear no other graphic resemblance to their predecessors. For example, the unusual ratio of the United States flag, 10:19, is found in only two other national flags: the Federated States of Micronesia and the Marshall Islands—both former U.S. possessions. The British preference for flags in proportions of 1:2 has been even more influential, as countries with designs as distinct as Canada, Dominica and the Seychelles have all retained the proportions of the Union Flag. The Soviet Union also flew flags whose length was double their height, and those proportions have been carried forward by many former Soviet republics. In a remarkable instance, Moldova, whose flag is clearly intended as one of many cultural links with Romania, preserved Soviet ratios even though Romania uses proportions of 2:3. Romania’s proportions, in turn, are the same as those of the French tricolor, upon which the Romanian flag was modeled (figure 1).

Based on the distribution of proportions among all national flags, any given flag should have a 26% likelihood of having a ratio of 1:2, and a 44% likelihood of having a ratio of 2:3. However, among former Soviet Socialist Republics (SSRs), 50% of flags share the old Soviet ratio; and among former British colonies, 43% share the British ratio. Among former French colonies, 88% have the same ratio as the *tricolore* (table 1); of particular note, all the former French colonies in Africa have flags with the same proportions as the French flag.<sup>1</sup> The persistence of this element of flag design is an

intriguing clue to some of the considerations that motivated the design of flags for post-colonial states in which a national identity is formed through what Kwame Anthony Appiah calls a “complicated negotiation of cultures.”<sup>2</sup>

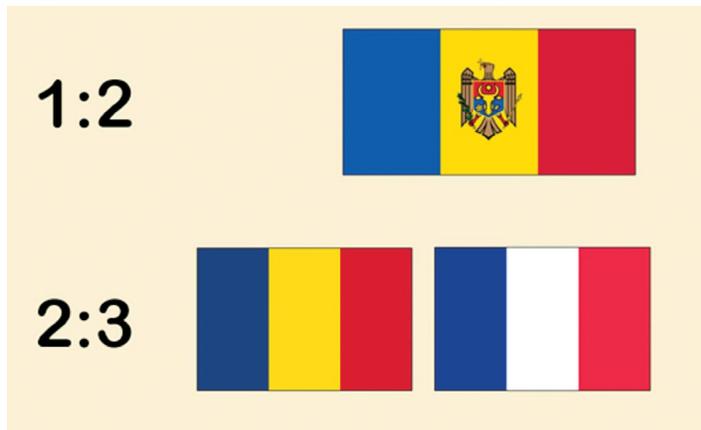


Figure 1. Flags of Moldova, Romania, and France, with proportions labeled.

The question of why flag ratios of the colonizing powers persist so prevalently in their former colonies is interesting in its own right, but also raises further questions. For example, why do former colonies use flags at all, when in many places flags had not been used as political symbols prior to colonization? And further, why do so many post-colonial flags resemble very strongly the flags of the colonizing powers, particularly in the case of former French colonies in West Africa? This paper proposes a combination of technical, psychosocial, and politico-symbolic explanations for these phenomena.

Ratio	Overall Distribution	Distribution among former S.S.R.s	Distribution among former colonies
1:2	26%	50%	43%
2:3	44%		88%

Table 1. Likelihood of a flag having a given set of proportions. Source: Compiled from data in the Flags of the World website, <http://www.crwflags.com/fotw/flags/index.html>

On the technical side, French colonial policy had the purpose and effect of undermining local textile industries in favor of shifting cloth manufacturing to the colonizing country for resale in the colonies.<sup>3</sup> It was likely that mass-produced flags for newly independent states were ordered from flag manufacturers in France. When creating specifications for the new flags, bureaucrats faced with numerous challenges of setting up an independent post-colonial government may have found it easier to proceed with the assumption that the new flags would have the same proportions as the French flag, requiring fewer adjustments on the part of French flagmakers.

Perhaps more important was the presence of French colonial administrators during the flag design process. In the 1950s, the French government prepared to relinquish its rule over sub-Saharan African colonies and negotiated limited self-rule with leaders in each of its colonies. Those territories held as “mandates” under the League of Nations and “trusteeships” under the United Nations—Togo and Cameroon—were the first to adopt flags of their own, by 1957. Throughout 1959, the remaining parts of French West Africa—Côte d’Ivoire (Ivory Coast), Dahomey (now Benin), Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Senegal, and Upper Volta (now Burkina Faso)—adopted flags in preparation for independence, which came in 1960.<sup>4</sup> A similar process occurred in the former colonies of French Equatorial Africa—Central African Republic, Chad, Congo (Brazzaville), and Gabon (figure 2). The sole exception was the Republic of Guinea. In 1958, the voters of Guinea had rejected a referendum, held throughout the French colonies, on the proposition that France and its colonies should be united in a “French Community.” Consequently, Guinea was declared independent without any time to prepare for transition to post-French governance; the Guinean flag was revealed a month later.<sup>5</sup>

It is understandable that legislatures preparing the symbols of post-colonial states while still under the military occupation of the French government would defer to the standards of the colonial power. Many of the flags are “an obvious echo of the French flag in basic elements and proportions.”<sup>6</sup> Of the twelve flags, all share the flag proportions of France, and five of them are vertical tricolors.

Africans subjected to colonial rule did not uniformly reject the culture and aesthetics of their occupiers. Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni notes a phenomenon called “coloniality”: “colonial modernity interfered with African modes of knowing, social meaning-making, imagining, seeing and knowledge of production, and [replaced them] with Eurocentric epistemologies.”<sup>7</sup> It was particularly common for Africans educated in European-run schools to embrace European modes of thought and reference European standards for African social structures—and those European-educated Africans were often the leaders of anti-colonial movements and thus flag designers for new states. Coloniality leads a person in a French colony, when thinking of a flag, to gravitate toward flags on a French pattern. In the answering of the question, “what should a flag look like?,” many of the leaders of French colonies clearly decided the answer should be, “like the French flag.”

A broader question arises from this discussion, however. Why were flags desirable for post-colonial African states? Louis Meka Meka notes that among the first issues considered by the government of Cameroon was “symbols without which, the identity of the State would have been deemed



Figure 2. (top row) Flags of Guinea Source: Getty; Senegal Source: Getty; Mali Source: USA Today; Chad Source: The World Weekly; (bottom row) Côte d’Ivoire Source: Getty; Benin Source: <http://beninthere-donethat.blogspot.com>; Cameroon Source: The World Weekly.

incomplete’: the flag, the anthem, and the motto.”<sup>8</sup> Similarly, among the first acts of the government of Central African Republic was creation of its new flag. In other cases, flags were not chosen until shortly before independence day; this was due not to failure to recognize a flag’s importance, but rather to lengthy deliberative processes. The Chadian assembly, for example, debated 85 separate designs.<sup>10</sup>

It is clear that the new states of Africa recognized flags as vital to their legitimacy in the eyes of their citizens and the world—as do, in fact, all states. Flags, however, have not always served that purpose in Africa. While some pre-colonial African states did use flags, others relied on different devices as symbols of state sovereignty and authority. Ashanti, for example, regarded the Golden Stool of its monarch with a reverence similar to that of Americans for the United States flag.<sup>11</sup> Earlier generations of Ethiopian armies marched under “a cross like the ones carried in a procession by parishioners.”<sup>12</sup> It is conceivable that a polity assuming a status of independence and sovereignty might choose to forego a flag and adopt some other visual marker of its status. And yet, none has. Furthermore, almost every independent state has a flag modeled on the European style of rectangular flags. As Nepal’s flag demonstrates, there are many shapes and patterns which could be used for a flag. Figure 3 shows the diversity of styles available to flag designers.

One might expect that newly independent states would eschew those European-styled symbols of sovereignty such as flags and arms. After all, why should the ways of the oppressor be perpetuated? And in some ways, states that have become independent after the first wave of decolonization have moved farther from traditional European designs. As Don Healy notes, flags adopted since the 1970s have foregone the traditional elements of cantons and vertical or horizontal stripes, and instead have displayed a proliferation of diagonal stripes, circles, and complex charges.<sup>13</sup> But many of the flags

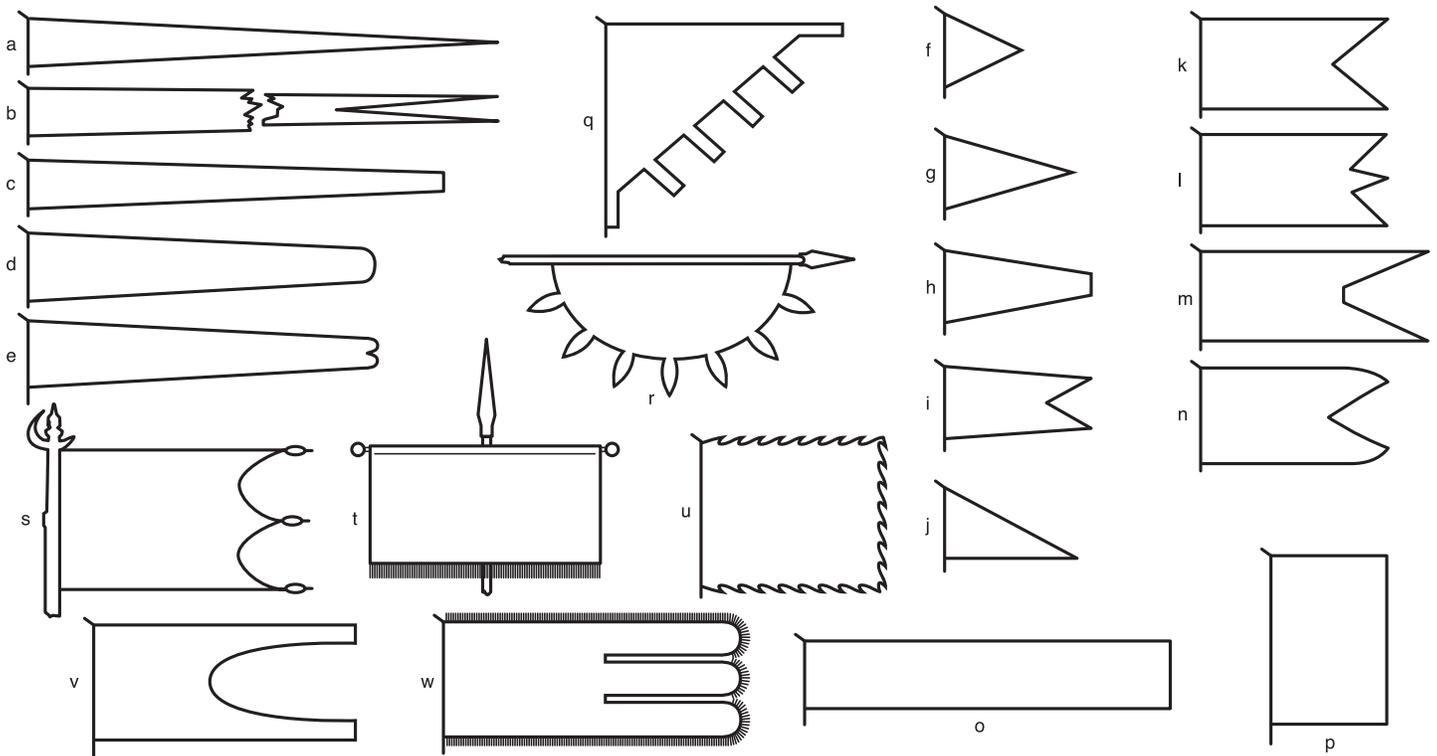


Figure 3. Non-standard flag shapes: a, b, c, d, e are 'pennants'; h, i are 'broad pennants'; f, g, j are triangular flags; k, l, m, n are swallowtails; the proportions of 'o' are 4:1; those of 'p' are 1:2; q, r are Viking flags; s is the flag of the Bukharan nation; t is a Roman vexillum; u is the 1943-45 edition of the Azad Hind flag; v is the flag of Imam Shamiy of Daghestan; and w is the royal 'oriflamme' of the Kings of France. Source: Sasha R. Weitman, "National Flags: A Sociological Overview," *Semiotica* 8, no. 4 (1973).

adopted in the late 1950s, especially in French colonies, are closely patterned after the colonizer's flags. There are, it appears, multiple motivations for adopting flags for African states that follow European patterns.

A question to consider is, what value does a flag have for an independent state? Sasha Weitman notes that a flag serves a number of purposes for a state. As any symbol would, it serves as a visual reminder to its citizens of the state's existence as an "indestructible, immortal" entity entitled to reverence and obedience. But a flag specifically is essential to a state's international status. Because other states have flags, new states must also have flags in order to present a distinct identity to the world. More essentially, most flags conform to the established standard of rectangular shape and a limited color palette. By doing so, the flags communicate to other states the message that the new entity is part of the community of independent states.<sup>14</sup>

Conformation to the European model of flag design is required because of the world order imposed by Europeans upon the rest of the globe during the age of colonization. Throughout history, societies have varied in the ways they have organized their governance. In some systems, varying levels of authority between village leaders, aristocrats, and kings or emperors may lead to tension or conflict.

Post-Renaissance Europe fought wars over questions of which authority, the Holy Roman Emperor or a local prince, could impose religion on the people of a territory. After the horrific Thirty Years War that consumed Germany, the Peace of Westphalia was signed in 1648. Under its terms, a notion now called "Westphalian sovereignty" became the standard for international relations among European states. The defining characteristic of Westphalian sovereignty is that the government of a state has "supreme authority within its jurisdiction" and "sole authority in its external relations with other states." States are recognized as having the right to pursue their own interests in negotiation with other powers, and to administer internal affairs free from interference by other states.<sup>16</sup> In cases of war, a state may surrender its sovereignty when conquered by an enemy.

Pre-colonial African states had varying understandings of sovereignty. Some, such as the kingdom of Dahomey, exhibited centralized administration that would be familiar to Europeans, even to the extent that when it conquered neighboring states it extinguished all elements of local rule.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, the several emirates ruled by the Sokoto caliphate controlled defense of their borders but were subject to the intervention of the caliph in the administration of internal affairs.<sup>18</sup> Despite these differences from European

notions of sovereignty, however, African states almost always chose to resist when confronted with European attempts to dominate them. Adu Boahen notes, "The issue at stake was not short-term or long-term advantages but rather the fundamental question of his land and his sovereignty, and it is precisely because of this that virtually all African polities, centralized and non-centralized alike, sooner or later chose to maintain or defend or try to regain their sovereignty."<sup>19</sup>

Colonialism, especially as practiced during the "Scramble for Africa" between 1881 and 1914, was the abrogation of sovereignty. European powers used a variety of legal statuses, calling them "protectorates," "trust territories," and "crown colonies," to justify their control over the external affairs and the internal administration of states that had formerly enjoyed rule by their own inhabitants. Regardless of the legal trappings, colonialism meant that the European powers could dictate economic and administrative policy on internal affairs, and involve their colonies in wars with foreign powers.

As leaders of the colonies preparing for independence considered the tasks that their flags and other state symbols would be required to perform, two challenges may have loomed largest. First, the symbols would be necessary for the work of nation-building. Second, the symbols would be a vital tool in asserting Westphalian sovereignty of the newly independent states.

Regarding nation-building, the reader may have noted that this paper has to this point used the word "state" to identify a top-level polity. While in lay usage, the words "country" or "nation" may seem acceptable synonyms, political scientists are careful to distinguish a nation from a state. A state is the government exercising exclusive dominion over a defined territory. A nation, on the other hand, is what Benedict Anderson calls "an imagined community." The members of the community perceive themselves as having some relationship with others who share the nationality—even if they live thousands of miles apart and will never meet. Furthermore, there are perceived limits to the community – not everyone is eligible to be part of the nation.<sup>20</sup> As Wilbur Zelinsky summarized, "A nation, for practical purposes, is a tribe of people... who believe they possess a set of historical and cultural traditions that place them apart. A modern state is a recent invention, a lofty, impersonal abstraction that is fleshed out by a government."<sup>21</sup>

Traditional limits of national identity may have included shared language or shared religion, but nationalism is also seen in pluralistic states such as the United States or Indonesia. In the European model, as states expanded, one method of inculcating a sense of shared nationality was to impose the language or religion of the majority populace upon residents of outlying areas.<sup>22</sup> Nationalism need not be coterminous

with the boundaries of a state—for example, many Québécois feel themselves to constitute a nation, and the provincial parliament is called the National Assembly of Québec, and their flag is "the national emblem."<sup>23</sup> When a state governs a people who feel a shared sense of nationality, a "nation-state" is created.

Leaders of emerging African states felt an imperative to build strong states, and felt that a sense of national identity would serve that purpose. The necessity of a strong state with a sense of nationality was for the governments to enjoy "autonomy vis-à-vis the interests of the social groups that make up a country in order for the state to perform its developmental role."<sup>24</sup> Those "social groups," however, constituted the prime difficulty in establishing nation-states in West Africa, as they constituted nationalities which had enjoyed greater or lesser degrees of sovereignty prior to colonization and still commanded the loyalty of members of their imagined communities. Their sense of community was rooted in "myths of origin, the ideologies of kingship and the oral histories of migrations and conquests."<sup>25</sup> The colonizing powers had paid little heed to the boundaries of those nations when drawing the borders of colonies to suit their own purposes. For example, Mandinka people were divided among seven colonies.

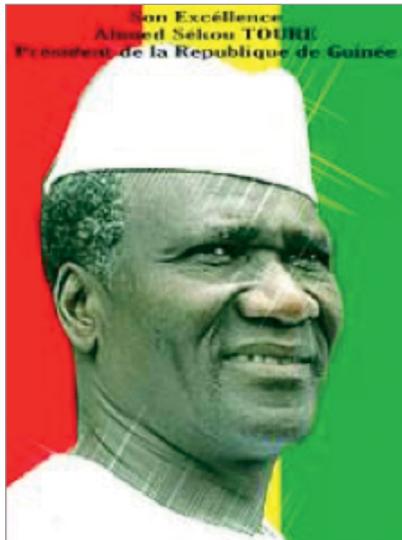
The colonies becoming independent states retained the boundaries drawn by colonial powers, and contained a populace of several nationalities, with none dominant enough to create a sense of nationality on the European model of expansion of culture from the center. The use of symbols, including flags, was an attempt to create an alternate sense of nationality corresponding to the new state. Jonathan Matusitz has noted that "whenever a flag is present, ideology is present."<sup>26</sup> Flags can even "constitute their own reality," by expressing "solidarity" among those whom it represents.<sup>27</sup>

The flag as a fundamental tool of nationality is touched upon by Sékou Touré, the first president of independent Guinea (figure 4). Reflecting upon the flag of his state, he noted, "Like every other independent state in the world Guinea has adopted a flag... The [colors] call on the citizens of the Republic of Guinea to love their flag and always defend the national honor which it incarnates... the people demand that it express their common pride as it waves in the breeze."<sup>28</sup> The flag, in Touré's estimation, offers an object of loyalty that supersedes national feeling among Fula, Mandinka, Susu, or Kissi.

A second strategy for inculcating national feeling in newly formed states is also reflected in the design of many of the newly created flags. Touré notes that "the colors of Guinea are the same as those of the African state of Ghana... The identity of choice of colors indicates that the Republic of

Guinea always considers it necessary to continue the political struggle for the realization of the unity of Africa.”<sup>29</sup> The colors of Ghana, Guinea, and most of the former French colonies were green, yellow, and red—known as the “Pan-African” colors, and derived from the flag of Ethiopia, the only indigenous African state to resist the first wave of colonialism. The choice of Pan-African colors was a deliberate link to a movement intended to counter the pre-colonial nationalistic feelings hindering the development of nation-states. The proponents of Pan-Africanism agreed that the entirety of Africa should aim for “African nationalism to replace the tribalism of the past: a concept of African loyalty wider than ‘the nation’ to transcend tribal and territorial affiliations.”<sup>30</sup>

Figure 4. Sékou Touré. Source: Ousmane Soumaoro, Flickr.



Use of Pan-African colors in the pre-eminent symbols of the new states encouraged loyalty toward a wider African nationality, of which the new state was a representative. Even in cases where Pan-African colors were not used, the color scheme still reflected a desire to overcome pre-colonial nationalistic loyalties. In both Côte d'Ivoire and Niger, the flags were designed with orange, white, and green stripes. The colors are those of a political party, Rassemblement Démocratique Africain (African Democratic Assembly), which worked throughout the several colonies of French West Africa to pursue independence.<sup>31</sup>

Aside from their usefulness in cultivating nationalism for newly created states, flags for independent African nations staked a claim to Westphalian sovereignty for the new polities. The principles of territorial inviolability and self-governance that are the hallmarks of sovereignty are essential to statehood everywhere, but in the case of post-colonial governments they are crucial to creating nations from those states. In the absence of imagined shared origins or common languages, the citizens of the new states needed outward symbols by which to mark their new shared identity, which was defined solely by the borders drawn around the state in which they lived. Lacking myths, songs, or fictive kinship to draw them together, the citizens of newly created states required symbols of sovereignty to define their country as a place where “territorial nationality” could prevail. Crawford Young notes, “The iconography of

currency, stamps, and flags communicated a silent message of state presence... Thus placed in the citizen's pocket, the state could hardly fail to also find a way to his or her head.”<sup>32</sup>

A place among independent states required a flag—recall Weitman's observation that by using a flag, new states declared their similarity to existing states. It is worth questioning why the newly formed states chose flags that so resembled European design. It is not difficult to imagine flags using indigenous textile patterns, along the lines of the Byelorussian S.S.R. flag of that day, or the later flags of Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan (figure 5). In West African textile design, certain patterns are even associated with the sovereignty of their wearers, such as the *aso ipo* cloth worn by leaders of the Bunu, or *kente* cloth worn by Akan royalty (figure 6).<sup>33</sup>

However, all the states formed out of French West Africa chose rectangular flags made with simple designs of large blocks of monochromatic cloth. The only charges were occasional stars. The choice of those European-style flags was influenced by several factors, all of which contributed to a prevailing notion of “what a flag looks like.”

As mentioned, the influence of the “coloniality” mindset was strong among the European-educated leaders of post-independence states. The use of rectangular, striped flags, along with other European symbols such as heraldic-styled state arms, official titles modeled on European governments (such as “President”), and European-styled military uniforms were a not-unexpected outcome of decisions made by leaders who identified in important ways with European notions of culture and status.

Furthermore, the European model of a rectangular flag with simple shapes was calculated to command the respect of the international community. It was a technique first used in Africa by the Ethiopian emperor Menelik II in 1897. Menelik's empire had used a distinctively shaped flag—composed of “three separate pennants in the colors of red, yellow, and green, flown together on a single pole in no established order.”<sup>34</sup> But as Menilek sought to exert his sovereignty against encroachments by French expeditions, he took the advice of a visiting Frenchman and designed a flag along European lines to command the respect of the colonial armies.

Furthermore, in 1960 the range of colors and designs seen in national flags was limited. Well over half the world's flags were “simple horizontal or vertical stripes.”<sup>35</sup> And only seven colors were used at all: red, blue, green, yellow, orange, black, and white. A new state asserting its sovereignty might seek the conformity of a simple tricolor in order to assert the “equality and normalcy” of the new state among the powers of the existing world order.<sup>36</sup>

The presence of stars on the new flags is another clue to the aspirational nature of the flags. Eran Shalev has pointed

out that stars are symbols of sovereignty in European tradition dating back to the eighteenth century.<sup>37</sup> The first stellular African flag was that of Ghana, whose black star was inspired by the Black Star Line shipping company operated



Figure 5. Flags with indigenous textile patterns (clockwise from upper left): Belarus Source: Gerard Flores, Flickr; Kazakhstan Source: Arijit Sen, Flickr; Turkmenistan Source: The Sloths, Flickr.

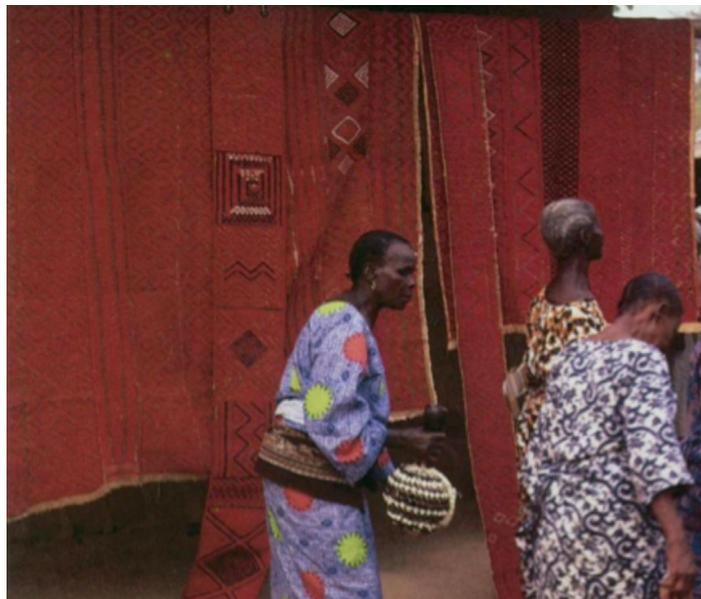


Figure 6. West African textiles denoting sovereignty: (above) aso ipo cloth used as drapery Source: HartCottageQuilts.com; (left) Kente cloth worn by Presidents Jerry Rawlings of Ghana and Bill Clinton of the United States Source: dupsies.com.

in the 1920s under the auspices of Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association, widely seen as an important step toward increased self-determination among black people throughout the world.<sup>38</sup> Although his own flag had no star, Touré in Guinea found it a powerful symbol of sovereignty: "It was not many years ago that there shone in the sky of Africa only a single star of liberty.... Liberation each brought forth a further star to better light for other countries still under foreign domination the program of anti-imperialist action."<sup>39</sup> The stars of Senegal, Cameroon, and Central African Republic (as well as, perhaps, Niger's sun, which is really just our local star), call upon well-known European tropes, placed in an African context, to use their flags as another means of symbolizing the sovereignty of their state and future nation.

The colonial enterprise was one which brought not only economic distress and political subjugation to West Africa, but also an understanding of the use of flags to construct nationalism, project sovereignty, and stake a claim to equality among the states of the world. It is not surprising, then, that post-colonial flags should have so much in common with the flags of occupying powers. The flags of French West Africa have the same purposes as the French flag—so why should they not resemble it?

*Note: this paper is an expansion of ideas originally presented at the 48th Annual Meeting of NAVA on October 5, 2014 in New Orleans, Louisiana.*

<sup>1</sup> Some sources claim that Niger's flag has a ratio of 6:7; however, observation of Nigerien flags in use shows that they typically are in proportions of 2:3. See the discussion on *Flags of the World* at <http://www.crwflags.com/fotw/flags/ne.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Language, Race, and the Legacies of the British Empire," in *Black Experience and the Empire*, ed. Philip D. Morgan and Sean Hawkins (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 387.

<sup>3</sup> See, among others, Richard Roberts, "French Colonialism, Imported Technology, and the Handicraft Textile Industry in the Western Sudan, 1898-1918," *Journal of Economic History* 47, no. 2 (1987): 461-72; Bonnie Campbell, "Neocolonialism, Economic Dependence and Political Change: A Case Study of Cotton and Textile Production in the Ivory Coast 1960 to 1970," *Review of African Political Economy* 2 (1975): 36-53.

<sup>4</sup> Whitney Smith, "La Communauté and Its Symbols," *Flag Bulletin* 37, no. 5 (1998): 174-84.

<sup>5</sup> Sékou Touré, "The Flag of Guinea," *Flag Bulletin* 24, no. 6 (1985): 213n1.

<sup>6</sup> Louis Maxime Meka Meka, "The Flag of Cameroon—Its Creation, Significance, Evolution, and Display," *NAVA News* 215 (2012): 2.

<sup>7</sup> Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Coloniality of Power in Postcolonial Africa: Myths of Decolonization* (Dakar: Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa, 2013), 8.

<sup>8</sup> Meka Meka, "The Flag of Cameroon," 2.

<sup>9</sup> Smith, "La Communauté," 176.

<sup>10</sup> "New Flags of 1960," *Time*, December 5, 1960: 23.

<sup>11</sup> A. Kyerematen, "The Royal Stools of Ashanti," *Africa* 39 (1969): 1-10.

<sup>12</sup> Manoel Barradas, *Tractatus Tres Historico-Geographici: A Seventeenth Century Historical and Geographical Account of Tigray, Ethiopia*, trans. Elizabeth Filleul (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1996), 70.

- <sup>13</sup> Don Healy, "Current Flag Design Trends," *Flag Bulletin* 25, no. 6 (1986): 211-14; Don Healy, "Modern Flag Design Trends," *Flag Bulletin* 38 (1989): 168-75.
- <sup>14</sup> Sasha R. Weitman, "National Flags: A Sociological Overview," *Semiotica* 8, no. 4 (1973): 328-67.
- <sup>15</sup> Robert H. Jackson, *Quasi-States: Sovereignty, International Relations, and the Third World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 32.
- <sup>16</sup> Henry Kissinger, *World Order* (New York: Penguin, 2014), 6-7.
- <sup>17</sup> Kola Folayan, "Dahomey before the French Conquest," *Tarikh* 5, no. 1 (1974): 17-30.
- <sup>18</sup> Obaro Ikime, "The Establishment of Indirect Rule in Northern Nigeria," *Tarikh* 3, no. 3 (1970): 1-15.
- <sup>19</sup> A. Adu Boahen, "Africa and the Colonial Challenge," in *General History of Africa*, vol. 7, Africa under Colonial Domination 1880-1935, ed. A. Adu Boahen (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 10.
- <sup>20</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (New York: Verso, 1991), 6-9.
- <sup>21</sup> Wilbur Zelinsky, "The Flag's a Religion," *NAVA News* 18, no. 5 (1985): 1. Zelinsky made a lengthy study of the use of symbols, including flags, in nation- and state-formation within the United States in *Nation to State: The Shifting Symbolic Foundations of American Nationalism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988).
- <sup>22</sup> David D. Laitin, *Language Repertoires and State Construction in Africa* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 12-14.
- <sup>23</sup> *Regulation Respecting the Flag of Québec*, quoted in Patrice de la Brosse, "Flag Display and Precedence in Québec," *Raven* 13 (2006): 50.
- <sup>24</sup> Jeremiah I. Dibua, "State," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of African Thought*, ed. F. Abiola Irele and Biodun Jeyifo, vol. 2 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 358.
- <sup>25</sup> Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja, *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Africa: Essays in Contemporary Politics* (London: Zed Books, 1987), 45.
- <sup>26</sup> Jonathan Matusitz, "Vexillology, or How Flags Speak," *International Journal of Applied Semiotics* 5, no. 1-2 (2007): 209.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 206-207.
- <sup>28</sup> Touré, "The Flag of Guinea," 209, 213.
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 209.
- <sup>30</sup> Colin Legum, *Pan-Africanism: A Short Political Guide* (New York: Frederick Praeger, 1962), 38.
- <sup>31</sup> *Complete Flags of the World*, relaunched 6th ed. (New York: DK Publishing, 2014), 116, 128.
- <sup>32</sup> Crawford Young, *The Postcolonial State in Africa: Fifty Years of Independence, 1960-2010* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2012), 311.
- <sup>33</sup> Lisa Aronson, "West Africa," in *Encyclopedia of World Dress and Fashion*, vol. 1, Africa, ed. Joanne B. Eicher and Doran H. Ross (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 147; Bridget O. J. Omatseye and Kingsley O. Emeriewen, "An Appraisal of the Aesthetic Dimension to the African Philosophy of Cloth," *Journal of Language, Technology & Entrepreneurship in Africa* 3, no. 2 (2012): 61.
- <sup>34</sup> Whitney Smith, "Twentieth Century Flags and Arms of Ethiopia," *Flag Bulletin* 35, no. 4 (1996): 150.
- <sup>35</sup> Weitman, "National Flags," 341.
- <sup>36</sup> Weitman, "National Flags," 338. Don Healy notes a parallel development in ensigns of former British colonies, which often retained the British pattern of a national flag in the canton and a field of white, blue, or red to distinguish whether the ship is military-, government-, or merchant-operated: "The three quarters that compose the area outside the canton do not serve to identify any particular nation, but rather, the type of vessel using the flag.... Nationhood and sovereignty are derived solely from the canton... By adopting the functional use of the fly at sea, the emerging nation asserts its equality with its former ruler..." "Modern Flag Design Trends – At Sea," *NAVA News* 21, no. 1 (January/February 1988): 4.
- <sup>37</sup> Eran Shalev, "A Republic Amidst the Stars: Political Astronomy and the Intellectual Origins of the Stars and Stripes," *Journal of the Early Republic* 31, no. 1 (2011): 40-73.
- <sup>38</sup> William George Crampton, "Marcus Garvey and the Rasta Colours," in *Report of the 13th International Congress of Vexillology, Melbourne, 1989*, 169-180 (Melbourne: Flag Society of Australia, 1993).
- <sup>39</sup> Touré, "The Flag of Guinea," 209.

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Above: Historic downtown Boston with a fisheye lens, across from the Old State House. Source: CristalArt, Flickr. Left: Omni Parker House. Source: Omni Hotels.

## Letter to the Editor

To the Editor:

Scot Guenter's "Solid Vexillology" essay in the most recent issue of *Flag Research Quarterly* raised several points regarding the study and practice of flag design, its relationship to vexillology in general, and its influence on the public's perception of our field.<sup>1</sup> I believe that his concerns are misplaced.

Dr. Guenter describes participating in a public radio program on which the host and participants were

...under the impression that vexillologists had a shared sense of aesthetics, and they believed our purpose was to rate flags numerically (give them a sort of seal of approval or thumbs down with a grimace) based on how pretty they were. Part of the procedure was to make fun of what we considered ugly ones, in a condescending manner, because they don't pass our beauty test."<sup>2</sup>

He further states that

...if someone wants to promote a flag for political reasons, or aesthetic reasons, if they want to set up a system where they can oversee how others design or promote flags, these are activities a vexillologist can and should study. But to suggest because one day you decided to do any of these things yourself that you are now the model for what the field of study in its totality is or should be—this is a serious disservice to the discipline.<sup>3</sup>

I don't think any NAVA member would suggest that flag design activities are "the model for what the field of study in its totality is or should be." During my term as NAVA's president, I gave a presentation at the annual meeting in Nashville that identified four categories of NAVA members: Scholars (practitioners of what Dr. Guenter calls "Solid Vexillology"), Collectors, "Evangelists" who promote the use of flags and flag design, and Commercial Members who are involved in the business of making and selling flags and flag-related items.<sup>4</sup> I used a 4-lobed Venn diagram to illustrate that these categories are not mutually exclusive, and that all come under the rubric of vexillology (figure 1). If the public and media perceive the Evangelists as the "totality" of vexillology, then it's our job to set them straight, as Dr. Guenter tried to do on the radio program.

There's more to it than that, however, because flag design is not simply about asserting "a shared sense of aesthetics." Firstly, there is a clear correlation between the quality of a flag's design and the success of that flag as a community symbol.<sup>5</sup> For example, here in the Washington, D.C., area, one sees the Maryland and District of Columbia flags everywhere in their respective jurisdictions, flying on businesses and private residences and as elements of art, advertising and

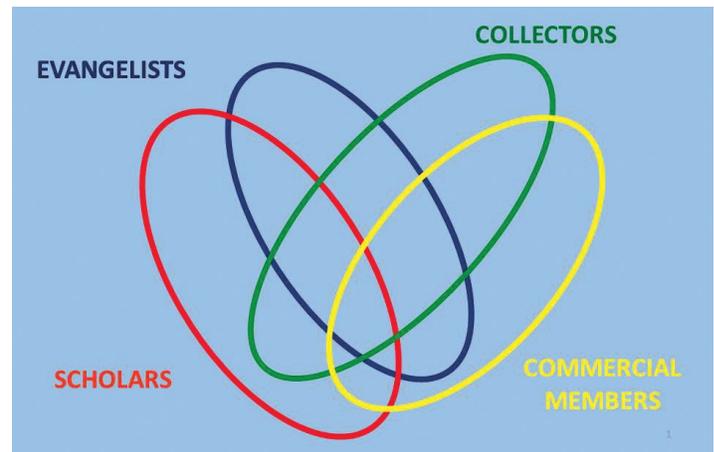


Figure 1. Four-lobe Venn diagram illustrating the overlapping interest groups that make up the vexillological community. Source: Peter Ansoff, "Some Thoughts on the Future of NAVA," paper presented at the Thirty-ninth Annual Meeting of the North American Vexillological Association, Nashville, Tenn., October 9, 2005.

even tattoos. Across the Potomac in Virginia, however, the "seal on a bedsheet" state flag is rarely seen other than on public buildings. The Texas and Alaska state flags and the Chicago city flag are other obvious examples of well-designed flags that are widely used by commercial and private entities as symbols of community pride. One can, of course, debate and analyze the specifics of what makes a good flag design, and those questions have been addressed in several NAVA publications.<sup>6</sup>

Secondly, the process of creating and adopting a flag is, by its nature, populist. The United States has no recognized authority to function as an official source of expertise for flag design, and flag proposals typically originate with individual corporate or government entities or private citizens.<sup>7</sup> For that reason, the information that NAVA offers to the public concerning flag design must be tailored to an audience that is not necessarily familiar with (or even particularly interested in) the finer details of vexillological lore and practice. It must be concise, understandable, and presented in common-sense terms.<sup>8</sup>

Dr. Guenter quoted Whitney Smith as saying that "The vexillologist studies the phenomena of flags rather than making or promoting flags," and stated that "vexillology is descriptive rather than prescriptive."<sup>9</sup> Those statements are true with respect to flag design, in the sense that it's not the vexillologist's business to promote or denigrate any particular flag. However, it is our business to analyze the factors that distinguish a successful flag design, to encourage the public to incorporate those insights into their flag-design efforts, and to provide impartial technical assistance to such efforts when requested. Vexillologists are also beginning to draw upon the insights of physicists and psychologists to understand the optics of flags, which affect how flags are perceived.<sup>10</sup>

We also should encourage activities that make the public aware of those insights, and of NAVA's interest in promoting good flag design. Such activities include articles in our publications, the state/provincial and city flag surveys that we conducted in 2001 and 2004, publication of guidance and case studies on flag design, and promoting the services of our Flag Design Committee.<sup>11</sup> We should also take advantage of popular cultural events that involve flags to publicize our activities and resources. Recent examples include the flag episodes of the *Big Bang Theory* television program, the podcasts and TED Talk by Roman Mars on city flag designs, and the media coverage of the 2016 Summer Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro.<sup>12</sup>

I disagree with Dr. Guenter's insinuation that flag design is somehow unworthy of inclusion in the scope of vexillology. However, I think he makes an excellent point that we need to be conscious of how our activities are perceived by the public. We must be careful to stress that flag design, like other aspects of vexillology, is a serious field of study that has real-world implications.

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<sup>1</sup> Scot M. Guenter, "Solid Vexillology," *Flag Research Quarterly* no. 10 (2016): 2-3.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 2-3.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Ansoff, "Some Thoughts on the Future of NAVA," paper presented at the Thirty-ninth Annual Meeting of the North American Vexillological Association, Nashville, Tenn., October 9, 2005.

<sup>5</sup> Dr. Whitney Smith has commented: "Good and bad flag design is recognized as properly being in the realm of vexillography, where questions of taste and preference rather than objectivity and rigorous analysis prevail...vexillologists in principle always stand apart from the flags they study, in order to derive scientific principles from knowledge of what is manifested in actual usage..." (Whitney Smith, "American Heraldry and Vexillology," *Raven* 6 [1999]: 53). In reality, the distinction is not so clear-cut: the success of a flag design is not simply a matter of "taste and preference," but can be objectively evaluated in terms of its acceptance and use, situational distinctiveness, etc.

<sup>6</sup> See for example: Ted Kaye, comp., *Good Flag Bad Flag* (Boston: North American Vexillological Association, 2006), [http://nava.org/digital-library/design/GFBF\\_English.pdf](http://nava.org/digital-library/design/GFBF_English.pdf); Perry Dane, "Flags in Context," *Raven* 15 (2008): 43-80; Michael Green, "Branding the Nations", in this issue of *Flag Research Quarterly*.

<sup>7</sup> There is a private body called The American College of Heraldry, but it has no official standing.

<sup>8</sup> *Good Flag Bad Flag* was designed to achieve these goals, and does so despite some significant shortcomings. Joint Commission on Vexillographic Principles, "Guiding Principles on Flag Design," (Boston: North American Vexillological Association and The Flag Institute, 2014), <http://nava.org/navanews/Commission-Report-Final-US.pdf>, adopted by the joint commission of NAVA and the Flag Institute in 2014, is less successful because of its unappealing and overly technical approach.

<sup>9</sup> Guenter, "Solid Vexillology," 2-3.

<sup>10</sup> For examples, see Georges Pasch, "Why There Are Only Six Colors of Flags: A Psychophysiological Theory of Basic Colors," *Flag Bulletin* 10, no. 2/3 (1971): 141-53; Georges Pasch, "Semiotic Vexillology: The Logical Structure of Flags," *Flag Bulletin* 22, no. 100 (1983): 141-57; Theun Okkerse, "After 50 Years, A New Design for Europe," *Flagmaster* 118 (December 2005): 1-2; Steven A. Knowlton and Adam C. Sales, "Flag Proportions: Thoughts on Flag Families and Artistic Unity within Displays of Multiple Flags," *Flag Research Quarterly* no. 9 (2016): 1-6; and Scott Mainwaring, "Which Way Forward? Directionality in Flag Perception and Design," paper presented at the Fiftieth Annual Meeting of the North American Vexillological Association, San José, Calif., October 15, 2016 [publication pending.]

<sup>11</sup> Summaries of the surveys, as well as case studies in flag design, may be found on the NAVA website at <http://nava.org/nava-digital-library-flag-design-resources>.

<sup>12</sup> The fictional characters Sheldon Cooper and Amy Farrah Fowler from *The Big Bang Theory* are shown presenting a podcast titled, *Fun with Flags*; relevant episodes include "The Beta Test Initiation" (season five, episode 14), "The Habitation Configuration" (season six, episode seven), "The Monster Isolation" (season six, episode seventeen) and "The Champagne Reflection" (season eight, episode ten), "The Separation Oscillation" (season nine, episode two), "The Valentino Submergence" (season nine, episode fifteen), and "The Veracity Elasticity" (season ten, episode seven), which may be viewed at [http://www.cbs.com/shows/big\\_bang\\_theory/](http://www.cbs.com/shows/big_bang_theory/); Roman Mars presented an episode of his podcast 99% Invisible titled "99% Symbolic" on October 8, 2010 that discussed the design of city flags (<http://99percentinvisible.org/episode/episode-06-99-symbolic>), and followed with an episode titled "Vexillonaire" on November 11, 2014 (<http://99percentinvisible.org/episode/vexillonaire>); it was later expanded into a TED Talk filmed in March 2015 titled "Why City Flags May Be the Worst-Designed Thing You've Never Noticed" ([https://www.ted.com/talks/roman\\_mars\\_why\\_city\\_flags\\_may\\_be\\_the\\_worst\\_designed\\_thing\\_you\\_ve\\_never\\_noticed](https://www.ted.com/talks/roman_mars_why_city_flags_may_be_the_worst_designed_thing_you_ve_never_noticed)).