Majulah Singapura: National Day and Flag Culture in a Southeast Asian City-State

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One important aim of vexillology, as a social science, is to help us understand other cultures and societies better by getting at how and why different groups use flags in different ways. As the late William Crampton demonstrated in his own academic scholarship on Nazi Germany, vexillology’s long range goals must move beyond categories of classification to develop methods of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation that can be adopted and adapted in studying flags and flag usage in the wide range of human societies.\(^1\) Another way of stating this agenda would be to appropriate the taxonomy of educational objectives of Benjamin S. Bloom. In the hierarchy of working with research data, Bloom sees a student rising through six levels of intellectual engagement, which he labels knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.\(^2\) Too often, I fear, vexillologists stop after completing work on the first three levels. Their work is often thorough and precise—but vexillology should not, indeed, must not allow itself to be limited in this fashion.

I wish to offer some observations and reflections on flag use in the city-state of Singapore, a thriving metropolis of three million people, technologically advanced and strategically located at the intersection of several important Asian trade and travel routes. Racially, Singapore is 77.3% Chinese, 14.1% Malay, 7.3% Indian, and 1.3% everybody else (often designated Eurasian).\(^3\) Forget the colonial images of coolies idling in sampans, this is (per capita) the ninth-richest nation in the world;\(^4\) it has—along with Hong Kong—one of the highest per capita uses of pagers and cell-phones; and anywhere on the 247 square miles of island you are not far from a modern multi-level shopping center. The benefit of a year’s sabbatical gave me the opportunity to live among Singaporeans for an extended period, to observe their flag culture and participate in the ceremonial celebration of National Day. Beyond description of the origin and uses of the national banner in this society, I will offer a contin-

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\(^1\) William G. Crampton, “Political Symbolism: Some Oblique Contributions”, an unpublished manuscript in the possession of the author.


\(^3\) This data is from June 1996. See <http://www.sg/flavour/profile/pro-people2.html>. For more demographic and statistical data see *Singapore Facts and Pictures 1996* (Singapore: Ministry of Information and the Arts, 1996).

uum of cultural emphasis to consider in evaluating strategies Singapore—or any other nation—might employ in regulating and disseminating flag usage. Such a study should be tempered by not only legal, but historical, economic, and political considerations.

Vexillology, born of heraldry but grown into a distinctive discipline of its own (in no small part because it reaches for the higher levels of Bloom’s taxonomy in ways that heraldry does not), nevertheless often demonstrates its European origins with a Eurocentric focus in its topics. When we do not focus on Occidental flags we still often carry, consciously or not, Western values and prejudices in the study of the usage of Asian or African flags. We cannot claim total objectivity; each of us operates in specific systems of cultural knowledge. As an American I have been shaped by life in the United States. Nevertheless, as scholars we need to keep moving back and forth through systems of knowledge, both cultural and theoretical, to get at the significance of human experience. When we discover different systems of rules surrounding flags, different practices associated with flags, we need to try to understand the systems both from within (the anthropologist’s emic) and without (the anthropologist’s etic). I hope that a year of observing flag usage within Singapore has provided me some useful knowledge that allows me to draw on insights from both perspectives.

Singapore was a trading post of a Sumatran empire and then of a Javanese empire by the mid-13th century. Sir Stamford Raffles arrived in 1819, and oversaw the development of a British free port to counter the Dutch monopoly in the region. In 1826 Singapore, with Penang and Malacca, became part of the Straits Settlements, which was recognized as a crown colony in 1867. Heavy immigration from south China and also from India contributed to the city’s cosmopolitan character; by the 1930s it was clearly a Chinese-dominated city. Following World War II and the Japanese occupation, the sentiment for independence grew in the populace. In 1954 the People’s Action Party was formed with Lee Kuan Yew as Secretary-General. This party swept to power in the 1959 elections; it has remained in control of Singapore ever since. Lee Kuan Yew served as Prime Minister until November 1990 and today remains in a position of respected authority as Senior Minister. Independence followed by union with Malaya was his first aim, and in September 1963 the Federation of Malaysia was formed. However, Singapore parted ways with Malaya on the point of offering special privileges to those of Malay descent, and the union was dissolved. Singapore became an independent nation on 9 August 1965. Under the strict control of Lee Kuan Yew and his People’s Action Party, by the 1970s Singapore was the wealthiest country in Asia after Japan.²

In the drive for independence from Great Britain, the Singaporeans sought a banner to rally around. In 1959, Deputy Prime Minister Toh Chin Chye headed a committee that created such a banner, and care and thought was put into the design. According to The National Symbols Kit distributed by the government of Singapore to inculcate patriotic sensibility in the schools, “... each feature has its own distinctive meaning and significance: red symbolises universal brotherhood and equality of man; white signifies pervading and everlasting purity and virtue; the crescent moon represents a young nation on the ascendant; and the five stars stand for the nation’s ideals of democracy, peace, progress, justice, and equality.”

Oral history by Minister Toh offers less lofty and more practical implications of color, symbol, and design decisions. The crescent was included to signal that Singapore professed to be multi-cultural and included Malays, who were overwhelmingly Muslim. His original inclination to use a solid red flag was modified for fear of too much association with the communists; the number of stars, originally three, was changed to five to avoid confusion with the flag and berets of the Malay Communist Party. Without the moon and stars, this becomes the flag of Indonesia, and comparatively tiny Singapore had to be sure to remain friendly while demonstrating its distinctiveness from this turbulent neighbor nation.

On 3 December 1959, the installation ceremony for the new head of state (who bears in polyglot Singapore the Malay title Yang di-Pertuan Negara) was held on the steps of City Hall facing the Padang, the most sacred site location in Singapore’s civil religious heritage. At that ceremony, the State Crest and State Flag were unveiled before a crowd of 25,000, and the new State Anthem, “Majulah Singapura”, was performed. Prime Minister and Father of the Nation Lee Kuan Yew made quite clear his awareness of the need and importance of civil religion when he averred: “Men have died for the honor and glory of their flag. Men have rallied and united in instructive response to their anthems. Small country though we may be, it is nevertheless necessary that we develop these instructive emotional responses so necessary to the survival of a people.” When Singapore was subsequently federated with Malaya into Malaysia, both flags flew over this island city. Upon independence in 1965 the state symbols of Singapore became undisputed national symbols.

From the beginning Singapore, one of the most highly organized social systems in the world, controlled the appropriate usage of these national symbols. On November 5, 1960, the Yang di-Pertuan Negara, empowered by “The Singapore State Arms and Flag and National Anthem Rules Ordinance, 1959”, established twelve rules for flag and anthem use. The flag was restricted to important government buildings and always given a position of honor and respect. It was forbidden as a means of adornment or advertisement. All were required to stand at the playing of the National Anthem. However, the use of the flag by the populace was unrestricted “on National Day and on all other occasions of national rejoicing”. Any contravening of these rules was an offense liable for a fine up to $1,000.

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7 “The National Anthem” segment on Talking Point, aired 7 August 1997 on Channel 5, TCS, Singapore.
8 Lee Kuan Yew’s address on 9 August 1959 as caught on radio tape included in “The National Anthem” segment on Talking Point. The phrase Majulah Singapura translates as “Onward Singapore”.
Singapore then developed a “flag season”, in which the flying of the national flag was encouraged—indeed, some would suggest very strongly encouraged—for citizens throughout the republic. The “Guidelines” designate the official celebration period as the month of August and warn that all decorations must be taken down by the first week of September. In my experience, the practice is a bit more flexible, actually beginning earlier. In my journal I noted by 21 July that decorations had gone up in my housing estate and at a nearby government-run community center. Already by that date “more and more flags were going up on the HDBs”.10

Twenty percent of Singaporeans are wealthy enough to own their own private home or condominium; the other eighty percent of Singaporeans live in HDBs, or Housing Development Board Estates. These are all planned and controlled by the government, and one of the miracles of modern Singapore is how quickly the population was shifted from life in kampong villages to life in these high-rises centered strategically around pre-designed shops, markets, bus terminals and subway stops. In July, “it has become something of a tradition for grassroots leaders to conduct promotion tours to sell copies of the flag in private and housing board estates”. As even the state-controlled paper in Singapore admits, “this can . . . be perceived by some as coercion and turn them, misguided, against the flag.”11

It was my perception that the flag-flying ratio was much higher in HDBs than in private estates; I lived in a private estate, shopped at Clementi (an HDB hub) and traveled freely all over the island, so I feel my perception is valid. Also, on the question of coercion, after I won their trust some Singaporeans openly complained to me about how the party officials in their housing area pressured their families to conform and fly the flag or risk the displeasure of the political machine.

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10 Author’s personal journal, 21 July 1997, Pandan Valley, Singapore.
Others countered that this was nonsense and all were free to choose. My educated guess based on these reports (in a society where any comment against the government could be risky) is that the pressure to conform and fly the flag is probably applied differently in different housing areas. But as more and more flags go up, a balcony in a building where the vast majority fly the flag becomes conspicuous in its emptiness. And as this season lasts for perhaps a total of six or seven weeks, neighbors will become quickly aware of who is conforming and who isn’t.

I chose to participate in the ritual and fly a flag from my balcony, but I was one of the few in my private housing estate to do so. I also discovered one does not just pop into a department or hardware store and buy a flag as one might in the United States. I visited two large shopping centers and could not find a flag at either of them. I discovered that the government distributed and controlled permits to sell the flag, and was eventually successfully directed to a shopping complex devoted to school and art supplies, where I found the recommended shop. Flags were not featured in a display but stacked behind the counter. They were, however, relatively inexpensive. People seemed bemused that I would want one, and my desire to fly the flag for National Day was interpreted as a bizarre eccentricity by most Asians, who said, “but you’re American!”

I also wished to attend the National Day Parade, an annual extravaganza held in the National Stadium, which seats 60,000. Tickets were free and coveted—not so much for the political status, necessarily, but because it’s an incredible show with
fireworks and attendees receive lots of free items: a hat, a scarf, a flag and flashlight to wave at designated times, a glossy color program, binoculars, food, drink, a backpack to hold all these gifts, plenty of coupons from sponsoring corporations and organizations, and so on. Singaporeans are very practical, known for their trading skills and emphasis on a bargain—I am sure these values contributed to the popularity of the National Day tickets. When the American Embassy was unable to help me procure a ticket to this acclaimed ceremony of Singaporean civil religion, I adopted a perfectly acceptable Asian strategy: I lamented my inability to see the event to a highly placed Singaporean socialite who conveyed my situation to a relative of the Prime Minister . . . and soon I received two free tickets as “gifts to a foreign scholar from the National Arts Council”.

I will save my analysis of the complex ritual ceremonies of National Day for another time; for the intrigued vexillologist they included a parade of more than thirty military colors, as well as ten commandos free-falling from 5,000 feet into the stadium, carrying the flags of the ten ASEAN nations. The National Flag of Singapore was pre-eminent in this gala presentation. All attendees received a flag which we waved when the spirit moved us or when we were so directed by authorities. One such moment came when the President entered and toured the perimeter of the stadium field in an open car. Then as twilight lengthened, a huge national flag carried by helicopters flew over the stadium as we solemnly sang the

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national anthem. At the end of a series of big musical production numbers, employing more than 15,000 participants and conveying a patriotic vision of the past, present, and future of Singapore, came fireworks designed by the fellow that did the Barcelona Olympics. This revved the crowd into a frenzy, waving their flashlights as the music crescendoed into the Pledge of Allegiance and again, climactically, we sang the National Anthem—not with reverence but with gusto. I must confess this propaganda was effective; I had tears in my eyes as I watched Indians, Chinese, Eurasians, and Malays—Singaporeans all—rise and recite the pledge, their right fists clenched atop their hearts, gazing up at the huge flag flown back in above them. Following the National Anthem, which is sung in Malay, the soundtrack and huge video screens turned back to fast-paced upbeat patriotic songs in English, the dominant language in Singapore business and commerce. Even I knew these songs by heart, as the government-controlled radio and television stations had been playing them with increasing frequency for the past three weeks; I also recalled hearing them as background music at the supermarket. The grand finale definitely instilled a sense of national unity, and in doing so it focused on the national flag as the main symbol of a multi-cultural, multi-language, multi-ethnic Singapore.

Following the National Day festivities, the flags remain flying everywhere for approximately four more weeks. In my belief system, Christmas decorations should not go up until after Thanksgiving and should come down immediately after New Year’s, so keeping these decorations up into September seemed anti-climactic. Around the first week in September each year, the national press and media begin reminding citizens to take down the flags. The Ministry of Information and the Arts advised “Each flag should be washed on its own and hung up to dry indoors . . . . If your flag is too old or worn to be kept, hand it to your local Residents’ Committee or community club to dispose of it. Organizations are requested to dispose of their used
flags in the same way.”

I saw a few examples of people delinquent in taking down their flags. What happened to them I do not know. However, as in many other cases in Singapore, the government has the option of enforcing the rules in any particular circumstance or situation as strictly as it feels is appropriate to best serve its perception of the national interest. As Singapore has been totally dominated by the People’s Action Party for its entire history since independence, with at best token representation of alternative perspectives, a blurring of meanings associated with the national flag has developed for many citizens. I have no doubt that the government of Singapore sincerely aims to present the national flag as a symbol of all citizens sharing their affirmed values in a multi-cultural society; however, with only one party always in control and in a society where so much is planned, organized, and regulated, it is not surprising that for many Singaporeans their national symbol evokes associations with the People’s Action Party.

As a comparatively young nation Singapore is still evolving the constellation of symbols and values in its civil religion. In 1986, because of the restrictions on the use of the national flag (and to protect the sacred national symbol), Singapore selected a new symbol based on the Merlion statue at the entrance to the city’s main harbor. The statue signifies Singapore to Asians just as the Eiffel Tower means Paris or the Statue of Liberty means New York. For the past twelve years, this “Singapore Lion symbol” has increasingly been exploited by practical Singaporeans looking for a marketing logo and image. In a society so based on consumer capitalism, the inevitable economic pulls to incorporate the flag into advertising and marketing were thus substantially (but certainly not totally) thwarted by the Singapore government. While one could buy small items (such as keychains, decals, and pins) showing either the national flag or the Singapore Lion in any souvenir shop, more blatant commercial representations of the Singapore flag were rare—for example, popular t-shirts used Merlion symbolism instead of the Singapore flag. In cases where non-government offices wanted to show their patriotism, flags of the Lion symbol would fly, because no official government permission was required. Although the introduction of the Singapore Lion symbol

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13 See memo to author from Michael Anderson, USIS, Embassy of the United States, 27 Napier Road, Singapore, 17 September 1997, with attached article “Last Week of Display of State Flags for N-Day”, Straits Times, undated, p. 36.
14 For a good essay on this topic see Ravi Veloo, “Don’t Play Politics with the Flag”, Straits Times, 7 August 1997, p. 5.
and its flag representation did not entirely protect the national flag from marketing, it kept its commercial use to less grandiose representation forms.

In comparing flag use across cultures and political systems, it would behoove vexillology to develop a quantitative gradient, a scale of sorts, to rate how open a society is to the use of its flag. Is it limited to the government only? Is it limited to daylight use? Is it limited geographically, or as in the case of Singapore's flag culture, temporally? A system like the United States, where flag usage is widespread, and where flag use is protected by the First Amendment as a speech act in many situations, would earn a high numerical ranking on this scale, as the semiotic image of the flag appears often and in many variable forms. A system in which flag use is restricted to limited elite on limited occasions would earn a low numerical ranking on the scale. Who would I ask to design such a scale? I would consult Dr. Whitney Smith for extremes on the scale and then seek his help and the help of knowledgeable FIAV members to set the standards. Of course, since social systems are vibrant, societies could change their rating levels over time, but establishing a rating system might prove useful in moving toward more insightful cross-cultural comparisons and assessments of how and why the national flag fares as it does in different cultures in its ranking of value in the hierarchy of each nation's pantheon of civil religious symbols and in the way it is used ritualistically.

Singapore would rate lower than the United States on such a scale (although higher does not necessarily mean better—it just means different rules of flag use). In such evaluations, other factors need to be identified as well. On research and vacation excursions, I saw spontaneous and enthusiastic uses of the national banner by everyday citizens to demonstrate patriotism in Indonesia, Brunei, Thailand, and Malaysia—all ASEAN nations near Singapore. In Singapore, however, all such uses of the national banner I saw were orchestrated, performed, even rehearsed. Part of this can be understood by the dynamics of neo-Confucianism and the Singaporean tradition of looking to authority for all decision-making.

In September 1997 the Programmes Section of the Ministry of Information and the Arts began distributing “The National Symbols Kit” to promote, primarily through the schools but also through civic organizations, a more cohesive civil religious belief system. The Kit includes a flag, a CD of the national anthem, and summaries of all important symbols. It is still too early to assess the success of this program. In the spring of 1998, when I went to the Ministry to buy some kits for myself, I had to list on a form who I was and why I wanted them, and up to that date, I was the largest private purchaser of the kits in the nation, although I only bought five, and the sign-in sheet had not yet gone beyond a dozen or so names. A website was also set up to spread this information to Singaporeans, who are increasingly computer-literate.

Clearly, the cultural significance of flags in southeast Asia is an area ripe for further study, and I hope other vexillologists will join me in an ongoing scholarly exploration of this topic. I also propose we begin discussion of some quantitative ranking

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15 For an excellent example of the reflexive cultural analysis beginning to emerge in Singapore studies which grapples with that complex culture's social construction of identity, see Chua Beng-Huat, “Culture, Multiracialism, and National Identity in Singapore”, Trajectories (London: Routledge, 1998) 186-205.

16 <http://www.sg/flavour/symbols.html>
systems for comparative flag use in different cultures, and that we all strive to move beyond classification to analysis and evaluation of why flags are the powerful, vibrant symbols they are, for by better understanding the role of the flags we will better understand ourselves.