

SEMINAR: EMERGING TRENDS IN FLAG DESIGN IN THE PACIFIC CENTURY

MONDAY 25 SEPTEMBER 1989

ST ANNE'S UNIVERSITY COLLEGE MELBOURNE 1330 HRS

by Tony Burton, based on notes by Ralph Kelly

In discussion over an hour, 20 delegates concentrated on possible trends in flags of nation-states recently emerged or likely to emerge in the Pacific.

Both economic and political changes were portents of change in the world of flags. Themes touched on included the prospect of the Pacific becoming an economic dynamo, with Japan and the so-called "tiger" economies (Taiwan, South Korea, Singapore,) setting the pace for rapid social change and new imagineering, as trading blocs superseded the nation-state in importance.

On the political side, neither the Philippines nor Malaysia could be assured of continuing political, racial or religious stability or integrity within their present boundaries. The Dayak, Iban, and Chinese of Sarawak and Sabah had little in common with West Malaysia. Sabah particularly had long and close historical links with Mindanao, while the latter had little to do with Manila.

The end of the 20th century had also seen the wind up of imperial holdings and former UN Trusteeships in the Pacific, and their replacement by new nation-states - eg Palau (Belau), Kiribati, Marshalls, Marianas, Nauru, Papua New Guinea, Solomons, Tuvalu, Vanuatu - whose long term viability relied on association with emerging trading blocs.

The 21st century might bring further such development affecting the larger nations in the area. Trade relations between Australia and New Zealand could force a Common Market between the two countries, if not eventual political union of the kind debated at the beginning of the 20th century.

In this context, noting that the Maori name for New Zealand, *Ao Te Aroa*, meant Land of the Long White Cloud, Tony Burton suggested that in a combined Southern Cross flag, a white bar above red could well represent the Long White Cloud and the Red Land (Australia). Moreover, such a flag would retain the red, white and blue features of their present emblems, and recall the common association Australia and New Zealand had with settlement and government from Britain in the formative periods of their histories.

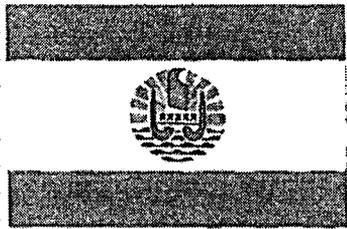


Fig. 1: Tahiti

Fig. 2: Marquesas

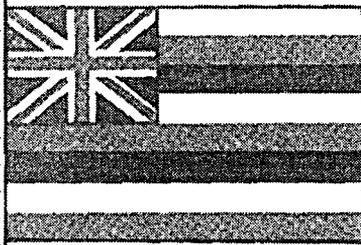
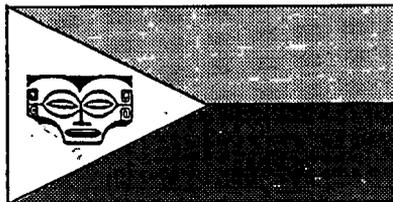
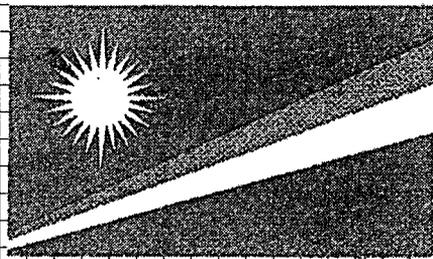
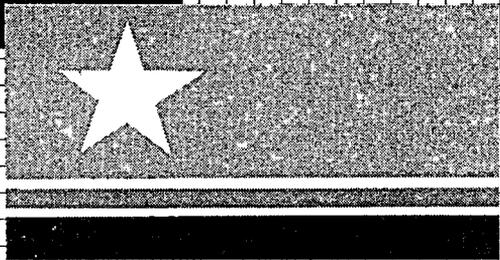


Fig. 3: Hawaii

Fig. 4: Marshalls



Figs. 5-6:
A new flag for Fiji?



While most recent flag changes and evolution had occurred within Micronesia and Melanesia, (French) Polynesia especially seemed politically dormant. It was recognised that flag traditions of the South Pacific generally dated from early in the 19th century, while the traditional Polynesian colours - red and white, and the Royal colours of red and yellow - were older still. In this context it was noted that the recently adopted flag for local use in Tahiti (Fig. 1) featured both red and white. The unofficial flag of the Marquesas (Fig. 2) combined all three - white, red and yellow. While the State flag of Hawaii (Fig. 3) derives from its unique mixture of British and American influences, the use of the traditional Polynesian colours red and white may have reinforced the acceptability of the foreign pattern.

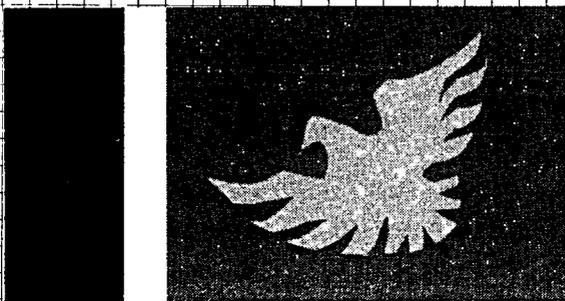
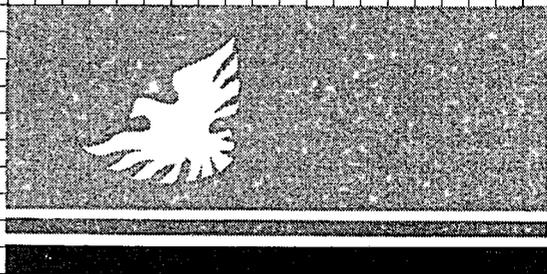
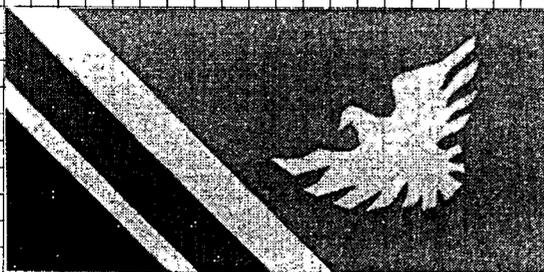
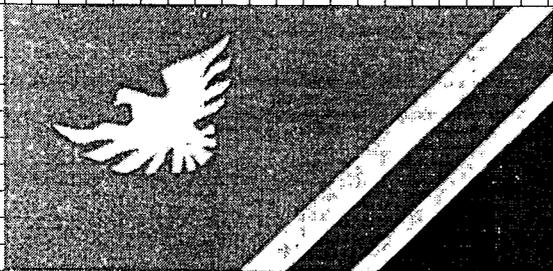
In Melanesia, parochial concerns predominate and fissiparous tendencies remain. It is possible that earlier secessionist flags could reappear - eg Buka and Bougainville in Papua New Guinea, Wallis and Futuna, Ngriamel in Vanuatu. On the other hand economic realities could steer in the other direction, toward both membership of an overall PACRIM Commission (akin to the Council of Europe?) and shifting patterns of regional amalgamation, eg, Melanaku - a greater Melanesian bloc comprising perhaps PNG, Vanuatu, Solomons. Developments of this kind, whereby purely localised nation states based on the whim of colonial boundaries became less relevant, might address in some way irredentist aspirations. Possibly OPM (West Irian) would also see its future within a Melanaki Federation - its cultural and historical ties to Indonesia are certainly very tenuous.

Overall, new and recent flags in the Pacific exhibited a readiness to experiment with design - some of the results (eg Marshall Islands - Fig. 4) seemed awkward from a design and heraldic point of view, but not all were as difficult. The cantonal device had been retained by West Samoa and Tonga (in the latter case, never to be changed, by law). The demise of the specific Union canton seemed to be a gesture of national affirmation as the old cantonal colonial emblems were discarded - although there were the exceptions that made them unique - Cook Islands, Tuvalu and (to date) Fiji. There was a certain playfulness evident in many designs (including those of Kiribati and of Tuvalu, canton notwithstanding).

Various symbols emerged as perhaps typical of flaglore in the region, both in the past and for the future. These included:

- [] borrowed heraldry - sigillographs, or graphic symbols such as the sun (Belau, Kiribati), wavy lines to denote water (cfr Kiribati with the shortlived West Indies Federation). Another prominent example is the Australian Aboriginal Flag, using Western design forms to express traditional concepts of creation and landownership.

Figs. 8-11:
More Fiji Flag
proposals:
Black,
White,
Red,
Light Blue



- [] **stellation**, i.e. the circle or cluster of stars to represent an island group. Micronesia Trust Territory flags, Tuvalu and Solomons were examples in point. Stars also seemed especially appropriate in the context of Pacific traditions of migration and navigation by startracking;
- [] **certain families of colours** - eg red and white in Polynesia, black for Melanesia, pale Pacific blue;
- [] **cultural artifacts as devices** - the Bird of Paradise for PNG, the boar's tusk for Vanuatu, the **latte** or **taga** stone for the Marianas, masks (Marquesas), the outrigger canoe (Tahiti) and, (potentially), weapons (the Maori **taiaha** or spear), or the **yaqona** or **kava** bowl for Fiji.

Particular interest was shown in the possible vexillonomic outcome in Fiji, in the wake of that country's crises and constitutional changes (although this was proving a slow and probably evolutionary process.)

The session made use of overhead transparencies of some design submissions by Tony Burton (**FlagGraphics**, Sydney) to the Flag and Anthem quest sponsored by the Fijian Government in February 1989. Many of these drew inspiration from the earliest symbols of Fijian flags - notably the white dove emblem and the light blue, red and white colours of Ratu Cakobau. Some of these are illustrated in **Figs. 5-11**.

The flag process in Fiji was progressing slowly, if at all. Indeed, at this time it is not a foregone conclusion that the flag will change. The "Melanesian Way" essentially is to do nothing until a compromise acceptable to all finally does emerge. If the flag eventually were changed, however, a number of questions would need settling:

- [] Would the change reflect political process
- [] or a design process?
- [] Would a new flag represent all of Fijian society
- [] or merely one/some of its parts?

Resolution of the four options implied was fundamental. Depending on the decision(s), the parameters were set on the one hand for appropriate symbols, and on the other, the challenge was open to ignore the political complexities altogether, opting instead for an apparently bland, but neutral design. In this context one suggestion put by **FlagGraphics**

seemed too simple and abstract (Fig. 7). Some delegates felt that some additional symbol clearly denoting Fiji would enhance the design. Ironically, many of the same speakers lived under national flags of extreme abstraction yet instant international recognition.



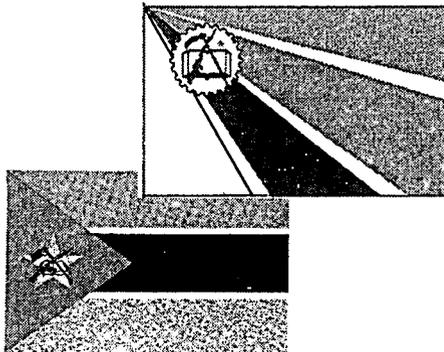
Fig.7 N/W/O/W/B-

This led to discussion on whether an acceptable national flag should please the people or their politicians - a people's flag versus the government's flag. While new flags came to be and frequently are imposed from the top, by administrative decree, and gradually gain acceptance through sheer familiarity from their constant display, such flags tend to command only unreflective loyalty, or worse still, jingoism. Germany's use of the Weimar colours has not altered the underground affection for the older and alternative red white and black.

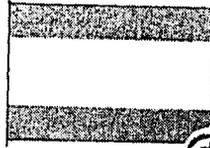
In an era when the nation state survives or withers by its performance as a corporate state, (with more attention to balancing the books than to folk dancing, so to speak,) an efficient national flag needs also to double as a corporate logo. Various European trading nations make widespread merchandising use of their flags.

This does not mean that good logos always make good flags. Corporations invariably want vague symbols to spread a general message, relying on colour changes and design sub-elements to convey a specific part of their corporate identity. A further weakness of the "logo" flags commonly seen was that trendy, fashionable colours such as pastels and fluorescents might look good in two dimensional media, but did not relate to the mobile conditions of flag use.

Important in devising new flags were also practical considerations, including the cost of printing compared to applique methods. This consideration had led to modification of the Bangladeshi flag very early on, and eventually to revision of the flag of Mozambique (Figs. 12-13).



In this context the various versions of the Spanish flag suited everyone. The official State flag had borne the seal of Franco, and now the Royal arms, but for popular use, the simple clarity of the unadorned red/gold/red was ideal.



CONCLUSIONS

New flags should keep in mind:

- [] their **purpose** (for the people or the Government?)
 - [] their costs (the simpler, the cheaper - and by implication, the flag's more general **diffusion among the population.**)
 - [] **adaptability** for a variety of uses
 - [] use of local symbols to convey **meaning** that came to mind, with **facility, rather than contrivance;**
 - [] willingness to look forward, without overlooking design relevance of past **tradition:**
 - [] the **past can often be adapted, simplified and modernised** without being lost altogether - cfr livery insignia of British Airways,
and as part of this,
 - [] affinity with **local design habits** - eg pan-Pacific blue, strellation, shared historical development or heritage;
 - [] **appropriate colours:** in flagcraft these were limited by reason of basic chromatics: pastels and fluorescents do not persist, and are therefore not effective for a device that must be a clear, unambiguous signal.
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