

The design and registration of flags in the South African Bureau of Heraldry

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ABSTRACT: The ever-changing political environment has influenced the design of flags in South Africa. As far as the Bureau of Heraldry is concerned, the active designing of flags received its initial impetus after the present State Herald attended the 8th ICV in Vienna in 1979. Special provisions are made for the legal protection of flags designed and registered at the Bureau of Heraldry under the Heraldry Act (Act No. 18 of 1962), which prescribes the administrative process which must be followed. Accepted vexillological and heraldic principles are applied. Flags designed by the Bureau of Heraldry can be divided into various categories, namely: those designed independently of any coats of arms; flags based on elements of a coat of arms; heraldic banners; offset heraldic banners and heraldic standards. Two flags which have not been designed by the Bureau of Heraldry are also shown. Recent influences on flag design in the Bureau of Heraldry are discussed. It is concluded that the designing and registration of flags in the Bureau of Heraldry is in a healthy position.

The illustrations for this paper appear on Plates 27-29.

1 Introduction

Studying the flags which have flown from a country's birth to the present provides a fascinating insight into that nation's history. There are not many nations whose history can more readily be researched in this way than that of South Africa.

Most nations' birth or development is associated with struggle, war, subjection, and freedom. Once a nation has freed itself of its suppressing factors and the chains of its past, its citizens tend to discard divisive symbols as they progress towards unification under new and widely accepted symbols.

South Africa's rich historical and cultural heritage has set the stage for a number of changes in its national symbols, in particular that of the national flag. This has provided vexillologists from around the world with an enormous amount of exciting research material. Not only have there been at least three exercises aimed at the creation of a national flag in the past 87 years, but on a local level flags have been taken into increasing use as a means of corporate identification.

During the past three decades in particular, the use of flags has flourished as a means for promoting independence, pride, and identity. To accommodate the ever-growing need for flag designs and registration, the Bureau of Heraldry has actively embraced the promotion of vexillology since the early 1980s.

2 The origins of flag design at the Bureau of Heraldry

While attending the 8th ICV in Vienna in 1979, the current State Herald (then the Assistant State Herald) was inspired by the extent to which flags play a role in promoting identity. He found that vexillology, just as strongly as heraldry, provides persons, nations, or bodies corporate with a means of self-identification, pride and purpose. He also realized that South Africa's vexillological needs were inadequately met. On his return to South Africa, he endeavored to encourage the Bureau of Heraldry actively to support the design and registration of flags in South Africa.

Since the establishment of the Southern African Vexillological Association (SAVA), the staff of the Bureau of Heraldry have been actively involved in its activities. The principal aim of flag design in the Bureau has always been to achieve the highest standard of design and always to act as a mechanism to meet the needs of its clients. It also aims to promote public awareness of flags and heraldry, and to create and promote unique designs, which are striking, a pleasure to see, and are technically correct.

This task has been facilitated by the fact that the Bureau of Heraldry houses the SAVA Library of which I am the current librarian. The SAVA Library primarily houses bulletins and journals which are received on an exchange basis from other flag societies.

3 Legal provisions for the registration of flags

In the aims and objectives which are set out at the beginning of the Heraldry Act (Act No. 18 of 1962), the words "other emblem" are used. This category is defined in section 1, as including "any flag, pennant, gonfalon or other or kindred symbolic representation." This provision clearly provides the Bureau of Heraldry with the necessary legal authority to design and register flags for its clients. It also makes provision for the lawful protection of those flags designed and registered under the Heraldry Act. Any transgression of the stipulations regarding the protection of a registered flag may thus be dealt with in accordance with the Act.

4 The physical process: from application to registration

When a person, official, municipal body, association or institution approaches the Bureau of Heraldry for the registration of a flag, the Bureau checks whether the proposed flag clashes with any existing registration. Even if there is no clash it is sometimes necessary to reject the proposed design in accordance with accepted vexillological principles. An alternative is then prepared. If no design is received, one is prepared for the applicant and submitted for consideration. Such draft designs are also checked against designs on record in the Bureau of Heraldry to ensure that they do not match or closely resemble any previously registered designs. They are also checked against various flag charts for the same reason.

The Bureau of Heraldry ensures in this way that any flag which is to be registered will not be confused with any other or well-known flag. Once the draft has been verified as being unique, it is then dispatched to the applicant for final comments, alterations and ultimately for approval. Once the applicant has approved the design, a notice of application is published in the *Government Gazette* in terms of the provisions of section 7(7) of the Heraldry Act. If no objection to the proposed registration is received, a notice of registration is then published in the *Gazette*.

After the registration has been effected and the client has paid all the fees due, the Bureau of Heraldry issues a certificate of registration, which contains a full-colour, hand painted representation of the flag, together with a full description. This certificate is countersigned by the State Herald and the Chairman of the Heraldry Council. A similar illustration and description is then incorporated into the register of the Bureau of Heraldry as a permanent record.

5 Technical considerations

In South Africa similar design principles are followed for vexillology and for heraldry. This includes the application of the heraldic rules of tincture, division, lines of division, *etc.* Easy identification is one of the cardinal principles applied. Generally, both sides of flags designed by the Bureau are mirror images of one another. Certain specialized flags, such as regimental colours, may occasionally have different charges on the obverse and reverse sides. Charges are designed in such a way that they are recognizable from a distance. Lettering is avoided as it negates the purpose of a flag. Lettering on a flag also makes a mirror image impossible and weakens the design. Only specialized flags, such as colours, bear mottoes. Charges are placed centrally or towards the hoist, since any charge positioned near the edge of the fly becomes blurred when the flag is flapping in the wind. Wear and tear also takes its toll and a charge which is placed near the edge of the fly will be the first to suffer. Colours are always clearly separated in order to avoid confusion and to enable black and white or line representation of the flag to show up successfully as well.

Preference is given to as few charges as possible as this strengthens the design. Too many charges confuse the viewer, especially when the flag is flying. Charges are also stylized since it is difficult and impractical to depict objects in their natural state. When a charge is depicted in its natural state, difficulties are often experienced with colour shadings and too many colours, which makes reproduction difficult. Simplicity strengthens the impact of any design, and this principle is as far as possible applied in the production of designs in the Bureau of Heraldry. Finally, the Bureau, for the sake of uniformity and tradition, tries to keep its flags in the overall proportions of 2:3. This makes the designing of flags much easier as certain proportions and divisions, which have in the past been set, can be used as a pre-set design principle. The uniformity of proportions also makes it easier for the flag manufacturers to produce a final product.

6 Categories of flags

6.1 Flags designed independently of any coats of arms

These flags are designed and registered without being linked in any way to an existing coat of arms. A typical example of such a flag is that of the *South African Railways Training College* in Esselenpark (Fig. 1). This College uses an unregistered coat of arms comprising nine white squares on a red field. These represented the nine administrative regions in which the Railways operated. The College colours are red, white, and black. In designing this flag the red and black were separated by means of white stripes, representing railway lines, while the nine blocks were moved towards the hoist, since this is the most stable part of a flag.

A second example is the National Flag of the Republic of South Africa (Fig. 2). This flag is in many respects a synopsis of the principal colours used in South African Vexillology over the past 350 years. It is a geometric design all proportions of which can be determined with the fingers of one hand. It was not influenced by any coat of arms.

6.2 Flags based on elements of a coat of arms

These flags are based on elements of a registered coat of arms. Some coats of arms, because of their complexity, do not lend themselves to conversion into heraldic banners. In such cases the flag may be designed in such a way that it contains all or only some of the elements of the coat of arms. The flag of the *University of South Africa* (Fig. 3) is based on the principal colours and partition lines of the University arms. The charges in the hoist are two rings which link the arms to those of the old University of the Cape of Good Hope, South Africa's first tertiary seat of learning, and a white rose, symbol of the Duke of York, the University's first Chancellor.

The arms of the *Municipality of Machadodorp* (Fig. 4) allude to the geographical position of the town. It is situated firstly on the old wagon trail between the Goldfields and Delagoa Bay (now Maputu), and secondly on the rail route which was built later and which replaced the wagons.

6.3 Heraldic banners

A heraldic banner is a flag in which the contents of the shield of arms are spread out to fill the bunting field. Other heraldic accessories such as the crest, wreath and mantling and riband bearing the motto are excluded from such a design. The following examples illustrate this category:

Municipality of Bethlehem (Fig. 5). The star above the chevron alludes to the biblical star of Bethlehem while the wavy bars refer to the river Jordan which runs through the town.

Florida Primary School (Fig. 6). This school is situated near Florida Lake, which is well known for its swans.

Hoërskool Overkruin (Fig. 7). The name Overkruin means 'over the summit,' in this case part of the Magaliesberg mountain range, while the trefoil refers to a centuries-old wild fig tree *Ficus capensis*, not far from the school.

Pretoria High School for Girls (Fig. 8). This school bears its coat of arms on a lozenge, but in the case of its banner the green border follows the edge of the flag in order to create a more practical and pleasing design.

Bureau of Heraldry (Fig. 9). The three blank shields allude to the Bureau's function of designing and registering coats of arms, while the lion holding four bound staves has its origin in the national coat of arms.

Municipality of Marquard (Fig. 10). This town is situated in the Eastern-Free-State in an area where the Basutu wars took place in the 1860s.

Municipality of Winburg (Fig. 11). In the early 19th century Winburg was the capital of one of the fledgling Boer Republics. It is a farming area, hence the sheaf of wheat and merino ram while the star is said to symbolize victory and thus to the town's name which means 'town of winning.'

Magalies Water Board (Fig. 12). This board supplies water to nearby local authorities. The main partition refers to the Magaliesberg mountains while the blue water drop within the outline of a glass alludes to the provision of water.

6.4 Offset heraldic banners

Bearing in mind that the fly is the first part of a flag to sag as the wind drops, the Bureau of Heraldry often moves single charges towards the hoist of what are in other respects heraldic banners. An offset heraldic banner is thus a flag which is based in full on the shield of a coat of arms with the main charges placed close to the hoist, instead of in a central position. The following are typical examples:

Carltonville Technical College (Fig. 13). In the case of technical colleges the traditional cogwheel or demi-cogwheel is often replaced in South Africa by a demi-cogwheel trefoil which is used as a common charge for this category of institutions.

19 Rocket Regiment (Fig. 14). The zig-zag band is derived from the flash of Saint Barbara, patron saint of artillery, while the rocket is self-explanatory.

Siebert Sybolt Roelf Jelle Visser (Fig. 15). The trellis across the lower part represents a fish net and in this case the fish has been moved towards the hoist. The surname Visser means fisherman.

Drakensberg Regional Services Council (Fig. 16). Here again the principal partition line refers to a mountain range while the dragon links the design to Drakensberg, which means 'dragon mountain.' The partition was extended horizontally to the fly.

Municipality of Nomonde (Fig. 17). The same principle as in the previous flag was applied in the flag of the Municipality of Nomonde, which was a black local authority. The colours red, yellow and green are the Pan-African colours found in many African national flags.

6.5 Heraldic standards

Heraldic standards are not often seen in South Africa, although a number have been registered. These follow the customary layout, usually with the shield of arms in the hoist, the motto on diagonal bands in the fly between the crest and any badges, which there might be. These are inevitably hand made on a one-off basis.

7 Flags not designed by the Bureau of Heraldry

Many of the flags which are flown in South Africa have not been designed by the Bureau of Heraldry or, indeed, by anyone with vexillological knowledge or experience. Many of these flags were designed before the establishment of the Bureau, while others are the products of enthusiastic amateurs or design studios. With few exceptions these flags are either primitive, impractical or too complex, and as a broad category tend to demonstrate a lack of knowledge of the basic principles governing and guiding good flag design. Many contain words and lettering which should be avoided on flags. The following are examples of what the Bureau of Heraldry would not design or register:

Municipality of Francistown (Fig. 18). The flag of Francistown in Botswana bears the full name on an oval with the full coat of arms in the center. The shield of these arms could have been adapted into a successful heraldic banner.

Municipality of Boksburg Centenary Flag (Fig. 19). In this case a minute representation of the municipal coat of arms appears together with ample script. Being a centenary 'flag' one would hope that it has a limited lifetime! It must really be considered as an advertising banner.

8 Recent influences on flag designs in South Africa

Flags for the people, by the people. Recently, many of the new coats of arms designed by the Bureau of Heraldry have been subjected to arduous processes of democratic participation and consultation. Concerned parties (political or otherwise) have been given numerous opportunities to become actively involved with the design of provincial, metropolitan and local councils' coats of arms. Everybody who is anybody has been given the opportunity to voice their opinion, however qualified or unqualified, about the proposed coats of arms. It would seem to indicate that South Africans are becoming more and more interested and involved with the creation of their own identities. They will not allow

others to dictate what they should accept as their national, local, corporate or personal symbols.

This new approach has obliged the Bureau of Heraldry to dig much deeper than ever before into multi-cultural requirements in the creation of coats of arms and related flags. As the Bureau of Heraldry seeks to stay at the forefront of heraldic design it endeavours to incorporate into new designs those elements which are close to South Africans and their culture. Elements such as local ethnic art, totems, artifacts and objects are seen more and more on the shield of arms. In most cases these elements are directly linked to one or other symbolic meaning of an ethnic nature. This can lead to tricky situations since a single dove can mean good luck in one culture and bad luck in another. Every effort is made to ensure that registered designs do not infringe on people's cultural beliefs.

Another recent development which is not directly related to flag design, but may be worth mentioning, has been the design of the Johannesburg Metropolitan Council's coat of arms. The council proposed that the two supporters, which were young lions, be of indeterminate gender. This would lead me to think that the traditional masculinity of heraldry in South Africa is now also becoming politically incorrect, making way for equality of gender and eliminating sexual discrimination in this field as well.

9 Conclusion

The designing of flags in the Bureau of Heraldry is alive and well, and new flags are constantly seeing the light. I am very fortunate to be part of the Bureau of Heraldry in these exciting times. As South Africa moves forward in its new-found democracy and settles more comfortably into the global community, so too are its cultural symbols being more freely accepted by the international community. It is heart warming to see our national flag flying at conferences and other institutions of note throughout the world. It is also an honour to be able to share with you a facet of our work in the Bureau of Heraldry.

Marcel Christian van Rossum

Marcel van Rossum became interested in flags early in 1993 when the South African public was invited to submit proposals for a new South African flag. He submitted five designs of which one had much in common with the final design. He joined the Bureau of Heraldry in July 1996 as Assistant State Herald and is the custodian of the Southern African Vexillological Association's periodical holdings, which are housed in the Bureau. His interests include history, history of art, heraldry and the application of computer-aided design in heraldry and vexillology.

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Plate 27

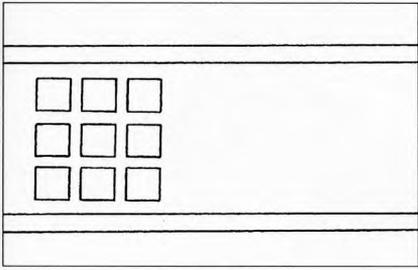


Figure 1

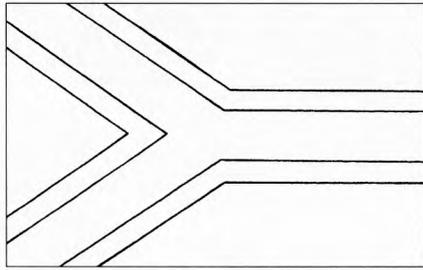


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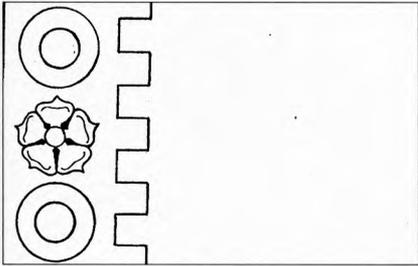


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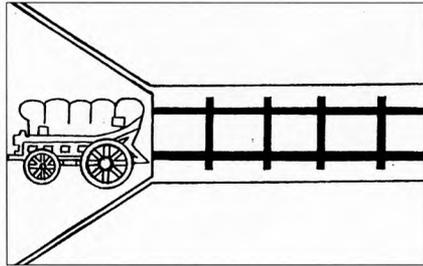


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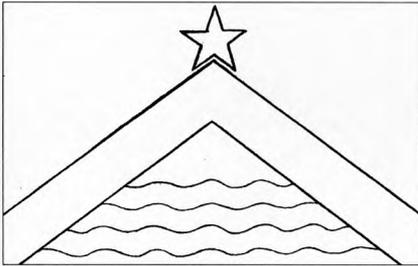


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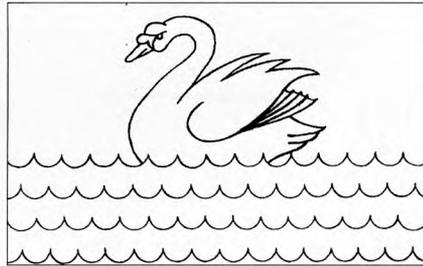


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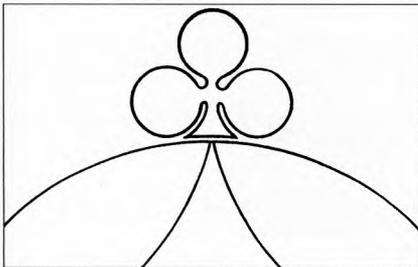


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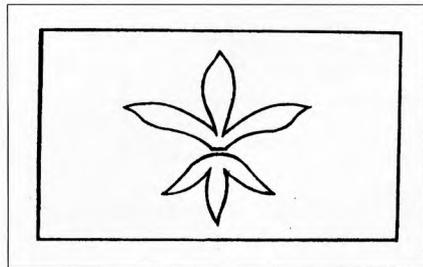


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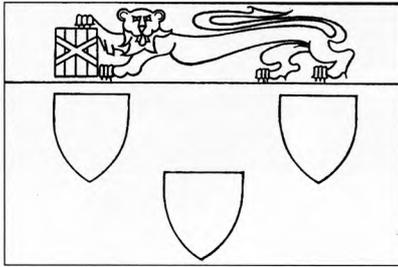


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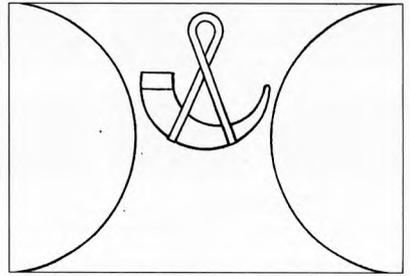


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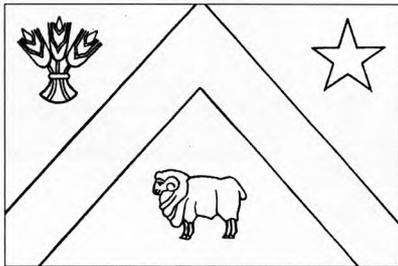


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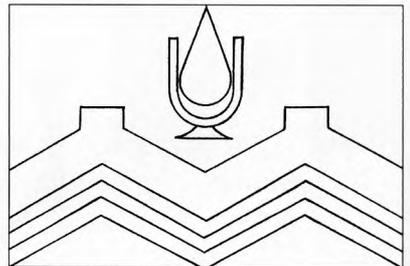


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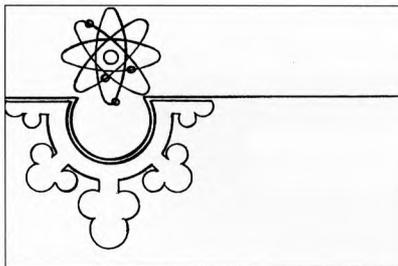


Figure 13

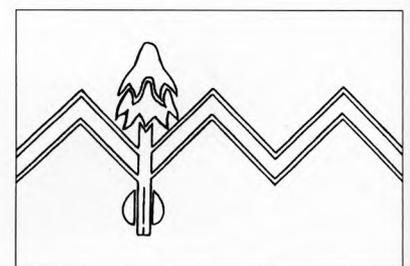


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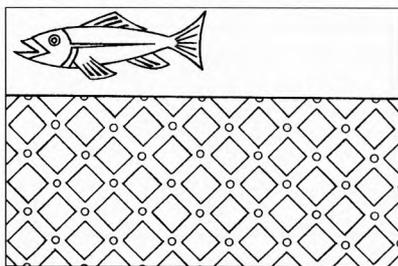


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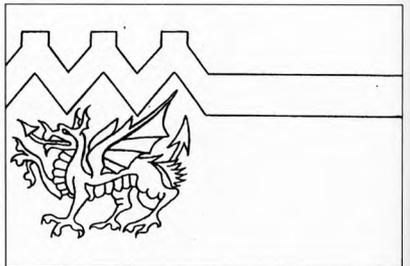


Figure 16

Plate 29

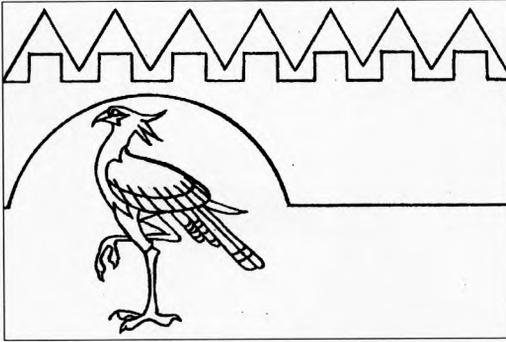


Figure 17

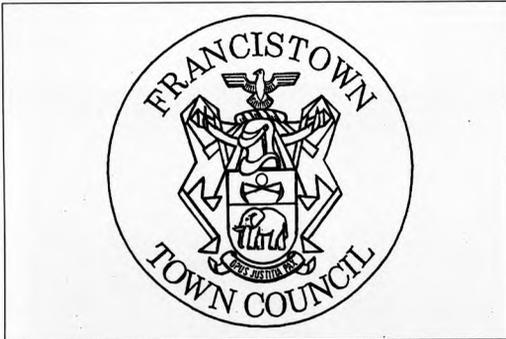


Figure 18



Figure 19