



## Where the Gambia River gives life: A tribute to Gambia's flag designer Louis Lucien Thomasi

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### **Abstract**

*In the wake of the 1807 Act for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, the British decided to stop slave traffic on the Gambia River. For the next century and a half the banks of the river were ruled by the British, and British flag traditions were followed there. Independence for the oldest British colony in Africa came in 1965 without one party claiming it. Due to the lack of an independence party, the choice of colours and design for the national flag was made freely. From the very start the national flag was accepted by Gambians of all eight ethnic groups and survived every coup d'état. This study concerns the flags that The Gambia has had in its history and is based mainly on archival research in Banjul and London.*

The United Kingdom was the first nation to abolish the slave trade in 1807. The British were determined to uphold the law and made real efforts to stop other nations from trading human beings. In what is now known as The Gambia, the British founded a base from where they could monitor the Gambia River. Europeans called it the 'River of secret trade and riches', as it served as a kind of highway for trafficking human cargo from the West African interior.

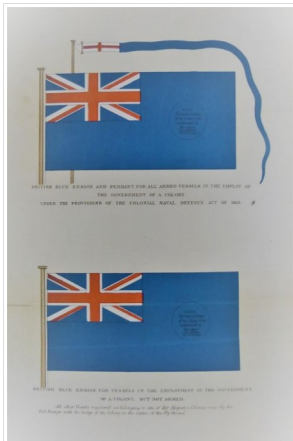
Sent out by the Colonial Office in London, Captain Alexander Grant entered into a treaty with the Chief of Kombo in April 1816, when the sandbank, known as St Mary's Island, was ceded to the British. In earlier centuries it was called *Banjulo* by the Portuguese. This base gave control over the mouth of the wide river. Here, a new settlement was built, after a design of Sir Charles MacCarthy. He named the settlement Bathurst, after the then Secretary of State for the British Colonies, Henry Bathurst. Bathurst (now Banjul) also served as a new home for freed slaves.

Sierra Leone, another small British territory on the West African coast, was chosen as the seat of government. Its jurisdiction also included Gold Coast, as Ghana was then called. This connection lasted until 1842 when Sierra Leone became a separate colony. In the meantime, British jurisdiction over The Gambia had expanded. In 1823, an island situated some 250km up the Gambia River was purchased from native chiefs, later the site of Georgetown (now Janjanbureh). When in 1857 the British acquired Albreda (now Albadarr) on the north bank of the river, The Gambia effectively became wholly British.

### **First flags**

The Gambian ethnic groups did not use flags. The only flags they saw were those used by European and American ships. The British marked their possessions around the world with Union flags, mostly flown from government

houses and military posts. This also applied in The Gambia. In these early days of British control over the Gambia River and its banks there was no system whereby colonies were entitled to fly their own flags. This all changed on 16 January 1866, when the Admiralty in London sent out 'Circular No. 4-S. Colonial Colours'. It prescribed: 'All Vessels belonging to, or in the service of the Colonies, ... shall wear the Blue Ensign, with the Seal or Badge of the Colony in the fly thereof.'<sup>1</sup>



*Circular No. 4-S, Colonial Colours*

Distinctive colonial ensigns were introduced after the abolition of the system which divided the British fleet into red, blue and white squadrons. These ensigns were always established by agreement between the Admiralty and the Colonial Office in London and the local governor. The introduction of colonial ensigns did not at first affect the Colony of The Gambia, as in 1866 it was merging – for the second time – with Sierra Leone and Gold Coast. The Lagos Territory, in today's Nigeria, became part of the same entity at that time. These four British territories were known by the collective name of West African Settlements.



*Elephant badge of the West African Settlements, 1870*

It was four years before the West African Settlements obtained a badge which could be used on a Blue Ensign. The Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty in London approved the design in 1870. Since Government House was in Freetown, Sierra Leone, the design of the circular badge was based on the old Public Seal of Sierra Leone.<sup>2</sup> It depicts a landscape with a brown elephant – it

- 1 'Circular No.4-S. Colonial Colours', *The Navy List*, corrected to 20 December 1865 [sic], p. 333.
- 2 Email from flag badge expert David Prothero, 2 June 2017. The email also acknowledged Prothero's incorrect attribution of the elephant badge to Gold Coast in his 'Chronology of Elephant and Palm flags', FOTW website (2004), <https://flagspot.net/flags/gb-wafrs.html> [accessed 29 May 2017].

looks like it is trumpeting – in front of a palm tree and green hills in the distance. Underneath the elephant is written in red lettering, 'WEST AFRICA SETTLEMENTS'.<sup>3</sup>

The landscape depicted might have been that of Lagos, Gold Coast and Sierra Leone, but it certainly did not apply to The Gambia. This settlement had no green hills nor an elephant population. The only accurate element in the flag badge as far as Gambia is concerned is the palm tree, which is seen everywhere in the country.



*The Gambia has many  
palm trees ... but no elephants!*

The Blue Ensign with the West Africa Settlement badge was not flown widely. It was never seen on land, as only vessels in the service of the colonies were entitled to fly it. Among these boats will have been the new government steamer *St Mary*, which replaced the *Dover* in 1875.<sup>4</sup>

The Lagos and Gold Coast Settlements left the West African Settlements in 1874 and merged to form the Gold Coast Colony. In 1877, the Admiralty granted a badge to the colony. It was identical to the badge used in the West African Settlements period, but for the red capitals 'G.' and 'C.' (for Gold Coast) replacing the full name of the settlements. Lagos left the Gold Coast in 1886 to become a new Colony and two years later was granted the same elephant badge, now with a red capital 'L.' for Lagos.



*Badge of the Colony of Lagos, 1886      Badge of the Gold Coast Colony, 1877*

Sierra Leone and The Gambia remained as the West African Settlements until 28 November 1888, when the Settlement of The Gambia became the Colony of The Gambia. Sierra Leone, which was designated a separate British Colony, was given the elephant badge with a capital 'S. L.', for Sierra Leone. The Gambia was granted the same badge by the Admiralty, but with a red 'G.', for Gambia. This

3 Note the incorrect omission of a capital 'N' after 'AFRICA'. The official name of the territory was West African Settlements.

4 Francis Bisset Archer, *The Gambia Colony and Protectorate: An Official Handbook* (London: St Bride's Press, [1906]), p. 78.

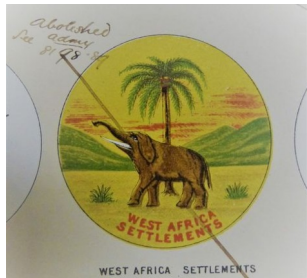
ended the use of the 1870 West African Settlements badge.<sup>5</sup>



*Badge of Sierra Leone, 1888*



*Badge of The Gambia, 1888*



*How the Admiralty treated the flag badge of the dissolved West African Settlements, 1889*

### **Gambia's own flag badge**

The Gambia's new status as a colony could have allowed it to apply for a new badge to correct the design errors, for it still had no green hills and no elephants. But when The Gambia obtained its new badge, it was identical to those of Sierra Leone, Gold Coast and Lagos, apart from the capital letter 'G.'. From 1909 the number of elephant badges slowly reduced.<sup>6</sup> The new Gambia badge was first published in the 1889 edition of the Admiralty's official flag book, *Drawings of the Flags in Use at the Present Time by Various Nations*.<sup>7</sup>



*First appearance of the Gambian flag badge. 'Drawings of the Flags in Use at the Present Time by Various Nations' (1889)*

Like the previous ensign, the new colonial Gambian flag was seldom flown or seen. It was certainly not viewed as a distinctive flag to represent the whole colony and was only used in colonial-owned vessels. One of these was the steam yacht *Mansah Kilah* ('King's Messenger'), purchased in 1894 when a regular weekly mail and passenger service was introduced. It is most likely the

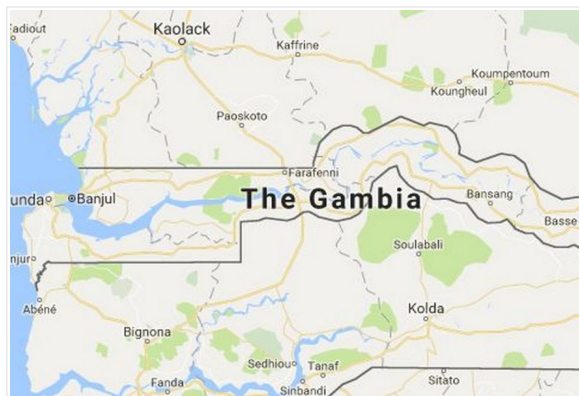
- 5 The National Archives (TNA) Kew, Colonial Office, CO 325/54, 'Colonial Flags 1865-1909'. This document contains a plate with several flag badges; the plate for the West African Settlements is crossed out with the remark 'abolished Admir[alt]y See 8198 "[18]89"'.  
6 Prothero states in 'Chronology of Elephant and Palm flags': "'L.'" ended 1906 when Lagos merged with Niger Coast Protectorate to form the Colony and Protectorate of Southern Nigeria. "S. L." ended 1916 when the arms granted to Sierra Leone 30 July 1914 became the flag badge. "G. C." ended 1957 when Gold Coast became independent as Ghana.'
- 7 *Drawings of the Flags in Use at the Present Time by Various Nations* (London: Admiralty, August 1889), p. 11.

flag flown by this vessel in this photo taken in 1904.<sup>8</sup>



*Government steam yacht 'Mansah Kilah' ('King's Messenger'), 1904*

In 1889, the present boundaries of The Gambia were defined when the United Kingdom reached an agreement with the French Republic, which held what is now Senegal. That agreement did not respect the borders of the different ethnic groups; the new border suited only the strategic needs of the UK and France. It gave to The Gambia the shape of a groundnut, which is now the country's main export product, and a territory that ever since has included eight main ethnic groups.<sup>9</sup> These same groups are also found in neighbouring Senegal. For administrative reasons, Bathurst and its surroundings became a Colony and the remainder of the territory became a Protectorate, hence the official name the Colony and Protectorate of The Gambia. Following a short conflict between the British colonial forces and indigenous Gambians, British colonial authority was firmly established in 1906.



*Senegal borders The Gambia on three sides*

In the mid-1920s consideration was given to changing the flag badge. On 11 March 1924, a proposal from the Governor's Office in Bathurst was sent to the Secretary of State for the Colonies in London.<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately, it is not clear why a new design was proposed or why the plan failed. The original documents dealing with the subject are untraceable, either in the National Record Office, Banjul or The National Archives, Kew. Twenty years later, in 1944, the elephant badge design was used in a set of Gambian stamps.

<sup>8</sup> Archer, 'The Gambia Colony and Protectorate', p. 128.

<sup>9</sup> These ethnic groups are: Mandinka (c.41 per cent); Wolof (15 per cent); Fula (19 per cent); Jola (10 per cent); Serahuli (8 per cent); Serer (2.5 per cent); Aku (0.8 per cent) and Manjago (1.7 per cent). All suffered the impact of the Atlantic slave trade and domestic slavery.

<sup>10</sup> See entry in National Record Office (NRO) Banjul, 'General Index Book Despatches Forwarded to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Commenced 4th July, 1914'; also a further entry, 'Badge for the Gambia, New. No. 167', 29 September 1924.





*Set of Gambian stamps featuring the elephant and tree, 1944*

One other flag was in use, which might be considered as the colonial Gambian flag. In the 1920s the Customs in Banjul began using its own ensign without official permission from the Admiralty in London. It was a British Blue Ensign defaced with a Tudor-type crown, beneath which was the word 'CUSTOMS', and flew over the Customs House in Bathurst. It was discovered by the authorities in London in early 1933. When the Governor mentioned it, he thought it was an official flag, but this was not so. The Colonial Office in London sought approval from the Admiralty, which was obtained. On 31 January 1934, the Governor in The Gambia was informed that Admiralty had 'no objection to the continuance of the practise of flying the Blue Ensign defaced as described ... over the Customs House in Bathurst'.<sup>11</sup> In this way the special flag received official permission.<sup>12</sup>



*Special Customs flag granted to the Customs House, Bathurst (Banjul), 1934*

### **Independence**

In the 1950s and 60s most foreign-ruled territories in Africa made it clear to their colonial powers that they wanted to manage their own affairs. This triggered the process of decolonisation, starting with Gold Coast (Ghana) in 1957. Some colonies had to fight bloody wars to achieve their goal. In others, parties were established whose main policy was independence. Their party colours heavily influenced the national flag after independence was finally achieved.

However, this did not apply in The Gambia. The country's road to independence was fairly peaceful. The first colony-based political parties appeared in the 1950s, with the United Party (UP) and People's Progressive Party (PPP) emerging as the most prominent and influential. The Mandinka-strong PPP established itself in 1960 as the leading advocate for independence. The Gambia acquired internal autonomy on 4 October 1963, and PPP leader Dawda Jawara became prime minister. During the parade celebrating autonomy, banners as can be seen on a black and white photograph taken in Banjul. Unfortunately, their exact colours or meaning are unknown. A so-called

11 TNA Kew, CO 323/1222/2, 'Use of Naval Ensigns as Government Establishments: Replies to Circular of 10 December 1932. Red 16'.

12 In 'Chronology of Elephant and Palm flags', Prothero adds: 'There was no specific colonial Customs Ensign. In the early 1930s those colonies that

'courtesy flag' was designed for the ministers, but I have been unable to trace its design.<sup>13</sup>



*Banners displayed during the parade celebrating  
The Gambia gaining internal autonomy, 4 October 1963*

The desire for independence was embraced by other political parties, which all continued to press more strongly for independence. Consequently, all The Gambia's political parties were invited to Marlborough House, London in July 1964 for independence talks. On 18 February 1965 independence was finally agreed.

Even before the opening of the Marlborough House Conference, the government in Banjul was aware that an independent nation would need a new flag. In a memorandum dated 4 June 1964, Governor Sir John Paul and Prime Minister Jawara suggested to the cabinet two means of obtaining this:

[E]ither it can be put out to open competition and a small committee set up to recommend to Cabinet those designs which it considers most suitable, or the Cabinet can decide the basic components of the Flag and ask the College of Arms to prepare a design embodying these components. In either case the design must be cleared with the Admiralty to ensure that there is no infringement of any existing flag and the College of Arms must prepare and inscribe a painting for Her Majesty's approval (this would apply if the Gambia remains within the Commonwealth but, in any event, we shall need the assistance of the College of Arms). The Flag is then enrolled in the College of Arms.<sup>14</sup>

In next day's cabinet meeting it was decided to launch a competition to design

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wanted one, were authorised to have one of their own design. The Gambia seems to have copied Nigeria, but others had just "HMC", "HM Customs" with no crown, colonial badge with "Customs" or with "HM Customs".'

13 The courtesy flags for ministers are mentioned in NRO Banjul, EXE3/5, Cabinet Conclusions, 1962-1965, 5 June 1964, 'Conclusions of a Special Meeting of Cabinet held in the Cabinet Room on Friday the 5th June, 1964', p. 5.

14 NRO Banjul, EXE5/36, Executive Council Minutes and Papers, 1952-1965, 4 June 1964.

a national flag, a coat of arms and a national anthem. Their reasoning was as follows:

[T]he courtesy flag at present used by Ministers was satisfactory and original; nevertheless, there was advantage in putting the design for this and for the Coat of Arms and Motto out to competition since this would secure a greater degree of participation by the public in the arrangements for independence.<sup>15</sup>

The selection process was to be finalised by the end of August 1964, with a prize of £50 on offer to the winner of each section of the competition. The cabinet also reserved its right to 'having alternative designs and compositions prepared – or in the case of the National Flag continuing in use the courtesy Flag – if the competitions produced nothing suitable'. The cabinet also agreed on the composition of the different committees established to select the new national symbols.

The cabinet appointed eight members to the selection committee for flag and arms: Speaker of the House, Sir Alieu Jack; Attorney-General, Sir Phillip Bridges; Director of Education, Mr S.H.M. Jones (b.1923); Mrs Rachel Carrol; Director of Medical Services, Dr John Mahoney (1919-2012); Seyfu Omar Sise (Upper Saloum district); businesswoman, Mrs Jacob Mahoney; and Ms E. Topham, who was appointed secretary.

On 15 June 1964 Ms Topham invited the other seven members to the committee's first meeting on Friday 26 June. Its brief was to consider its terms of reference and to issue notices to the general public inviting suitable designs for the Gambian National Flag and Coat of Arms and Motto. This invitation also specified that the committee's task was, 'To select a maximum of not more than 12 designs each for the National Flag and Coat of Arms (including Motto) from the entries submitted and to forward these to the Government for final selection not later than 31st August, 1964.'<sup>16</sup>

The invitation also pointed out that: 'apart from the closing date of the Competition and the amount of prize money, the Government does not seek to impose any special conditions with regard to the designs'.

Nonetheless, the cabinet did have some ideas regarding the overall direction of the design, inspired by the flag adopted by neighbouring Sierra Leone on independence in 1961: '[T]he design should be to scale and the Flag should be accompanied by an official description (the Sierra Leone Flag for example has green for its agricultural resources, white for peace and blue for its natural harbour).'

After this meeting, the Flag and Arms Committee placed notices in *The Gambia News Bulletin*, published by Gambia Information Services. Some 50 universities in Sierra Leone, Ghana, Nigeria and the UK also received calls to display the details on their noticeboards. *London Fanfare*, a BBC African Service radio programme, called on Gambian expatriates to send in their ideas.

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15 NRO Banjul, EXE3/5, Cabinet Conclusions, 1962-1965, 'Conclusions of a Special Meeting of Cabinet held in the Cabinet Room on Friday the 5th June, 1964'.

16 NRO Banjul, GOV1/60, GO/S3786/2, National Flag and Coat of Arms Committee, Letter Government's Office, 15 June 1964.





*Sierra Leone flag adopted at independence, 1961*

The Flag and Arms Committee responded to the cabinet's hint that blue and green should feature in the future flag, specifying to contestants that: 'The design of the flag should be accompanied by an official description. For example, green for agricultural resources, blue for the Gambian River.' And the closing date for the competition was noon, Saturday 15 August 1964.

which is open to everyone, is subject to the following terms:—

1. The design of the flag must be in colour and to scale. The colours should be clear and accurately portrayed and care should be taken to ensure that the design does not correspond with the National Flag of any other country.
2. The design of the flag should be accompanied by an official description. For example, green for agricultural resources, blue for the Gambian River.
3. A prize of £50 is offered for the design accepted by the Government.
4. The Government reserves the right to have alternative designs prepared in the event of it being of the opinion that none of the designs selected by the Committee are suitable for the Gambian National Flag or to make any variations in the

*Notice inviting proposals for national symbols. The Gambia News Bulletin*

During that year's rainy season, 238 people submitted a total of 504 proposals for a future Gambian flag. We now know only of one of these, because this design became the Gambian flag at independence. The names of the contestants and their number of entries are kept in the National Record Office in Banjul. Seventy-four contestants sent in more than one design, and one delivered thirty ideas. The eventual winner submitted eight designs. But sadly, the hundreds of entries themselves cannot be traced.<sup>17</sup>

Four days after the closing date, the committee met again to pick twelve suitable designs to present to the cabinet, but Mrs Jacob Mahoney and Seyfu Omar Sisay had were not present. The remaining six members picked the best

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<sup>17</sup> During visits made in February 2010, 2011 and 2016, it was clear to the author that the NRO Banjul struggles to maintain archival standards. Most files are boxed and the original drawings, if they have been kept, may be misfiled. Other boxed files are in the process of digitisation.

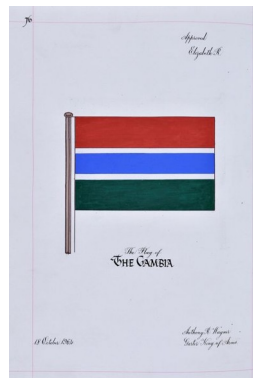
designs and concluded their task by writing a report on their reasoning.

We do not know which twelve designs were laid before the cabinet. But on 1 September 1964 it decided 'to select flag based on No. 147, provisionally, and have a specimen made'.<sup>18</sup> The cabinet also chose a coat of arms. It was too early to publish the decision, as *The Gambia News Bulletin* reported a few days later: 'The designs will be made public as soon as they have been checked to ensure that the flag does not conflict with that of any other country and that the coat-of-arms conforms with the accepted rules in heraldry.'<sup>19</sup>

The designs for the future flag and coat of arms were sent to London to seek approval from Queen Elizabeth II. During the first half of October she agreed to both proposals and ordered their registration by the College of Arms, London.<sup>20</sup> It was (and remains) the practice of the College of Arms to supply applicants with certified drawings of approved arms and flags, so these will have been received at the time by the Gambian government. The National Records Office Banjul holds the drawing of the coat of arms but the flag drawing cannot be traced. Consequently, the drawing held by the College of Arms now serves as the legal authorisation of the Gambian flag. The document is dated 18 October 1964 and the flag depicted has proportions of 1:2.



*Certified drawing of the Gambian arms, College of Arms, 1964.  
NRO Banjul*



*Royal approval of the Gambian flag,  
18 October 1964. College of Arms, MS  
Standards 3, p. 76; reproduced by  
permission of the Kings, Heralds and  
Pursuivants of Arms*

In the cabinet meeting of 27 October 1964, acting Prime Minister Sheriff S. Sisay broke the news to his colleagues that the Queen had been pleased to approve the future flag. Cabinet decided to publish the results of the competitions for Flag, Arms and Anthem,<sup>21</sup> and they appeared almost a month later, in *The Gambia News Bulletin*, 21 November 1964. The creator of the chosen design was revealed to be Mr L. Thomasi, from Bathurst. No photographs, drawings or explanations were given, just this single-line description: 'The flag is of horizontal stripes of red, blue and green, the blue stripe being bordered by a narrow white band at each side.'<sup>22</sup>

18 NRO Banjul, EXE3/5, Cabinet Conclusions, 1962-1965, 1 September 1964.

19 *The Gambia News Bulletin*, no. 103, 3 September 1964, p. 2.

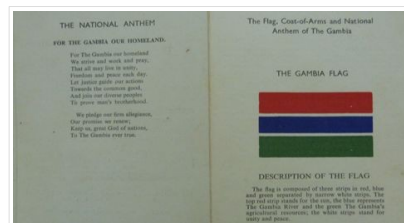
20 College of Arms (London), MS Standards 3, p. 76.

21 NRO Banjul, EXE3/5, Cabinet Conclusions, 1962-1965, 27 October 1964, p. 6.

The flag, and the other future national symbols, were put on public display on 21 December 1964, at 10.30am. From the steps of the new administrative buildings in Bedford Place, MacCarthy Square in Bathurst, Prime Minister Jawara, told the crowd:

The national flag of horizontal stripes of red, blue and green with the blue stripe bordered by a narrow white band on each side was designed by Mr Louis Lucien Thomasi, 72 Hagan Street, Bathurst. His design was selected after over 400 entries had been considered very carefully by a specially appointed committee and by the cabinet itself. Mr Thomasi, although born in what is now Mali, has lived and worked here for many years; first with a local firm, then a fishing enterprise and now as a private accountant. After over thirty years here, I think we may safely accept him as a Gambian.<sup>23</sup>

The Prime Minister shook hands with the winner and gave him a cheque for £50. Cheques were also presented to Mr R.N. Motin for the coat of arms, and to Mr and Mrs Howe for the national anthem.



*The new Gambian national symbols described in a leaflet dated 18 February 1965 (Independence Day)*

The prime minister offered no explanation for the meaning of the flag's stripes and colours. That had to wait until Independence on Thursday 18 February 1965. At midnight in Bathurst, in the presence of the Duke and Duchess of Kent, the Union flag was taken down. In its place was hoisted Mr Thomasi's flag. The last British possession in West Africa had become the smallest independent country in Africa. Queen Elizabeth remained Queen of the independent nation.

On Independence Day, a leaflet was issued about the new Gambian national symbols. The colours and stripes were ascribed a meaning for the first time:

Description of the Flag – The flag is composed of three strips in red, blue and green separated by narrow white strips. The top red stripe stands for the sun, the blue represents the Gambia River and the green The Gambia's agricultural resources; the white stripes stand for unity and peace.<sup>24</sup>

22 *The Gambia News Bulletin*, no. 137, 21 November 1964, Special Independence Supplement, p. 2.

23 'Flag, Anthem and Coat of Arms: The Prime Minister Presents the Prizes', *The Gambia News Bulletin*, no. 150, 22 December 1964, p. 2. See also Hassoum Ceesay: 'The History of The Gambia National Anthem and Flag', *Daily Observer* (Banjul), 7 July 2000, p. 1x.

24 *The Flag, Coat-of-Arms and National Anthem of The Gambia* (Banjul: Government Printer, 15 February 1965).

Louis Lucien Thomasi<sup>25</sup> clearly had taken to heart the suggestion of the Flag and Arms Committee to use the colour green for agriculture and blue for the Gambia River. It remains unclear who devised the story behind the flag colours. The committee had asked the contestants to accompany the designs with an 'official description', which should have been read and understood as an explanation. As the original entries are not stored where they should be, and the first explanation of the flag's colours is dated six months after its selection, we have room for speculation. Did the government devise an explanation for the colours?

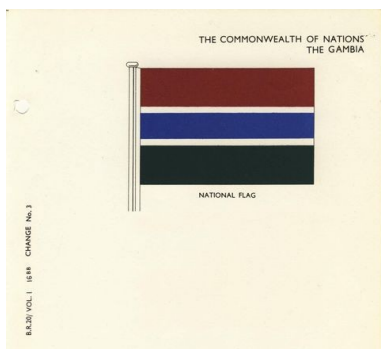


*The Gambian flag (1:2) over The Gambian High Commission. Daily Telegraph (London), 19 February 1965*



*The Gambian flag (in 2:3 proportions) and coat of arms also adorned a set of commemorative postage stamps*

The proportions of the Gambian flag as shown in the Independence leaflet are 1:2, which was also noted of the flag flown from Westminster Abbey, London during the Independence celebrations. The new flag as shown on the stamps issued at Independence, however, has proportions of 2:3 and flies above a red sunrise over the Gambia River. The sunrise is often used in Africa to illustrate the new dawn brought by independence.



*The Gambian flag in 2:3 proportions. Admiralty, 'Flags of All Nations' (1955 edition, Change No. 3)*

Details of the Gambian national flag did not appear in *The Gambia Gazette*, the official paper which publishes all decisions of national importance. In the government leaflet on the symbols, published at Independence, the colours were given as unspecified shades of red, white, blue and green. The flag was added in 1966(?), as part of Change No. 3, to the 1955 edition of the Admiralty's *Flags of All Nations*. It shows the flag in proportions of 2:3. The Admiralty bunting colours are given as follows: T813 for Intermediate Blue, T816 for Crimson, T819 for White, and Tartan Green (a quite dark shade of green).

<sup>25</sup> Every flag publication to date has misnamed the designer as Lucien Thomasi but his full name is Louis Lucien Thomasi. Personal note from Louis Thomasi, Mr Thomasi's grandson, to the author, 27 June 2017.

From the earliest days of Independence, The Gambia was unhappy at its status as a constitutional monarchy within the British Commonwealth. In the November after Independence, a referendum was held to make The Gambia a republic. A majority voted in favour but not the two-thirds majority needed. A second referendum in 1970, however, produced a successful 'yes' vote. Prime Minister Dawda Jawara became President of the new republic. This transformation, on 24 April 1970, did not affect the national flag. The Constitution of the Republic of The Gambia did not mention the national symbols. From 1981 until 1989, when The Gambia and Senegal tried to establish the Senegambia Confederation, the flag question never seriously arose.

Immediately after Independence, the Gambian Parliament had adopted an *Act to Regulate the Use of the Coat of Arms of The Gambia*.<sup>26</sup> Yet nothing was done about the flag until 1996, when the Constitution of the (Second) Republic of The Gambia was adopted after a referendum. Two years earlier, Jawara had been deposed in a bloodless military coup, after being [the first] leader of The Gambia for more than thirty years. Lieutenant Yahya A.J.J. Jammeh was appointed president in his stead.

The Constitution of 7 August 1996 described the National Flag in Article 3 and Schedule 1. It established the proportion of the flag as 2:3 and defined the stripes as being 6:1:4:1:6:

#### Chapter I – The Republic

##### Article 3: National Flag and Anthem

1. The National Flag shall be a flag of the design set out in schedule 1.
2. The National Anthem shall be the anthem in use immediately before this Constitution comes into force ...

##### Schedule 1: Dimensions of the National Flag

The National Flag of The Gambia shall be a flag of the following design:  
The flag shall measure twenty-seven units across and eighteen units down. It shall be divided into horizontal stripes, which shall have the following colours and dimensions from the top to the bottom:

- Red – six units one third
- White – one unit
- Blue – four units one third
- White – one unit
- Green – six units one third

Since the flag became the national flag of The Gambia, no ethnic group has ever disputed or hijacked it. It has survived several major constitutional changes. The explanation lies in The Gambia's lack of independence parties able to impose their colours on the country. It has also helped that the design of the flag is simple and is generally considered to be balanced and beautiful. Nowadays the flag and its colours appear in every corner of the country. Most classrooms in The Gambia have a flag painted on the walls. The children learn a song about their flag, which describes the meaning of its colours. They appear in all sorts of street ornament, and ships and fishing boats fly the national flag or are painted in its colours.

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26 'An Act to regulate the use of the Coat of Arms of The Gambia, *Act of The Gambia* No. 14 of 1965', *The Gambia Gazette* (1965), pp. 65-7.





*Use of flag colours:  
top left, lampposts, Banjul; top right,  
Gambian Football Association HQ,  
Banjul; middle left, vehicle number  
plates, Gambian National Assembly;  
middle right, Gambian schools;  
bottom left, Gambian vessels*

On 1 December 2016 presidential elections were held in The Gambia. In a surprise result, opposition candidate Adama Barrow defeated the autocratic Yahya Jammeh, who had been expected to win with a large majority.



*Gambians celebrate the ousting of  
autocratic president Yahya Jammeh,  
December 2016 - January 2017*

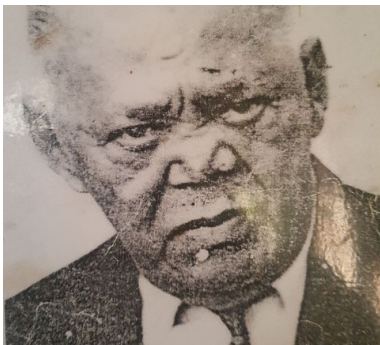
After Jammeh initially conceded defeat, he later rejected the election results. It was only when other West African leaders put pressure on him to leave did he do so. Mr Barrow was sworn in as the first elected Gambian President in the

Gambian embassy in Dakar. Jammeh finally left the country over which he had ruled for 22 years. People flocked into the streets flying their national flag.

For the national flag, the departure of Jammeh came in the nick of time. He had started examining ways to leave his signature on it. 'Jammeh wanted to change the flag last year into an Islamic flag or something like that after he foolishly declared Gambia an Islamic State in 2015. Twice he consulted me,' says Gambian historian Hassoum Ceesay. Mr Ceesay saved the flag by avoiding the president.<sup>27</sup>

### **Louis Lucien Thomasi**

Louis Lucien Thomasi was born in 1910 near Bamako, then part of French West Africa, but nowadays capital of Mali.<sup>28</sup> He moved to Bathurst (Banjul) in The Gambia where he started a family. He first worked for a local firm, then a fishing enterprise and in 1964, when he designed the Gambian flag, he was a private accountant.



*Louis Lucien Thomasi (1910-85):  
the only extant photograph*

After Louis Lucien Thomasi, then aged 52, heard that the government had opened a competition to find ideas for a future national flag, he submitted eight different designs. All were in the colours red, white, blue and green. He explained it to his children and grandchildren as follows: red was to symbolise the Sun, which is bright and light. The Sun is shining over the future of The Gambia. White was to symbolise peace. The stripes were a bit smaller than the other stripes. Blue was for the Gambia River, with all the resources it gives, such as fish. It gives life to The Gambia. Green is at the bottom. It symbolises the vegetation. Agriculture would be the basis of the Gambian development. It would be the main resource for The Gambia after independence, as The Gambia lacks other resources such as oil, and other mineral resources.

Thomasi was quite confident that one of his designs would be proclaimed the winner. He was right, because in a ceremony on 21 December 1964, he received a cheque of £50 from Prime Minister Dawda Jawara at a ceremony in front of the administrative building in Bathurst.

The flag was first flown during the independence celebrations, on midnight 17/18 February 1965. Thomasi attended the celebration, but not as an invited guest. He felt very disappointed, he told his children and grandchildren. It was only because he met the Duke of Kent that he was invited to the reception the following day. The Duke of Kent was very surprised to hear that Mr Thomasi

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<sup>27</sup> Hassoum Ceesay in email to author, 2 June 2017.

<sup>28</sup> This biography is based on a telephone interview with Marcel Thomasi, son of Louis Lucien Thomasi, 4 March 2010.

had not been invited to the Independence ceremony.

Apart from his £50 prize Louis Lucien Thomasi never received a national honour, which always disappointed him. Prime Minister Jawarda did offer him a job as National Auditor but he first needed to be naturalised. A year after Independence he became a naturalised Gambian, but he never got the job.

Louis Lucien Thomasi died 4 November 1985. His children and grandchildren still live in The Gambia.

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