

THE DYNAMICS OF FLAG EVOLUTION

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This paper is the second instalment of my treatment of the theoretical aspects of flag evolution and taxonomy, following from the paper on the «Phylogenesis of Vexillology» presented at Barcelona in 1991¹. In that paper I postulated that just as living organisms form themselves into genetic families so do flag designs, and that these grow into major, intermediate and minor groupings as do organic life-forms. I also postulated the existence of at least twelve major flag root-forms, labelled «Urflaggen», from which, it could be demonstrated, a huge proportion of the world's flags, both extant and extinct, could be shown to be derived.

The purpose of this paper is to illustrate some of the ways in which they originate, and how designs change to accommodate themselves to external influences, in other words how they evolve. To pursue once more the parallel with organisms: evolution by natural selection is a process of adaptation and accommodation to external factors such as climate, habitat, food sources, environment, disease, natural disasters etc. In the flag world the external forces would be mostly political ones, but factors such as fashion and trend are also important, as are the influences of pressure groups such as heralds, community groups, religious organisations and other non-political community leaders or trend-setters. In terms of political science the process of flag evolution is part of the continuous inter-action between the elites and the masses of a given political system, a process of dialogue and discourse, but a dialogue in which the politicians usually have the last word.

The oldest of the factors which influence flag design is **heraldry**, the system of personal and, later, territorial symbols which grew up in the pre-Renaissance and Renaissance eras, say roughly from 1200 to 1500 CE. Heraldic ideas about symbols and how they could be used as flags were as important to flag evolution as the Ice Age was to human development. Heraldry was at once the spur or stimulus of flag usage and a curb or brake to it. It stimulated flags for personal and political use but by imposing a rigid system of its own failed to accommodate to the needs of new areas of vexillological extension, for example to use at sea or in the swift-moving military era of the Thirty Years War or the English Civil War. Modern graphic artists are very scornful of heraldry as an area of design expertise because of its self-imposed restraints. A graphic artist who could design the flag of Newfoundland would have little time for the niceties which have led other Canadian provinces to adopt heraldic banners.

One very useful feature which did emerge from heraldry, but which has only a precarious hold on life, is the idea of the livery flag. It could be shown that the flags of Poland [Fig. 1], Spain, Luxembourg, the Vatican City and many others are combinations of the main colours of the armorial bearings of these states, and in regional and civic flags in Germany, the Czech Republic, Austria and Switzerland the idea of the livery colours as

the obvious colours for the flag is still alive and doing well, although unfortunately extinct in Britain.

The ideal heraldic process was therefore from the arms, to the colours, to the flag, particularly the flag for common usage, and from there to a further form: the striped flag with the arms added back to it, to make a more official or important flag. Another use of this, as we know from the work of Rabbow and Günther is the civic flag with the arms added back to it, probably for purposes of distinction, since there is a limit to the number of striped flags that can exist together at any one time^{2,3}.

Related to heraldry and roughly co-terminous with it was the influence of **religion**. Two major forms of this are known: the Christian and the Moslem, and both related very directly to flags for personal and territorial use. In Christian Europe the cross was first the badge of the Crusader and the conquistador, and secondly a prime heraldic charge. Combinations of these can be seen in heraldic standards which often had the national cross, that is the cross in a form and colour associated with a particular realm, placed next to personal or royal heraldic devices [Fig. 2]. In the Islamic world written slogans appeared on flags at an early date, and were for a long time the only recognised form. The slogans had power because they were related to the deity («God is Great») and because they were written – a form of magic in which the Moslems were superior to the Christians. Many Christian flags and banners portrayed God, Christ, the Virgin Mary and the saints in forms which live on today in church banners.

Some of the oldest flags of Christian states are purely religious, such as the crosses of Denmark, Scotland and Switzerland, as are flags of former city-states such as Genoa and Venice. Christian motifs are still very widespread in civic heraldry, particularly in Catholic countries. Like heraldry religious overtones live on today in a kind of half-life: still there in the background although not necessarily active. Religion also lives on in the way in which flags acquire affective charges, leading to more or less virulent forms of vexillolatriy⁴.

The third element I wish to note is the **military** one. This includes all the demands of warfare, especially developments in the seventeenth century when early modern methods superseded feudal ones. The most important of all these was in the use of ships of war. The need for squadrons, proper marks of nationality, and rank and signal flags led to a systematisation that is still alive today, and which also very heavily influenced flags towards being simple and straightforward. It is interesting to compare the descriptions of the flags of the ships of the pre-Tudor monarchs in Perrin's «British Flags» with those of the post-Tudor era: the first were heavily ornamented with both heraldic and religious insignia and were intended to impress and awe as well as to distinguish, whereas in the Navy of Elizabeth and the Stuarts we find flags becoming more practical pieces of tough coloured bunting rather than artistic confections in silk.

But in Spain, Portugal and other southern countries we see the silks and satins bedizened with elaborate heraldry and religious icons surviving on right into

modern times. On land the need for territorial flags did not arise until much later. It is interesting to note that some early national flags are described in contemporary charts as «Jack and Fortress Flag» indicating that distinguishing a fortress (and probably a maritime one at that) was more or less the only role enjoyed by the national flag, contrary to the anachronistic view of many makers of films and TV dramas. Otherwise they formed the basis of military colours.

The whole subject of the evolution of military flags and colours is a full chapter of this thesis. All I can say here is that the development did follow both the needs of the time and the dictates of fashion, and involved an evolution from simple to complex and back to simple again. The military flags did require a national flag as their basis, as can be seen in those of Britain which all incorporated the Union Jack [Fig. 3]. We are familiar with this practice in French, Swiss and Piedmontese flags as well. In a contrasting development in modern times we can point to the use of military colours as the basis of several USA state flags, and (the sole instance of a national flag) the use of the Swazi Pioneer Corps flag as the foundation of the Swaziland national flag.

But by far the most important political influence on flag design is that of the major **revolutions** of the modern world. It will be recalled that several of the «Urflaggen» were revolutionary flags which emerged from the revolutions or were shaped by post-revolutionary attempts at national self-determination. These include: The «Tricolore» and its derivatives (the German, Belgian, Irish and German tricolours), the blue-white-blue triband, the flag of Miranda, the Red flag, the Anarchist flag.

Revolution of the type referred to here does not mean merely a change of regime, but a wholesale replacement of an elite and prevailing ideology. The effects of what has been called the North Atlantic Revolution of 1775–1799 spread into every part of society, and shaped the history of the next century. In vexillology a most important development was the extension of the idea of the national flag to use on land as well as at sea. It is true that the American and French flags were primarily intended for use at sea but during this period the concept of the national colours, cockade and tricolour came to life and have been with us ever since. It is interesting to note that among the repressive measures taken by the British government in the early nineteenth century was a ban on the use of tricolour cockades, even though red, white and blue were the British national colours.

Among the innovations of this period were the notion that national flags should be in three colours (unlike the traditional heraldic livery), and of the star as an emblem to replace the cross. Dozens of revolutionary and political flags since that time have used a star or stars (now systematised into the five-pointed form) whereas before 1777 it was more or less completely unknown to vexillology. The genealogical tree that grows out from the «Tricolore» is the biggest in the vexillological world, but since this area has been dealt with by others I will not pursue it here⁵. I will just note that several other kinds of revolution or political campaign took

up the notion as well, including the Pan-Arab Movement, the Arab Liberation movement of Nasser, the Garvey-Rasta cult, the Indian Congress and African National Congress flags and many other political party flags.

The use of political party or liberation movement flags as the basis of a subsequent national flag is a very well-known phenomenon, although also a very recent one. I would say that the first instance of it is the adoption of the Irish Tricolour in 1919 as the flag of the Free State, although we cannot really say that the flag was that of a distinct political party. Related to this practice is the use of an older or alternative liberation flag as a naval jack, a practice known in Cuba, Ireland, Indonesia and elsewhere. In 1935 the «Hakenkreuz», in a form almost identical with that of the Nazi Party, became the national flag of Germany, but we have to wait until 1947 when the flags of the Indian Congress and the Moslem League became (in altered forms) the flag of India and of Pakistan [Fig. 4] before we see the floodgates open and a great rush of national flags derived from political sources becoming the national flags of the world.

The last trend I can refer to now is perhaps less well-known. It is that of **modernisation**. Modernisation has several aspects and is the name of a large body of theoretical work in modern political science. Here I can only mention some of its more obvious aspects. The first is the wish of a country to show that it is up to date and in the fashion in the same way as others. The second is the wish to display solidarity with other countries which are acting as paradigms in the geocultural sphere. The third is the wish to re-cast the past so that it is of use to the present, if necessary inventing traditions that can be exploited today. A fourth is to include the flag, arms, anthem and other national symbols into a coherent statement about the country, in other words to use them as part of the apparatus of national identity⁶.

Examples of these trends are seen in the treatment of the flags of China, Japan, Iran, Ethiopia, Turkey and Thailand where the flags themselves, that is their forms and functions, were modernised under European influence. In the case of Thailand the flag was altered to be like a western tricolour, forcing it out its natural form, and in China the normal flags were completely abandoned in favour of western models. Thailand's colours demonstrated solidarity with the WW-I Allies, and as I showed in my paper on Garvey and the Rasta Colours African countries demonstrated their solidarity with each other in their flag colours. In Japan the modern flag, the «Hinomaru», is shown to emerge from a glorious and worthy past to take its honourable part in modern Japan. Many countries, at any rate those qualified to do so, celebrate the ancient origins of their national symbols, the most outstanding example being the way the modern German Tricolour is vaunted as having an origin in the good old days of liberal nationalism⁷.

The fourth aim is connected with the very modern development of the conscious creation of national identity, which is another huge subject too vast to deal with here. I refer those interested to my PhD thesis on «The Symbolism of National Identity»⁸. All I can say here is that flags and related images are part of a modern discourse between elites and masses in the ongoing struggle for political modernisation, and convey much

more complex messages that they did in former times. It is at this point that political science crosses the path of vexillology, and both are seen to be relevant to the other, and to be able to make contributions to the other. «Symbolism» in both the metaphorical and the realistic sense has to draw very extensively on flag-design and flag-usage.

A final point on this subject is that the national flag is now an absolute necessity in a way unimaginable in the nineteenth century. The unveiling of the national flag is now the public highlight of any act of independence, whereas we note that the USA did not acquire anything of the sort until two years after the outbreak of hostilities, Australia did not have one at the time of independence and Canada had to wait over a hundred years. But a nation is not a nation today unless its flag is flying outside the UN headquarters⁹.

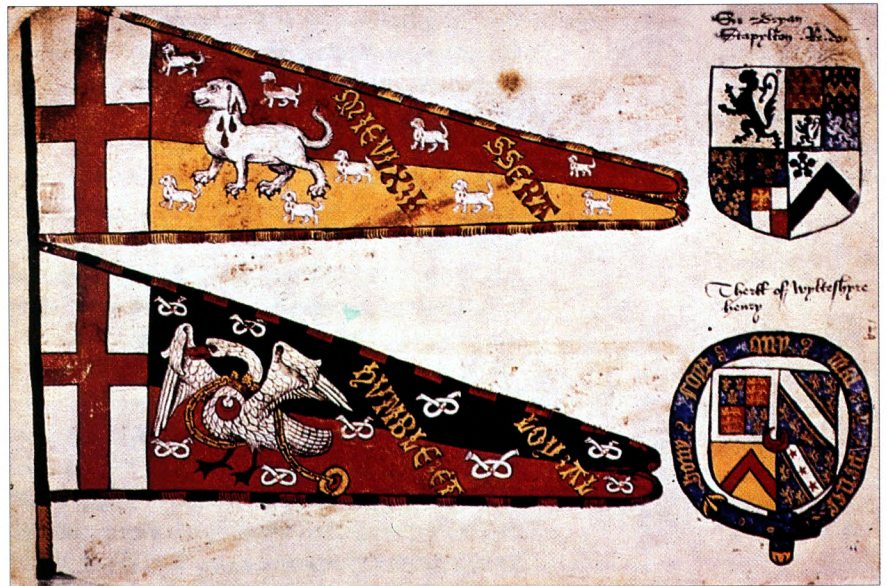
I hope I have convinced you that flag evolution is a very organic process, not a matter of chance or whim but one just as real as anything else in the natural world and therefore just as subject to scientific analysis.

Notes

- ¹ William G. Crampton, «The Phylogenesis of Vexillology», paper delivered to the XIV International Congress of Vexillology, Barcelona, June 1991.
- ² Arnold Rabbow, «Typology of Westphalian Village Flags: Democracy, Bureaucracy and Heraldry in Conflict», in: «The Flag Bulletin», Vol. XI, No. 3, pp.363-372.
- ³ Erwin Günther, «City Flags and Banners in the DDR», in: «Flagmaster», Nos. 064/065 and 070.
- ⁴ This is another huge subject that can only be briefly referred to here. A good starting point is David R. Manwaring: «Render unto Caesar: The Flag Salute Controversy», Chicago, 1962, University of Chicago Press. See also «Religious Objections to the Flag Salute», in: «The Flag Bulletin», No. 121, pp.178-179, and the essays by Buchanan, Guenther and Smith in «The Flag Bulletin», No. 128.
- ⁵ Lucien Philippe, «The French Tricolour and its influence on flags throughout the world», in: «The Flag Bulletin», Vol. X, Nos. 2-3, pp.55-58.
- ⁶ Søren Askegaard, «The National Flag and the Myth of the Nation», in: «The Flag Bulletin», No. 124, pp.16-22.
- ⁷ This has been the theme of the material in «Wappen und Flaggen der Bundesrepublik Deutschland und ihrer Länder», and other material produced by the «Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung», the object of which is to carry the flag story back to the good old days of Wartburg, Hambach and Frankfurt; see also «Das Hambacher Fest» produced by the «Landeszentrale für politische Bildung Rheinland-Pfalz», n. d.; and Ekkehard Kuhn: «Einigkeit und Recht und Freiheit», Berlin, 1991, Ullstein Verlag. Much of the material produced during the «Flaggenstreit» also attempted to build an acceptable «past» for the black-red-gold German colours.
- ⁸ A thesis being presented by the author in 1993 to the University of Manchester. The object of the thesis is to relate vexillology more closely to the modern theories of political science.
- ⁹ A modern twist to this is the case of Macedonia, which has been accepted as an independent nation state without having a proper name and on condition that its flag does not fly at the United Nations!



Fig. 1
The state flag and the coat of arms of Poland.



above: Fig. 2
Heraldic standards of the Tudor era.

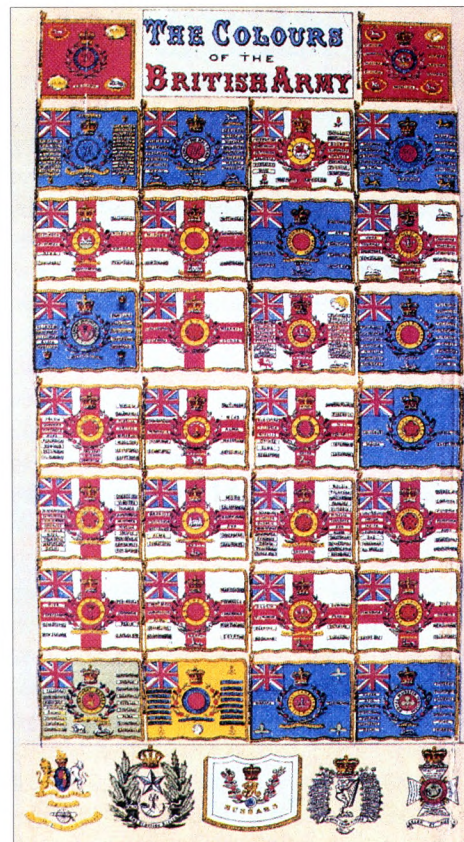
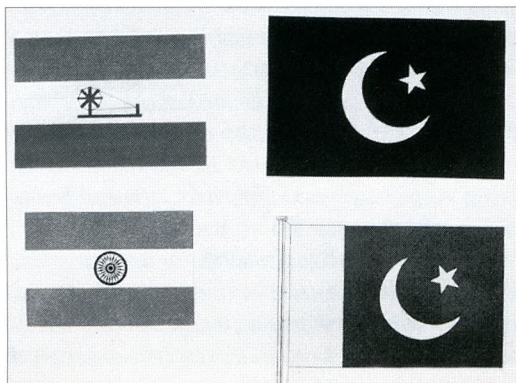


Fig. 3
The Colours of the British Army



left: Fig. 4
Flags of the Indian Congress Party (top left), of India (bottom left), of the Moslem League (top right), and of Pakistan (bottom right).