

## Design motifs in the flags of the native peoples of North America

Donald T. Healy

**ABSTRACT:** Drawing upon a database of some one hundred and fifty flags employed by the Native Peoples of the United States and Canada, the author identifies some of the more common recurring elements found in these flags. Explanations for the flag elements are presented, as well as hypotheses as to why such elements appear over and over in these designs. Examples of actual flags highlight the presentation.

*The illustrations for this paper appear on Plate 48.*

Until recently the flags employed by the Native Peoples of North America were a vast unexplored facet of vexillology. Within the last decade, primarily through the publications *Flagscan* of the Canadian Flag Association and *NAVA News* of the North American Vexillological Association, these flags have slowly come to light. Now building upon this author's research, NAVA is about to publish the most comprehensive report ever conceived on the flags of the Natives Peoples of North America. The premiere of this research was at the previous International Congress of Vexillology in Warsaw, Poland.

This body of data, combined with Kevin Harrington's reports on Canadian native flags, and vexillological discoveries since the NAVA report went to press, offers, for the first time, a sufficient data base from which to extrapolate the inspirations and design themes to be found in the flags of Native Peoples of North America.

Of course, the Native Peoples are not unique in finding certain unifying themes. The northern European "Scandinavian Cross," the pan-Arab colors and the use of the "Crux Australis" on flags of the South Pacific are just some of the better known examples. Like those, the themes found in the flags of

Native Peoples express a sense of unity with their kinsmen and try to define "who we are" to the wider world.

In this short space I can only touch upon a few of the themes to be found in this body of flags, but they will serve as examples by which others may be derived or uncovered. The first theme I would like to mention is, to me, a most unusual and unexpected one. The use of maps.

For centuries the Native Peoples of North America have held a strong belief that no human can own the land or its bounty. Nature is the province of the Great Spirit and man can make use of it for his needs, but no matter what he may do, the land belongs solely to the Great Spirit. As strongly held by the Euro-centric peoples coming to North America, was the belief that not only could they own the land, but frequently that it was God's will for them to take it, rule it and change it, regardless of what the local inhabitants might believe or think. This dichotomy was a source of recurrent cultural clashes between the European and the native populations of the continent. The "Europeans know best" attitude led to vast colonial empires, ravaged lands, and millions of deaths around the globe in the name of "God," "King" or profit.

Today, the flags of the modern Native Peoples, reduced from vast open spaces to small parcels of often unproductive wasteland, often strongly affirm their ownership of all that remains in their hands. Of the 130 United States tribal flags known to the author, 13 employ maps of the reservation or reservations as part of their design. Included amongst these are the Blackfeet (Fig. 1), the Colville Confederated Tribes and the Seneca nation. This seemingly incongruous motif, when viewed through the religious and philosophical heritage of the Native Peoples looks bizarre. When viewed through the context of their brutal history and disastrous interactions with the European Americans, especially in the 18th and 19th centuries, this motif proclaims that they have not been wiped from the planet, that they still exist and what little remains of their world is theirs, that they are proud of what they have and intend to succeed within their now limited world.

A second recurring element found in tribal flags is the association with a larger group. This is somewhat analogous to the "Scandinavian Cross" mentioned earlier. Two prime examples of this are the art of the Northwest Tribes and the "Hiawatha's Belt" of the Iroquois Confederacy.

The Haida (Fig. 2), Saanich, and Sechelt of British Columbia, the Lummi, Makah, Quinault and Upper Skagit of Washington State all employ artistic design elements unique to the region of the northwestern United States and Pacific Canada. This is the land of the totem pole builders, the great war canoes, and the distinctive carvings so frequently linked to the region. Here at least seven nations within two countries draw inspiration from their native art. The Quinault feature a giant war canoe, the Upper Skagit and the Haida both employ renditions of eagle heads and the Lummi of Washington and the Sechelt of British Columbia use the same eagle with orca (killer whale) wings. Between the latter two tribes, only the inclusion of the tribe's name, date of the treaty

establishing their reservation and a black ring around the eagle distinguishes the design of the Lummi from that of the Sechelt.

"Hiawatha's Belt" (Fig. 3) has symbolized the Iroquois since the sixteenth century. It originated as a wampum belt, made of small seashells, commemorating the founding of the union between the Cayuga, Mohawk, Onandoga, Oneida and Seneca nations. Two centuries later, a sixth nation, the Tuscarora, joined the Confederacy. Today that wampum belt appears in white upon a flag of bluish purple, the two colors of wampum. It serves as the flag of the Six Nations of Ontario and Quebec and the Iroquois Confederacy in New York State. It can also be found on the flags of the Oneida of New York and their cousins, the Oneida of Wisconsin, while the blue and white colors are found in the flags of both the Seneca of New York and the Seneca-Cayuga of Oklahoma. Thus a nearly 500-year old symbol still unites the six nations of the Iroquois on both sides of a border created by Europeans. The ties between the six nations are still strong and the importance of "Hiawatha's Belt" lives on.

A broader range of recurring symbols unifies the tribes and bands of the Great Plains. This is the land and the people of the stereotypical "Hollywood western." This is the country of the Sioux, the Cheyenne, the Comanche and many other great tribal names. Throughout this vast land three images are particularly common on tribal and band flags. They are the teepee, the buffalo or bison, and the horse and rider.

Each of these images recalls the glorious past, when tribes followed the immense herds of American bison across the prairies. These people relied upon the bison for food, clothing, and shelter. It was the single most important item in their economic life. Until nearly exterminated in the nineteenth century, the bison herds were unimaginably vast; some estimates put herd sizes in the millions. The Sioux, the Blackfeet, Assiniboine and others all followed the herds, culling just enough animals to sustain their tribes' needs. As a symbol of the Native Peoples of the prairie, it recalls the more tranquil past and an era when the red man and the bison roamed over this vast area. The bison is recalled on the flags of the Fort Belknap, Fort Peck, Kiowa, and Lower Brule Sioux by either a skull or pelt. Entire bison appear on the flags of the Flathead, Quapaw, and Southern Ute and the Siksika of Alberta (Fig. 4).

The teepee was the home of these Plains wanderers. It offered shelter with ease of maintenance and easy assembly and disassembly when the bison herds moved on in search of new feeding grounds. As a symbol of home and security the teepee can be found on the Cheyenne and Arapaho, Crow, Crow Creek Sioux (Fig. 6), Flathead, Lower Brule Sioux, Oglala Sioux, Miami of Oklahoma, Sisseton and Wahpeton Sioux, the Standing Rock Sioux, the Warm Springs and the Yankton Sioux in the United States. In Canada we find the Enoch Band of Alberta employing the same device.

The third device appearing with some frequency in the tribal flags of the prairie is the horse and rider. The horse, an accidental gift of the early Spanish explorers, became a godsend to the Indians of the vast openness of the plains.

The increased mobility and ability to transport heavy cargoes had an immediate and dramatic effect on the lifestyles of these people. Today three nations honour the horse by making it an integral part of their tribal seals which appear on their flags. They are the Comanche, the Kaw (Fig. 5) and the Kiowa.

The final recurring theme I would like to point out is the honouring of some of the historically famous Native Americans. This theme is carried across the continent and appears in one of two ways - either overt or symbolic.

Among the individuals honoured overtly on flags, we can see Chief Joseph on the flag of the Nez Perce of Idaho; Geronimo appearing on the flag of the Fort Sill Apache of Oklahoma (Fig. 7); Tecumseh on the Absentee Shawnee flag; Tishomingo on the Chickasaw flag (Fig. 8); and Sockalexis on the flag of the Penobscot of Maine. Except for Tishomingo, all these famous chiefs appear as busts. Tishomingo is represented by his entire visage.

The symbolic tributes may not be as easily recognized as the overt, but they too honour the great names from the past. The Sac and Fox tribes of Oklahoma both honour Black Hawk with the use of, naturally, a black hawk; while the great athlete Jim Thorpe is recalled by the Olympic rings arcing over the black hawk's head. The Mashantucket Pequot of Connecticut honour Robin Cassasinnamon by including his glyph on their seal, while the Northern Cheyenne recall the great chief Dull Knife by depicting the "Morning Star" or "Woheyiv," his Cheyenne name.

These few examples of the design tools employed by Native Peoples in North America show the breadth of choices utilized to exhibit pride in their culture, art, achievement and history. It also illustrates the tenacity of a people whose world was shattered some 500 years ago and who have only recently had a chance to re-assert themselves upon the tableau that is modern society.

### Donald T. Healy

The author has been interested in vexillology for more than thirty years and has published internationally on the subject. From 1989-1991 he served the North American Vexillological Association (NAVA) in the capacity of Corresponding Secretary and President. He served as NAVA's delegate to the International Congress of Vexillology in Warsaw, Poland in 1995. His 'Flags of the Native Peoples of the United States' was published in volumes III and IV of NAVA's *Raven* in 1997. Healy lives in Trenton, where he is employed as a Data Base Analyst in the New Jersey Treasury Department. He has served in many civic capacities, including as a city commissioner on the Trenton Landmarks Commission for Historical Preservation.

ADDRESS: 523 Centre Street, Trenton NJ 08611-3017, U.S.A.

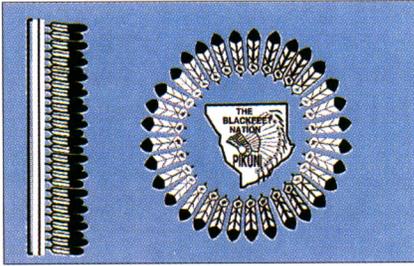


Figure 1



Figure 2

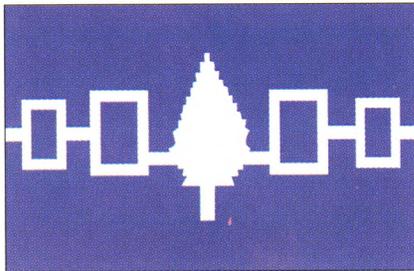


Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5

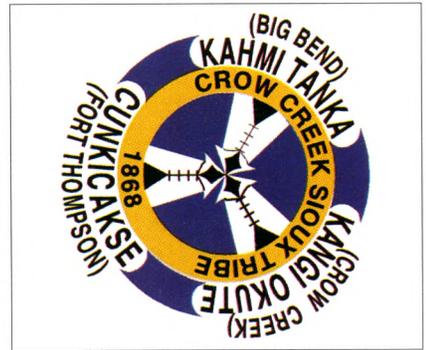


Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8