

Budgie smuggling: flag mayhem in Malaysia A trashing of symbols and a vexillological voyage in uncharted territory

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Abstract

An extraordinary instance of flag abuse at the 2016 Malaysian Grand Prix and its aftermath, reported internationally, led to reflections on the value and proper treatment of flags especially, and etiquette generally, in a changing world where instant communication and gratification for the twittering classes is taken to be normal and rational, certainly a challenge to established methods of vexillology, and even affecting its content, nature and future.

Introduction

Malaysia has since 1999 hosted the International Formula 1 motor-racing Grand Prix, one of the stages of the annual F1 World Championship. Held at the Sepang circuit next to Kuala Lumpur International Airport, the event was envisaged as, and has been, a major tourist and revenue drawcard.¹



*The Malaysian Grand Prix 2016 in progress
with a national flag prominently displayed*

It is also an event for flags, in 2016 attracting drivers and sponsors from 20 countries.²

The winner on 2 October of the 2016 Malaysian Grand Prix was an Australian, Daniel Ricciardo, from Perth, Western Australia. However, Ricciardo's moment of glory was overshadowed by a peculiar flag incident, and a week of political fall-out at the highest levels of government. All the result of nine other Australians staging a stunt among the groundlings in the spectators' area, ostensibly in celebration of their countryman's success.

- 1 In 2017 the Malaysian government announced that that year's F1 Grand Prix would be the last in Malaysia.
- 2 Sponsors: Austria, France, Germany, India, Italy, Switzerland, UK, USA. Drivers: Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Indonesia, Mexico, Netherlands, Russia, Spain, Sweden, UK.

Part I: The incident

All young men in their twenties, the nine visitors sought to emulate the victor's innovation (at Formula 1, that is) of drinking champagne from his shoe.³



Winner Daniel Ricciardo does his shoey thing

Sculling beer, not champagne, from their own shoes, shoes were almost all they wore.

The nine had stripped down to skimpy swimsuits to reveal the Malaysian flag on their backsides, the flag overprinted – and thus defaced – with a brand-name 'budgy smugglers', a commercial appropriation of a common name in Australia for these togs.⁴



Bogan Boys Burlesque: the budgie smugglers on display

- 3 An eccentric ritual of medieval and German military origin. Drinking from a shoe has historically been performed as both a bringer of good fortune and as a hazing punishment. Drinking champagne from a lady's slipper became a symbol of decadence in the early twentieth century. Drinking beer out of one's own shoe is a ritual sometimes undertaken at parties and events in Australia, where it is referred to as a 'shoey'. The practice is thought to have originated in 1902 at the Everleigh Club, a high-class brothel in Chicago. When a dancer's slipper fell to the floor, a member of the entourage of Prince Henry of Prussia picked it up and used it to drink champagne. The German *Bierstiefeln* is a boot-shaped beer glass said to have been created by a Prussian general who promised his troops that if they were victorious in an upcoming battle, he would drink beer from his own boot. After they won the battle the general had second thoughts, and instead ordered a glass imitation to be made.
- 4 A reference to a small native bird, and to a colloquial euphemism for a defining part of the male anatomy. The *budgerigar* ('budgie' for short) has bright green, blue or yellow plumage.

The extraordinary costumes were made and marketed in Australia, the 'smuggling' in this case obviously planned.⁵



A budgerigar, a bird of little brain

The unusual exhibition of nine nearly naked men and the unorthodox salute to their hosts' national flag created Shock, but hardly Awe – only gasps at the audacity, the 'cheekiness' of it all, an affront to the host country's official sensibilities.

It also came in the wake of similar incidents involving tourists in Cambodia and in the East-Malaysia state of Sabah.⁶

The aftermath

Media sensation and a deal of confected outrage ensued. The 'Budgie Nine', as they were quickly tagged, were arrested on the spot for 'intentional insult and public indecency' (attracting a two-year prison sentence).⁷ Instagram and other social media ensured that the stunt went viral. Indeed, the role of social media was central to the incident and goes to the heart of the vexillic issues canvassed in this paper.

Some letters to Australian tabloids and ignorant remarks by an Australian former politician turned journalist suggested the Malaysians acquire a sense of humour.⁸ Ricciardo more helpfully observed that the nine 'didn't realise the effect it would have on the locals' and called for their release as 'it sounds like

- 5 Conversation with Sales Manager, Budgy Smugglers Swimwear, Manly NSW. The company has since announced that it has withdrawn this particular 'pattern' (though other national flags are not off-limits). budgysmuggler.com.au/mens-swimwear/flags.html
- 6 BBC News, 12 June 2015: Four tourists – a Briton, two Canadians and a Dutchman – were given jail terms and fined after posing naked on Mt Kinabalu in Sabah state, eastern Malaysia, after admitted causing a public disturbance. (The group was subsequently blamed for a magnitude 5.9 earthquake in the area, which is considered sacred.) They were jailed for three days, but their sentences were backdated reflecting time already served. A judge at Kota Kinabalu Magistrates' Court said the four had shown remorse and ordered the jail terms to run from 9 June, meaning the group was free to leave. He also fined each defendant 5,000 Malaysian ringgit (£860/\$1,330)
- 7 A tabloid reference to Australian drug-mules arrested in Bali, the ringleaders executed in April 2015.
- 8 David Penberthy, 'Budgie Nine should have behaved better in Malaysia', *Sunday Herald Sun*, 9 October 2016. See also www.smh.com.au/Comment, 7 Oct 2016: 'The Budgie Nine offer light relief from a broken world and Donald Trump - Let us give thanks for the Budgie Nine. In a world that hasn't made any notable sense for some time – Trump, anyone? A spot of Brexit?'

they have learned their lesson and I don't think they will be doing that again any time soon in Malaysia'.⁹

After four days in custody (and possibly discreet démarches at the highest level – one of the nine was a policy adviser to a senior Australian Cabinet Minister – the Budgies were cautioned over the lesser offence of public nuisance, and with telling grace on the part of the Malaysians, without any charge formalised, declared 'free' (but not obliged) to leave the country. Nevertheless, all did return to Australia over the weekend. On Monday 10 October Defence Industry Minister Christopher Pyne accepted his staffer's resignation.¹⁰



Australian Defence Industry Minister Christopher Pyne: he was not amused but at least the 'budgies' were concealed

Post-mortem

The same performance in Australia (and with the *Australian* flag) might have been dismissed by the open-minded, and in that domestic setting, as a larrikin prank¹¹ – though Australia's Foreign Minister Julie Bishop expressed 'exasperation' at yet another example of some Australians' crass conduct overseas.

A trashing of symbols, or ...?

If that were the whole story it merits no more than a passing note, best forgotten: Australia's relations with its non-European neighbours have always been sensitive, and probably always will be.

Compared with Prime Minister Paul Keating publicly naming then Malaysian PM Mahathir 'a recalcitrant', this episode was a monsoon in a thimble.

Questions for vexillology

But what was really going on? Just boys going boofy away from home, or a sign of something deeper in the human condition? Or peculiar to our own time? as Canadian Marshall McLuhan foreshadowed 50 years ago.¹² Either way, larger

9 Implying that they – or others – might elsewhere? www.sportingnews.com/.../other...ricciardo.../10tzjldgrw65y1i371ho46rb7c

10 www.smh.com.au › Politics › News 9 October 2016

11 www.sydneycriminallawyers.com.au/.../budgie-nine-criminals-or-a-harmless-larrikins/ 5 October 2016

12 Canadian media analyst Marshall McLuhan and American graphic designer Quentin Fiore co-authored their thesis, *The Medium Is the Massage* (Penguin, 1967), which argued that the medium by which information is received colours the perception of the message: the medium is both message and massage. McLuhan predicted, accurately, that a screen-based culture would come to dominate society.

questions arise for vexillology if it is to be more socially useful than common perceptions of 'vexiology' [sic] as a bizarre but 'harmless hobby'.¹³

Grounds for grievance

While the Malaysian episode seems to revolve around real affront offered, and taken, this paper identifies some of the lessons and challenges for vexillology, especially in its longstanding claim to be a science.

Even though the incident was handled as a minor hiccup in regional relations, the fact remains that the Malaysian authorities were swift in arresting the B9 and adamant in their extended detention.

Was the essential issue the 'indecenty' necessary if the Budgies were to make their ill-considered point, or the way the symbols of the nation and of its major faith were presented – basically a juvenile mooning of their hosts?

Well, both.

Several factors that hardly dawned on the nine, or on lenient letter-writers in Australia, explain the Malaysian reaction.

Budgerigars are birds of very little brain, but their imitators – indeed, considering the euphemism, their owners – hit the jackpot in repeating the gaucherie of others, offending convention, custom, civic pride and religious writ. Each on its own can influence flags in both design and usage. On this occasion all these combined to create a perfect WTF (Why This Flag?) moment.

The perfect WTF

Parallels and precedents

The previous year had seen several instances of young Western (and Chinese) tourists behaving in ways they would not attempt (one supposes) at home, as if assumed anonymity abroad provides impunity.

The Australians' stunt at the Sepang circuit was almost an echo of a similar exhibition in May 2015 on Mt Kinabalu, considered sacred to the spirits of Sabah state in Malaysia's eastern wing, and of repeated incidents at the Angkor temples in Cambodia in 2014.¹⁴ The Chinese government has had to issue explicit directions to its newly affluent travelling citizens. The Australian government's 'Smart Traveller' website includes similar warnings, and frequently stresses that consular assistance is neither a right nor guaranteed – and may be limited.¹⁵

13 John Cartledge, review of *Vexillistics: An Illustrated and Practical Guide to Flag Design* (2015), *Flagmaster*, no. 157 (Winter 2016); see also www.flagsaustralia.com.au and Phil Nelson's contribution to the FOTW discussion of February 2004 (see note 33).

14 See note 6 above.

15 Under the heading 'Respect local customs', the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) states: 'It's important to respect local cultures and customs when travelling. Here are a few tips to assist you:

- Research the local customs of the country you're travelling to. If in doubt, seek local advice.
- Dress appropriately. Look at what the locals are wearing and be sensitive to local standards.

So is this about flags or about behaviour using them? Well, again, both. The qualitative difference that made the Budgie Nine episode notorious is that it involved the national flag of their hosts. The trend over the last decade among young people of wearing the national flag around their necks (the 'yoke of allegiance'?)¹⁶ or displayed on other, and even intimate, clothing is particularly ill-advised in a country where conservative Islamic or other tradition is followed by the majority.¹⁷

Islam

Islam is a moral code¹⁸ predicated on the assertion of respect for a Higher Power sustaining the universe, if not its source – a concept often questioned in the secular West. Whatever the finer points of the Qur'an, the prominent Islamic symbol on the Malaysian flag should have meant something to products of expensive private schools. That it didn't register underscores the usefulness of vexillology as an aspect of professional design training and for the schools' syllabus on civics.

Culture

Before and above the flag, and predating the arrival of Islam, is the local Malay culture. Hospitality anywhere is based on the respectful behaviour of guests – breached in this instance.

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- Show respect when visiting cultural, historical and sacred sites. In some countries, inappropriate or indecent behaviour can lead to arrest.
 - Always ask permission before taking photos of people and respect their wishes if they decline. In some countries, it's illegal to take photos of certain places, such as government buildings, airports and ports or anything that may be police or military property.
 - In some countries it's not acceptable for couples to be very affectionate in public.
 - Laws and attitudes towards lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and intersex (LGBTI) travellers around the world can be very different from those in Australia, which can create risks for LGBTI travellers. Check the LGBTI travellers page on smartraveller.gov.au and the country-specific advisories for more information.

'The provision of consular assistance to Australians does not extend to protecting you from the consequences of actions that are prohibited under Australian law or the laws of the country you are visiting.'
<http://smartraveller.gov.au/guide/all-travellers/everyone/Pages/advice-for-all-travellers.aspx>

- 16 In Australia the national flag was prominent and mis-used in riots on a Sydney beach in December 2005. Regarded as a bogan act, the stigma stays, and in fact flag-capes on Australia Day or as prop in the rising instances of anti-'Muslim' demonstrations, along with Southern Cross tattoos, have become part of the scenery and the zeitgeist. (In US terms, a *bogan* is a *jerk*).
- 17 Islam is the official religion of Malaysia(ns), though the Constitution also provides for free expression of other religious beliefs. See editorial nuances on the issue at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islam_in_Malaysia and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religion_in_Malaysia
- 18 'Flags in the World of Islam', special edition of *Crux Australis*, 23/4, no. 96 (October-December 2010).

In Malay, the word *kasar* describes coarse, loud, vulgar, trumpeting behaviour. Its commended opposite, *halus*, means elegance, tact, modesty in all its meanings,¹⁹ and genuine respect for the sensitivities of others. It takes some mental contortions to imagine that cavorting, even clad, in public with the hosts' flag will be seen by the host as a compliment – as Madonna thought she was doing in Manila and elsewhere in Asia.²⁰

National unity and civic pride

Beyond all other factors is the secular and important issue of national unity, the flag and its devices directly related.

Malaysia was constituted in 1963 from fourteen territories. The eleven on the peninsula, already federated in 1957, were joined by three British colonies, two of these, Sarawak and Sabah, across the South China Sea on the north coast of Borneo. (Brunei, a British protectorate, not a colony, was invited but declined). A somewhat artificial expedient and experiment, the fragile assembly was assailed from the outset by Indonesia's President Sukarno, inflammatory rhetoric followed by military *Konfrontasi* in Borneo and the Malacca Straits.

In September 1965 Singapore was expelled and declared its independence. Stunned by serious communal riots in 1969, the Malaysian government, particularly under the long tenure (1981-2003) of Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammed has promoted the flag and reinterpreted the 'vacated' fourteenth stripe and star-point as the symbol of national unity for Malaysians, beyond such differences as *bumiputera*, Nonya, Tamil, Iban or Dayak.

Design

An ancillary, but specifically vexillological, aspect relates to flag design in general. As mentioned, the Budgies were oblivious to the finer nuances of the Malaysian flag. Even though depicted incorrectly, the flag was a conspicuous feature of the Sepang circuit in 2016. Did the B9 miss its purpose? Did they even see it on the slope below grandstand K1 at the western end of the circuit? After all, they could not get their own flag the right way up, highlighting that ignorance was a major factor on their part. This too presents its own challenge for the more public presence of vexillology.

Part 2: Aspects and issues for vexillology

How does this incident, and other similar demonstrations involving flags, impinge on the scope and future of vexillology? I suggest the main issues are: the use, misuse and abuse of flags; the origins of such practices; and in regard to misuse and abuse, potential mitigations of these negativities.

Definitions

But first I define or clarify a couple of terms or concepts.

The first – what I am calling 'vexillics' – relates to and includes popular appropriation of existing or historic flags in events that claim to be about what the original flag represents, even if and as such claims are actually 'alternative facts'. So the Tea Party claims to be about Reform, 'draining the swamp'; the

19 It should not be overlooked that the Qur'an enjoins modesty for men as well as women; see Surah *an-Nur* (The Light) 24:30.

20 'Dancing with Flags: Madonna in Manila', *Crux Australis*, 29/2, no. 118 (April-June 2016).

Free Syrian Army, about recovery of Independence, the Eureka flag, a proposal for a Republic.²¹



The 1776 Gadsen Flag, adopted in the USA as a symbol of the Tea Party



The 1932 flag of Iraq, adopted by the Free Iraqi Army



The Eureka Flag of 1854, adopted in Australia as a symbol of protest

Vexillics goes beyond the kind of cataloguing and description that the late Peter Orenski called 'hunting and gathering' (though the basic data are important), and thus beyond flags as artefacts in themselves to focus on the ramifications for society as widely as there are symbols on flags or as long as there will be flags as symbols. Consider the vexilloidal aspects of Masonic paraphernalia; the use of flags as sine qua non in revolutions about issues previously unheard of; what the miscellany of Gay-inspired flags says – or claims – about identity and relationships; how the fashionistas mess with minds by usurping the traditional purpose of flags.



Flag of Albania worn as a cape by Miss Albania, Miss Universe competition, 2008



The US flag as a hijab, illustrating an article on American Muslims

²¹ Annie Platoff and Steve Morton's joint paper to ICV26 (Sydney 2015) explored the idea of old flags endowed with new meanings.



The Union Jack as a fashion item

The other concept is hard to pin down – and harder to practice. If Jung's collective unconscious exists, perhaps there is also a sense of 'universal solidarity' that transcends historical tribalisms.

It is tempting to coin a hybrid neologism, like *vexillology*, or *metanöics* – yes, it is a word, 'the process of a change of outlook'.

However, let's just say that this not quite tangible dynamic connotes more than simply fellow-feeling or empathy within an immediate and closed social circle. Nor does it entail an overly romantic, Pollyanna view of the world – that all is for the best. It calls to those who are guileless but not naive.²²

Its hallmark is an empathy based on amity, the exclusion of enmity, more than a dash of humility and a reverence for humanity instead of imaginary gods or inflexible ideologies.

It postulates, assumes, requires an abiding awareness, whether based in a religious or secular worldview – a not-quite Pelagian view²³ that all humanity is of the same blood, faced with the same existential challenges, that we are innately good, but potentially better. It is a quality most recently and best demonstrated in the community response to strangers not two miles from this very hall. It is perhaps one of the many expressions of love.

The two concepts mesh (or clash) in the use – and abuse – of flags (for there is a dark side).

The role of, publicity for, and attitudes toward flags – especially national flags – has changed since Whitney Smith launched organised vexillology in 1961 and published *Flags through the Ages and Across the World* in 1975.

22 Pollyanna: the main character in Eleanor H. Porter's popular 1913 children's novel. She irritatingly gave everything a positive spin, even things that call for sadness or discouragement. Note that this twaddle was written a year before the cataclysm of the First World War.

23 Pelagius was a fourth-century British monk who was condemned for his views (or those of his students). In paraphrase these argue that human nature is a *tabula rasa*, each person responsible for his own maturity and improvement, without the need for any more Divine assistance than that already provided in Creation.

Vignette

Aside from his native interest, Whitney was reacting to and inspired by the plethora of new flags hoisted at the fading of colonial empires in Asia, Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific. In the relatively brief zenith of European empires, the flags of the interlopers were symbols of power and of force, gunboat diplomacy 'keeping the natives in order'. Europe's own folly undid its empires and brought a new world order – or disorder, and the current tally of 200 national flags.

Both the United Nations and Europe are still anything but united, while the actual emancipation of peoples has been much slower. Slavery has returned. Human rights, especially those of women, are abused or dismissed as widely as, or even worse, than before. However, new generations began to see flags and symbols differently, no longer requiring the restrictions and reverence previously asserted by governments.

The appropriation of national flags as common property, to be used as seen fit, perhaps began with the Olympic Games – or before that even football championships. They now feature from politics to pornography (is there a difference?). As new standards have been raised, they have also been lowered.

In this climate, how seriously should juvenile sideshows with flags be taken – by anyone, but above all, by vexillology? That depends on how seriously the national flag is taken: by different cultures; from one generation to the next; between those who defend what they believe the flag to represent; by those who simply make similar but uninformed assertions for ideological reasons; or by those who see the flag as simply a logo or 'Team' badge.

Basically the Budgie Nine at Formula 1 were sending a message: 'your flag – and what it represents – doesn't mean much: it's only a flag.' Which brings us to:

Use, misuse and abuse of flags

Flags can be used – and abused – in different ways:

– *by individuals* in positive ways such as the elation of victorious athletes like Olympian Cathy Freeman, and in earlier manifestations of that trend among other team sport supporters.



Left, Australia's Cathy Freeman carrying the national flag and the Aborigine flag at the Commonwealth Games; right, Arsenal FC fans show their allegiance

The essentially harmless trend for individual display of the local team colours and latterly, but more dubiously, national flags in particular, has morphed

toward less positive manifestations, hijacked to play a passive-aggressive role. It is held up as a trophy; worn in provocative ways, based on ignorance, hormones²⁴ (which is what we saw in the Grand Prix incident) and sometimes deep racial prejudice; appeals to 'heritage', ostensibly to proclaim patriotism, or 'pride'. In reality the 'pride' is expressed as a nasty hint of exclusion to those not following the (back-to-front oblivious) 'dress-code'.



*German national football team:
supporter's scarf*

Patriotism Mine is greater than Thine seems to be the message. 'Bad hombres' out. Muslims and Mexicans blocked. Australia is full – and from that country, with unconscious irony and ignorance, this charmer: 'You flew here; we grew here'²⁵ (to which the retort: 'We came in planes; you came in chains').



Hang out more flags: left, Australia; right, USA

– by states seeking to make the nation grate again

State and marketing propaganda

While youths may act out their immaturity with excessive zest, heedless of consequences, norms of decent behaviour set elsewhere might also be shown by example there. Sadly, not always. Government and the marketplace can be seen in unconscious, but effective, collusion in exploiting the national flag as a

24 Hormones? Yes, and the attendant psychosphere. Young men the age of the Budgie 9 are still discovering where their brains are.

25 The riot and retaliation at Cronulla Beach in December 2005, and the misuse of the Australian flag therein, is detailed in *Crux Australis*, 19/1, no. 77 (January-March 2006); 20/2, no. 82 (April-June 2007).

means of subtle stupefaction. In the name of free speech, the one acquiesces in trashing the symbol. The other both promotes and devalues the flag by turning it into a tawdry novelty – as the Budgy Smugglers enterprise does (or is this a subtle means of early civic indoctrination?)



The flag as a commercial product: left, those budgie smugglers; right, Ted inculcating civic identity for tots

Though who can blame enterprise for catering to – and creating – the Zeitgeist? The media message is the message. It may be that the market simply responds to the manner in which the public have been seduced by the specious allure of nationalism – it's just a flag, after all.

There are ethical merchants, and then there are opportunistic shysters like the Melbourne stallholder flogging the ISIL flag the moment it became notorious. Even in the flag trade there are harlots.²⁶ One of the challenges of vexillology is to convince merchants of tents and tarpaulins that flags really do matter and rather than tourist trinkets mass-produced overseas, their product should relate to civic responsibilities, the true test of patriotism and real citizenship.²⁷

The last century is a record of crimes against humanity via state-sponsored aggression, from the Armenian Genocide to the Syrian apocalypse now, with appeal to spurious patriotism with slogans and flags – *Gott mit Uns*, *In God We Trust*, *Allahu Akbar!* – appeals to concepts of *heimat* and *lebensraum*, righteousness professed over Crimea and the Donbass.



L'état c'est moi: a supporter of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad



Flag of the breakaway Republic of Donetsk, modelled on the flag of the President of Russia (top right)

26 'Melbourne man flies flag of terrorist group ISIL', www.theage.com.au, 17 September 2014. A Melbourne flag-seller who flew the ISIL flag from his front yard in the outer suburbs says it's about making a buck, not endorsement

27 Tony Burton, 'Australia Day and Identity', *Crux Australis* 22/2, no. 90 (April-June 2009); 22/3, no. 91 (July-Sept 2009).

The attendant demonising propaganda includes a worse abuse of flags appealing to patriotism but also darker instincts as a means of citizen manipulation, controlling dissidence, the flag often identified with the incumbent dictator (Mobutu in Zaire, the Assads in Syria). What Leni Riefenstahl glorified, Dear Leaders and other power-fiends follow.



Highly organised displays, with flags prominently featured, under the Third Reich



A similar display in modern North Korea

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As Harold Thomas, the designer of the Aboriginal flag, has observed, assemblies with flags make the crowd seem larger than those without.²⁸ Less intense than the standard set by fascist forebears, but not altogether removed in spirit, is the recent vogue among politicians, hoping thereby to camouflage their incompetence, for backdrops and even avenues of flags – the same flags, as if to emphasise some point with a blunt instrument. This is the behaviour of

28 Ralph Kelly, 'A Conversation with Harold Thomas', *Crux Australis*, 22 /1, no. 89 (January-March 2009).

thugs. The more flags, the better. Dazzle with pageantry and hope to dodge awkward questions.



Left, then US presidential candidate Donald Trump stands before a display of national flags; right, his Democrat opponent, Hilary Clinton

A remarkable instance of play-acting with flags in the name of some fatuous and fictional entity as 'Team Australia' was the flag fetish cultivated by former PM Tony Abbott, a habit picked up in North America.



*Then Australian Prime Minister
Tony Abbott*

An awesome avenue of the same national flag is just that – an attempt to instil awe, but to an insightful public, a cause for wonder – as was the raw onion eaten, an Australian knighthood (and thus a demotion) for Prince Philip, theatre for its own sake. Why should the chief symbol of the people and their sovereignty be dragged down to this level?

If the national flag is as powerful and effective as supporters claim – and its status endows – why does it need to be manifold, unless this (ab)use of the chief national symbol is to intimidate those over whom it floats? If the national flag means what it proclaims and the people have confidence in it, one is surely enough.

Visitors may have been overwhelmed; for locals, the field of flags eventually seemed something more than merely cheap theatre. Mr Abbott was deposed a fortnight following the 26th International Congress of Vexillology in Sydney – but we didn't do it.

It is time to declare official vexillomania for what it is and seek a balanced respect especially for national flags, abused so often in the name of national pride.

Vexillophallacies

Governments – even democracies considered benign – see propaganda value also in elevating the flag not just metaphorically but literally, in attempt to foster national pride by resorting to vexillophallacies – the installation of ever

larger, taller, flagpoles and banners in similar proportion.²⁹ (The flag mast over Australia's Federal Parliament in Canberra is possibly one of the first offenders, despite the intended homage to the governed.) Akin to the monomania of the Pharaohs, the technique often favoured especially by despots, the incumbent tyrant identified with the flag – until that conceit is reversed when the people reclaim the flag as their own, as in the Arab Spring, in Venezuela, and in the recovery of independence in the Baltic states.



Vexillophallacy 1: a huge Saudi Arabian flag flies over Jeddah



Vexillophallacy 2: the Australian flag flies over the Parliament building, Canberra

Of course, not every display of massed flags – or even the great erections – are sinister, and this may exonerate Canberra.

There are festive occasions where a sense of theatre and occasion is conveyed by the colour and movement of flags – but all of them the same? It is this monomania associated with an individual that creates a creepy feeling, and the suspicion that amid all the hoopla nothing of substance is happening. Perhaps this is because flags have a bad reputation as part of warfare and 'Us against Them' – the very opposite of the metanöic outlook postulated above.

The zeitgeist and social media

Flags are more visible today than when our associations and these Congresses were established. (We have either reacted to the political changes around the world or have in various ways added to the promotion of flags, and brought joy to many.) The most obvious sign of the times is the evolution, and now ubiquity, of the Internet and attendant technology of social media. These played a central role in publicising the Malaysian flag incident, but present their own challenge to fostering interest in flags, and accurate information as distinct from trivia.

However, for better or worse, and despite – or because of – the proliferation of tools of communication, we live with the irony of isolation. The exponential expansion of social media in a wired world, proving the prophecy of Marshall

²⁹ See https://www.rferl.org/a/baku_flag/2296097.html for a February 2011 report on the evacuation of neighbouring apartments when the ambitious flagpole in Baku proved unable to sustain the flag.

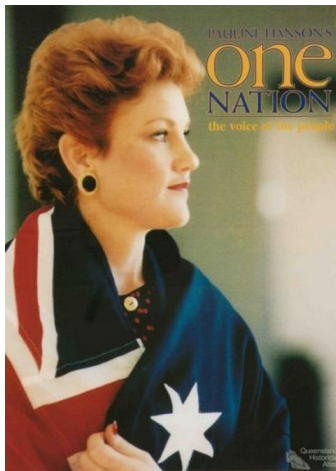
McLuhan half a century ago has created an addictive, and potentially anti-social screen-based culture at risk of diluting the messages and spirituality of flags.

Where does the endless, almost-senile, Twittering stop (especially by the Big Budgie, a Bird of little Brain, who should know that to fetishise or elevate the national flag in the pursuit of power actually devalues the flag).



Trump as über-patriot

Waving the flag registers a claim to be patriotic, not its reality, a lesson for Australia's populist politico Pauline Hanson. Formerly a fishmonger, famously a fear-monger and recently re-elected to the Federal Parliament, this latter-day Boudicca would cut a swathe through the targets of her nationalistic spleen – formerly (and still) the 'deluge' of Asians and more lately, Muslim immigrants.³⁰ A cause eagerly taken up by other twisted vexillati such as the allegedly Christian, anti-Muslim, Rise Up Australia Movement.³¹



Über-patriot Oz: Australia's Pauline Hanson

30 Nick O'Malley, "'Opportunist' Hanson is anti-Asian as well as anti-Muslim', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 3-4 June 2017, News, p. 15. And in this context, on the definition of patriotism and civic commitment as applied to German-born citizens in South Australia during the First World War, see 'Flagging Indifference: Emblems of the Adelaide and Barossa Germans', paper presented at ICV22 (Berlin, 2007), <https://fiav.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/ICV22-15-Burton-FlaggingIndifference.pdf>

31 riseupaustrialiaparty.com/welcome-to-rise-up-australia-party-keep-australia-australian/



Rise Up Australia flag fetishists

The future –

Quo vademus ad quem aspiremus? Where to now?

At ICV19 (York 2001) the late Peter Orenski challenged the claim that vexillology is a science rather than an adjunct of semiology and called for a broader approach to the study and understanding of flags. In his newly self-published essay, he had asked: *Quo vadimus*, Where are we heading?³² And following its second release in 2003 (ICV20 Stockholm), the question was debated on FOTW in some detail.³³ Given the social and communications evolution in the 16 years since, it is time to ask in a different tense: *Quo vademus*, 'Where shall we go', or, equally challenging, *Ad quem aspiremus* – 'What do we hope for?'



Peter Orenski (left)

Here is the opportunity for the liberation and expansion of vexillology toward exploring and allowing an inter-disciplinary approach to flags in the social sciences and the arts. There are dimensions of flag usage that go beyond cataloguing and explaining the artefacts themselves, the detail of their design and historical pedigree (looking at you, Australia, New Zealand and Fiji) or the protocols around their hanging and hoisting, to include an appreciation of how

32 Peter Orenski, *Quo Vadimus? An Essay on the State and Future of Vexillology* (New Milford CT: the author, 2001 and 2003).

33 'Vexillology and Science', online discussion between FOTW members Dignan, Heimer, McMillan, Nelson, Pasquin, Schmöger, 8-9 February 2004, <http://www.crwflags.com/fotw/flags/vxt-sci.html>

symbols are advocated, understood, explained and otherwise interpreted – the story of the Papua New Guinea flag one such.³⁴

This is not a call for the reinterpretation of core vexillology, which will always be what it is: the detailed study and research of flags and their meanings. It is to widen the scope to what I have called vexillics, across areas where flags are not the central focus, but are part of the scene – and by that fact raise questions if the observer is alert. As for the recent trend for redesigning defective city flags, notably in the US, the scope for the creative arts is an opportunity for rediscovering the joy of pageantry. (And this country, 'this scepter'd isle' with its long related traditions needs no lessons in that.)

A wider brief

While understanding our own limitations – we are professionals, not proselytisers for a particular flag – we might consider practical steps and remedies for the disrespect or triviality with which flags are regarded and treated:

- Encourage more inventive ways of publishing (including via social media) that will respect and guarantee the authorship of scholarship and original research;
- Pursue the highest standards of flag design, and note the arrangements for recognition already instigated by the Flag Institute (UK);
- Introduce principles of flag design in Graphic Design training;
- Ditto in social studies curricula;
- Promote accurate knowledge on flags, transcending flag-spotting as a pastime;
- Secure specific flag expertise on committees selecting designs;
- Follow an interdisciplinary approach;
- Create and support educational aids and material on flags with accurate information and without the distortions of nationalist propaganda;
- Promote the use of flags in assisting social expression of autistic children;
- Encourage relevance of flags in social movements, psychic and therapeutic practice.

Overview

This paper began with an outline of a relatively obscure flag incident that probably attracted more publicity than it deserved. It has attempted analysis of what was going on behind the scenes and in the heads of the protagonists in this flag drama – host and visitors alike.

Relevant cultural, religious, historical and political aspects of the Malaysian flag were clearly not the primary focus for a group of 'mates' out for a bit of circus. They certainly made clowns of themselves. Questioning whether ignorance, perceived as arrogance, can really be excused, this paper touches on the psychoses that underlie the role of and attitude towards flags.

While excuses might be advanced for the exuberance of youth, their stunt (and others similar around the world) prompts thought about the role and value of flags and the nature of respect. Flags are not just curios and collectibles; they are semaphores of someone else's meaning.

34 For example, 'The Story of the Papua New Guinea Flag', *Crux Australis*, 30/3, no. 123 (July-September 2017).

As standard bearers literally, gathered here for that very purpose (we raise standards, not lower them), we need to understand the zeitgeist, the signs of our times, and especially the new forms of communication in all their depth and shallowness, where image appears to influence mores. Marshall McLuhan's message that the medium is the message – indeed, the message – is even more relevant today than half a century ago.³⁵



Wiley's wry comment on the shallowness of social media

At the political level, crude nationalism, with flags in train, gave rise to much of the global destruction of the last century. That legacy continues, and the risk of repetition in more virulent forms has not been dispelled – whole populations may still be duped, a universal and more efficiently distorting screen culture their opiate.

Vexillologists have a moral and civic obligation to be a voice of reason and moderation in respect of flags and to resist attempts (such as special ceremonies to 'retire' worn or damaged flags) to canonise (national) flags as holy relics of a civic religion. Turning flags into fetishes is the first inkling of brainwashers at work.³⁶

I have suggested several avenues that individual vexillologists and our related associations might explore to promote sound knowledge of flags, noting especially, for all its superficiality, social media. For better or worse, this is the medium by which a new generation to whom we must pass baton and banner may imbue vexillology with a sense of balance in interdisciplinary cooperation with the social sciences.

In this way, I believe, vexillology will find its greater and wider identity, and recognition as a branch of semiotics as well as the creative arts.

I have questioned the motivation that informs even a mundane, and beyond that, political – and even anti-social – understanding of flags. Others, whether in academia or beyond it, may wish to follow the pathways identified, or suggest others, from the role of merchants who might see flags more than in terms of sales value and market innovations.

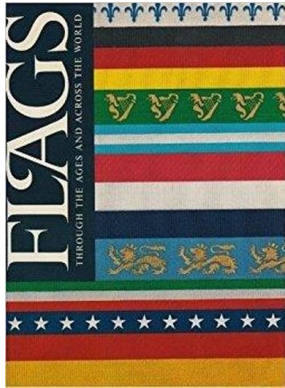
As a branch of semiotics, vexillology can be construed to include the interdisciplinary engagement and cooperation in what I have called vexillics and allows the study of flags to maintain a socially responsible, yet expansive role and purpose. Some of this programme may entail what I might have preferred

35 <http://www.leaderu.com/orgs/probe/docs/mcluhan.html> – and see note 12 above.

36 Ralph Kelly, 'Retiring Flags Ceremonies', *Crux Australis*, 30/3, no. 123 (July-September 2017).

not to call metanöics (for those who must have exotic names) – but have, meaning a willingness to think outside the square and actually to follow through.

That broader scope in no way diminishes but builds upon and reinforces the achievements of our forebears in heraldry, nor of Dr Whitney Smith, who took flag cataloguing and almanacs a necessary step further, revealing the splendour and power of flags in *Through the Ages and across the World* and the organised rigour of the *Flag Bulletin*.



Whitney Smith's flag bible, 1975

Our particular brief is indeed splendid, for our ultimate purpose is greater understanding, communication and mutual respect between individuals and people at home and Across the World – and let us see to it, Through the Ages to come.

Appendix: The Malaysian flag

The Malaysian flag is a prime example of what Whitney Smith (speaking primarily of the US flag) has referred to as a 'core' design sustained over time, despite frequent and complex political changes. It offers an object lesson to those seeking to design new flags for communities with a foundation myth or established traditions, mindful that any new design may be defeated by the power of familiarity: the principle that what is established tends to trump anything new that seems too far removed from the comfort of the familiar, and the longer the incumbency of the familiar flag the greater the odds against its changing.³⁷

Malaysia's flag in this sense is not new. Part of the larger Malay world, the peninsula and even the states of what is now the eastern wing of Malaysia were governed by local royalty (rajahs) or Sultans, guardians of the Islamic faith of their subjects. Then in the early nineteenth century the British displaced other preceding European traders. Whereas the earlier intruders by and large had left indigenous structures intact, the British came to stay, ruling directly in their west coastal colonies in the Malacca Straits, and following different

37 Whitney Smith's concept of the 'core design' cited by Ralph Kelly, *Caudillos, Coups, Constitutions and Changes: An Analysis of Flag Changes in Latin America*, Proceedings of the 21st International Congress of Vexillology, Asociación Argentina de Vexillología (Buenos Aires 2005), reprinted in modified form, *Crux Australis*, vol. 20/4, no. 84 (October-December 2007).

protocol with the four federated states and independent Sultanates, each adopting or adjusting their own flags.³⁸

After the Second World War, devolution of the British Empire gathered pace, with the independence of India and Pakistan in 1947, and of Ceylon and Burma in 1948. Attention had already turned in 1946 to Malaya, with plans for a Union, and in 1948, a Federation, on the peninsula.³⁹ A committee established in 1949 examined proposals for a flag for the Federation (Singapore was not included and was made a Crown Colony).

Initial designs featured stars, the Crescent and the Malay *kris*, a curved dagger which had been used, unofficially, as a Seal for a time by the Chief Secretary of the four states federated in 1895,⁴⁰ but in the end the Committee recommended a simpler design of stripes and canton – in structure not far removed from the cantonal ensigns of the fading Empire: as outlined above, a familiar continuity, however subtle, can assist acceptance of change. Approved in 1950 by King George VI, this featured a Crescent as a symbol of Islam, the dominant religion among Malays, red and white stripes and a star pointed also to match the eleven federating members – nine Malay states and two of the Straits Settlements (Penang and Malacca).

Two other national flags of red and white stripes might suggest that the Federation of Malaya flag of 1950 was based (as was the Liberian) on that of the United States. The Committee did look at flags of similar federations: India, Canada, Australia (the last two dismissed as too British), and of course the United States. Suffice to note that in 1949 the events that brought the Pacific war and Japanese occupation to an end were still fresh, and the prestige of the United States still high, while the formal name of the flag *Jalur Gemilang* (The Stripes of Glory) is evocative of an Older Glory. There was also a kind of precedent when, joining the Allies in the First World War in 1917, Thailand added a blue band to its then red and white flag.

However, an arrangement of stripes was already familiar from the 50-year-old flag incorporating the colours of the four states Federated in 1895 under British protection, while red and white had been used in the Malay empires a thousand years before. If there were any relic from the more recent past it might have been the mercantile red ensign, variegated now by five white stripes – in fact a throwback perhaps to the flag of the British East India Company familiar even to American colonists well before 1776. Gold of course is the colour of the *bunga mas* (golden flower) symbol of Malay royalty (found also in the flag of Brunei which opted not to join Malaysia). The Federation flag was formally unveiled but independence delayed until 1957 due to the ten-year guerrilla war known as the Emergency.

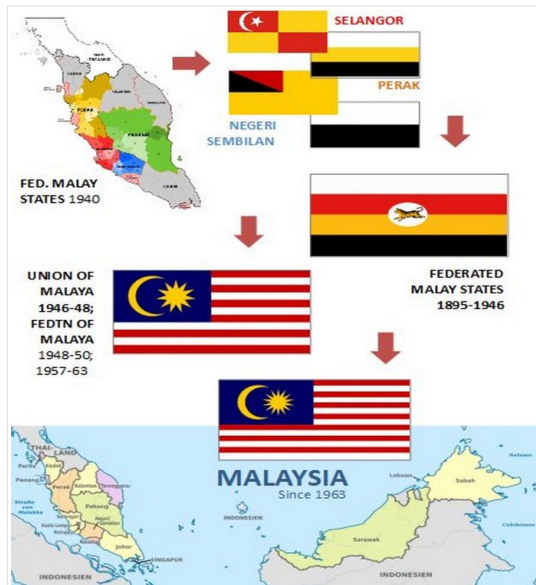
The same flag evolved further with creation in 1963 of a greater Malay(sia) incorporating the two British colonies (Sarawak and Sabah) on the north coast of Borneo and briefly, Singapore. With the expulsion of Singapore (self-

38 The different arrangements with indigenous rulers and the different protocols with those of the Federated and of the Unfederated States hampered resistance against the Japanese invasion in 1942.

39 The Union was inaugurated (on 1 April 1946) but effectively undermined by Malay opposition to the loss of royal powers and to citizenship laws considered too lenient towards non-Malays (Indian and Chinese), and here lay the seeds of the ten-year Emergency and the communal riots of 1969.

40 The Chief Secretary was reprimanded for this practice *ultra vires*.

governing from 1959) in 1965, the new 14-point star and the 14 stripes were retained, the white stripe at the lower edge and the 'extra' point reinterpreted to represent Federal Territories and national unity.⁴¹



Evolution of the Malaysian flag

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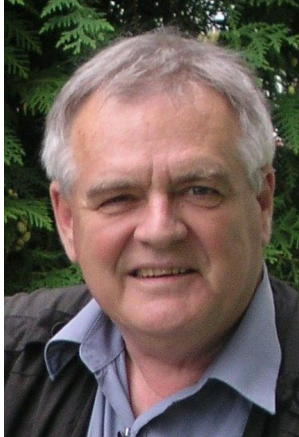
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⁴¹ In FOTW, 'Malaysian Flags', Loy refers to the symbols of the three communally based political parties, with first place (in the canton) rightly assigned to the indigenous Malays (*bumiputera*).

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Author biography



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He has a keen interest in the principles and practice of flag design, reflected in emblems of Aboriginal Councils and the community flag of the Australian South Sea Islanders. Other designs of his have been among finalists in public competitions conducted as part of the debate over the Australian flag.

In addition to the titles listed in the bibliography, his other works include many cross-cultural articles on flags and aspects of early Australian flags (1990-2015) and 'A Flagging Relationship?', *British Politics Review*, 10, no. 1 (Winter 2015), pp. 14-16, <https://www.duo.uio.no/handle/10852/68557>

His flag designs include Flag Society of Australia (1989), Australian South Sea Islanders (1994), ICV24 and NAVA 46 – Alexandria VA (2011), ICV26 Sydney (2014), NAVA 50 San Jose CA (2016).

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