

The Flags of Princely States of the Dutch East Indies

by Marcel van Westerhoven

Abstract The subject of this paper is the flags of the subordinate native states that existed until the Second World War in the former Dutch colony of the Netherlands Indies, in what is now the Republic of Indonesia. The situation in the Netherlands Indies was in a lot of ways similar to that in British India: till their independence shortly after the Second World War, in large parts of both countries, next to the parts ruled directly by the colonial government, hundreds of sultans, rajas, susuhanans, panembahans, pangerans, cokordas and other types of lord kept on ruling their feudal native states, after signing treaties of allegiance to the head of state of the colonisator. And almost all of these princely states used one or more flags. Another similarity is the mix of Hinduistic and Islamic traditions.

The purpose of this paper is to give a general introduction to these flags, in an analysis that takes into account geographic, cultural and religious similarities. It is not comprehensive and certainly not conclusive. It can be considered a starting point for future analysis.

1. Introduction

While analysing the many princely state flags in the Dutch East Indies, the following information has also been taken into account:

- The location of all these sultanates and other lordships. They are not easy to find on a current map. It is easy to find the location of the residential cities and towns, as most states were named after them. But some of them are not. And it is not easy to find historical maps on which their territories and boundaries are clearly demarcated.
- The year until which each of them existed, because in the course of the colonial history a lot of them disappeared.
- Their status within the colonial organisation; research into this is by no means conclusive.
- Source material about the meaning of the colours and symbols in the flags, looking for similarities. It turns out that these do exist. This will be the main focus of this paper.
- And finally, on studying these flags, it becomes clear that there is another important question to answer: whom or what did these flags represent? This often is not clear at all. It often turns out that the flag shown for a state was only used as a personal flag by the sultan and does not stand for its territory or people. Also, in many states many flags were in use, one for each member of the royal family and



for each state official. There could also be special flags for the mercantile fleet and for war.

2. Situation of the princely states

The map of the Netherlands Indies in figure 1 shows the political geographic situation with regard to the princely states in the year 1909.⁽¹⁾ At this time, the Kingdom of the Netherlands had consolidated its grip on almost all of nowadays Indonesia. Having almost complete control was a fairly recent development then. From the first commercial contacts with this region around 1600 by the Dutch East India Company, the VOC, direct Dutch rule of territory only grew slowly, mostly by playing one local state against the other and meddling in internal strife. By the end of the Dutch Republic and the VOC around 1800 and after the retake of colonial power by the newly formed Kingdom of the Netherlands in 1816 after the Napoleonic era, direct Dutch rule only applied to:

- the west coast of Sumatra;
- most of Java, and
- scattered possessions in the east of the archipelago.

For the most part, at that time the East Indies consisted of a patchwork of some 280 independent indigenous states. The most important of them were:

- on Sumatra: Atjeh, Siak and Palembang;
- on Java: Yogyakarta;
- on Borneo: Pontianak and Banjarmasin;
- on Celebes: Makassar (Gowa).



Figure 1 Princely states in the Dutch East Indies in 1909
(1)

During the next hundred years, the Dutch relentlessly gained control over these states in a systematic campaign of conquest and annexation, by military but also by diplomatic means. A lot of the local princes signed treaties, by which they swore allegiance to the king of the Netherlands and relinquished suzerainty, but still kept a kind of autonomy and continued to rule locally. The ones that did not want to cooperate were attacked. Resistance could be fierce, as in the sultanate of Atjeh in the north of Sumatra, the last important territory to fall under Dutch rule after a long war, lasting from 1873 to 1903.

On the map in figure 1 the status of the territories in the Netherlands Indies in 1909 can be seen:

- In pale yellow: territories under direct Dutch rule.
- In dark yellow: treaty (or contract) states that signed a bilateral contract with the Netherlands and were more or less autonomous: the north east coast of Sumatra, the Vorstenlanden on Java, the west and east of Borneo, small parts of Celebes, the Northern Moluccas
- In white: native states unilaterally subordinate to the Dutch under the *Korte Verklaring* (Dutch for short declaration) with limited autonomy: Atjeh local lordships, the Batak Lands on Sumatra, most of Celebes, the Lesser Sunda Islands.



Figure 2 Princely states in the Dutch East Indies in the 1930s

The treaty states and the states under the *Korte Verklaring* were together called *Zelfbesturen* (Dutch for self ruling entities), the dark blue territories on the map in figure 2, which shows the situation in the 1930s. This situation lasted till the Second World War.

3. Sources of flag information

In the *Jaarboek van het Centraal Bureau voor Genealogie* of 1952, Dutch heraldist Dirk Rühl wrote a comprehensive article about these flags, after he had done research in all source material available to him, after much information had been lost during the Japanese occupation and the subsequent Indonesian Revolution.⁽²⁾ Most of those sources are in Dutch and date from the 19th century. His source material also included *The History of Java* (1817) by Thomas Stamford Raffles, Lieutenant Governor of the British administration of the East Indies from 1811 to 1816. In his article, Rühl does not only catalogue and show all the known flags of the East Indies back then, but in many cases also explains the meaning of colours and symbols. This article, of which a translation in English can be found on the *Flags of the World* website, has become the starting point for vexillologists who have also catalogued and analyzed these flags. It is still relevant now and has been the main source of information for the analysis here.

4. General symbolism of princely state flags

In Indonesia three traditions in symbolism, linked to religion, can be discerned, in chronological order:

- **native**, dating from before the coming of Hinduism and Buddhism to those parts;
- **hinduistic/buddhistic**, these religions arriving from India as early as the first century AD and
- **islamic**, Islam arriving on the northeast coast of Sumatra in the 13th and 14th centuries and from the 16th century spreading over the whole of the archipelago to become the dominant religion; only Bali and Lombok remained Hinduistic.

Native symbolism

Native symbols and colours that can be seen on flags throughout the archipelago include:

- the kris, a long ornamental ceremonial knife kept as heirloom (or pusaka) by noble families;
- the colours red and white; see paragraph 5 about Java for this;
- the colour yellow for royalty, seen in many flags on Borneo and Sumatra.

Hinduistic/buddhistic symbolism

Hinduistic and buddhistic symbols and colours that can be seen on flags throughout the archipelago include:

- the Garuda, the mythical bird-man creature that was the messenger of Heaven; it stood for the heavenly mandate given to the earthly ruler and can be found on flags in a few instances;
- red, white and blue (or black); see paragraph 7 about Bali and Lombok for this.

Islamic symbolism

Because of the wide spread of Islam throughout the East Indies, Islamic symbols can be found on many flags. The most common are:

- the *Zulfiqar*, the double sword of Ali, son-in-law of Mohammed;
- Koran verses;
- the well known crescent and star.

The following paragraphs (5 to 12) together form a geographical tour of the constituent islands of Indonesia, which will show examples of all the colour and symbol traditions mentioned.

5. Java

Mataram and Banten

From the second half of the 16th century the sultanate of Mataram became the dominant power on Java. The sultans ruled most of Java, except for the west. It used a flag in the traditional red and white colours (fig. 3), of which it is said that they were already used by the Hinduistic-Buddhistic precursor of Mataram, the Indonesia-wide Majapahit empire (14th-16th centuries). Red and white stood for the dualistic nature of man, for feminine and masculine and therefore for the whole of creation and humanity. It is of course also the current flag of Indonesia.

The west of Java and the south of Sumatra (the Lampungs) were ruled by the sultans



Figure 3
The flag of Mataram



Figure 4
The flag of Banten



Figure 5
The flag of Surakarta



Figure 6
The flag of Mangkunegaran



Figure 7
The flag of Pakualaman



Figure 8 The Vorstenlanden on Java in 1830 (1)



Figure 9
The flag of Yogyakarta before 1932



Figure 10
The Guloklopo of Yogyakarta

of Banten (or Bantam). For Banten a flag with crossed swords is mentioned (figure 4) that could be a misinterpretation by westerners of the islamic Zulfiqar. The Dutch managed to weaken Banten so that by 1752 it acknowledged Dutch suzerainty. In 1832, the Dutch abolished and annexed it.

The Vorstenlanden

The Dutch managed to gradually wear down Mataram's hold on most of Java. In 1755 the VOC, by meddling in court intrigues and internal strife, managed to divide the remaining territory of Mataram into two subordinate states: the sultanate of Yogyakarta, and Surakarta (or Solo), ruled by a susuhanan. In 1830, after the devastating Java War, only the south of central Java remained to these so called Vorstenlanden (Princely States). In the mean time, Mangkunegaran had split off from Surakarta and Pakualaman from Yogyakarta. These four Vorstenlanden retained a special status until the end of the colony (see the map in figure 8). Even now, the sultanate of Yogyakarta still exists and has a special status within Indonesia.

Surakarta used the traditional Mataram colours of red and white (figures 5), while the split-offs used yellow and green (figures 6 and 7). For Yogyakarta a black flag with a yellow disc is on record (figure 9), but in 1932 it adopted the Guloklopo in the traditional red and white colours (figure 10).



Figure 11-12
The Guloklopo can still be seen today in ceremonies in and around the kraton (palace) of Yogyakarta

6. Madura

The island of Madura, east of Java, came under Dutch influence in an early stage. Only the state of Sumenep on the eastern part of the island, ruled by a panembahan, had autonomy under Dutch rule until it was annexed in 1879.

The flag of Sumenep consisted of the royal yellow with a western style coat-of-arms on it (figure 13). Interesting about this coat-of-arms is that it contains islamic (the crescent in the first quarter) next to hinduistic symbols (the dragonlike Naga). This hindu-islamic dualism is typical for Javanese and Madurese culture.



Figure 13 The flag of Sumenep



Figure 14 Princely states on Bali and Lombok between 1880 and 1908 (1)



Figure 15
The flag of Klungkung



Figure 16
The flag of Pamecutan



Figure 17
The flag of Badung



Figure 18
The flag of Kesiman



Figure 19
The flag of Lombok



Figure 20
The flag of Karangasem

7. Bali and Lombok

Hinduism remains the dominant religion on Bali and to a lesser extent on Lombok. Bali was comprised of some ten hindu 'kingdoms' before 1906 (figure 14). The Dutch had difficulties gaining control over these kingdoms and only succeeded to defeat them in 1906 and 1908, after which almost all were abolished.

With one exception, all these kingdoms used flags with red, white and blue or black stripes (see figures 15 to 18). The red, white and blue certainly are not the Dutch colours, but are Hinduistic colours and stand for the three main gods of Hinduism:

- red for Shiva;
- white for Brahma and
- blue (or black) for Vishnu.

Because of Bali influence, the flag of Lombok also had these colours (figure 19).

Karangasem was the exception and had a hinduistic Garuda on its flag (figure 20).

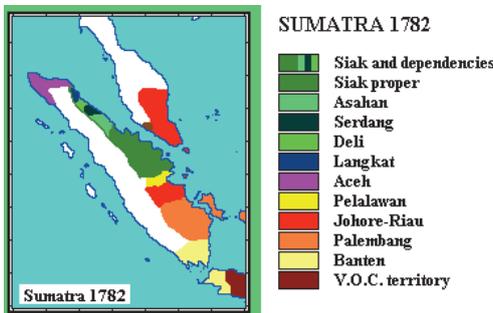


Figure 21 Princely states on Sumatra in 1782

8. Sumatra

By the end of the 18th century, along the whole of the east coast of Sumatra there were many sultanates, that reached from the Malacca straits to the central mountain spine. The most important of these were Palembang, Johore-Riau, Siak and the powerful Atjeh in the far north. In all of these states Islam had a strong presence. The map in figure 21 shows the political situation in Sumatra in 1782, while the map in figure 22 shows the developments with regard to the princely states on Sumatra in the 19th century.



Figure 22 Princely states on Sumatra in the 19th century (1)

Johore-Riau

Johore-Riau, based on the Malay peninsula and later on the islands to the south, lost its power already before 1800, but influenced the flying of many flags of the same pattern: a monocolour with a white jack which could be seen in Jambi, Indragiri, Siak and the Linga Islands as the flags of their mercantile fleets. They were a reminder of the former widespread dominion of Johore-Riau on Sumatra.



Figure 23
The flag of Johore-Riau



Figure 24
The flag of the Atjeh sultanate



Figure 25
Atjeh war flag (wrong depiction)



Figure 26 Atjeh war flag in the collection of the Rijksmuseum Volkenkunde (Leiden, the Netherlands)

Atjeh

Atjeh in 1903 was the last of the main independent states in the East Indies to be subdued by the Dutch, after the 30 years of the bloody Atjeh War. It looked to the Ottoman Empire for inspiration and support, which explains the flag of the sultanate (figure 24). The red flag with the crossed swords (figure 25) is a misinterpretation of the Zulfiqar, as can be seen on flags in the collection of the Rijksmuseum Volkenkunde at Leiden, the Netherlands (figure 26) (3). The Zulfiqar flags were war flags, probably captured by Dutch troops during the Atjeh War.

Yellow flags

The yellow for royalty, plain or with symbols, was used by a number of Sumatran sultanates, for instance by Indragiri (figure 27) and Deli (figure 28).



Figure 27
The flag of Indragiri



Figure 28
The flag of Deli

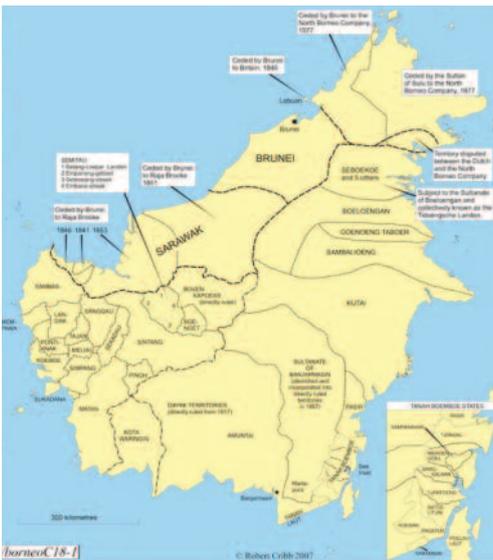


Figure 29 Princely states on Borneo in the first half of the 19th century (1)

9. Borneo

Only the southern and central parts of Borneo were under direct Dutch rule. The west and the east consisted of many sultanates and rajahnates that had signed treaties with the Dutch and thus retained a kind of autonomy (see figure 29). Most were based on the coasts, but nominally held large inland rain forest territories, only accessible by the many rivers and inhabited by Dayak tribes.

The yellow royal flag was very prominent on Borneo. Most of the flags were plain yellow (figure 30), but sometimes contained a specific symbol. Pontianak had the crescent and star of Islam (figure 31). On Kutai's flag stood a crowned tiger. The picture of the tiger wearing a kind of Dutch royal crown in figure 32, as it is depicted in a couple of sources, is false. It should be the traditional crown of Kutai, the mahkota, as can be seen in the collection of the Rijksmuseum Volkenkunde, where the real flag of Kutai is kept.



Figure 30
The flag of Mempawah, Sambas, Simpang, Sintang, Sambaliung, Sanggau, Sukadana



Figure 31
The flag of Pontianak



Figure 32
The flag of Kutai (wrong depiction)



Figure 33
The real flag of Kutai (detail)



Figure 34
The flag of Brunei



Figure 35
The flag of Serawak

The current flags of Brunei (figure 34) and Serawak (figure 35) show that the tradition of yellow flags was not confined to the Dutch part of Borneo.

Mempawah

The case of the state of Mempawah shows the situation that occurred quite often and was very confusing to Dutch officials: one state using many flags. Mempawah used separate flags for the ruler and his wife, the prince-minister, princes, councilors, the chancellor of the exchequer, children of concubines, regents, commanders, nobles, notables, kampong chiefs, imams, judges, the police and district chiefs (figure 36).

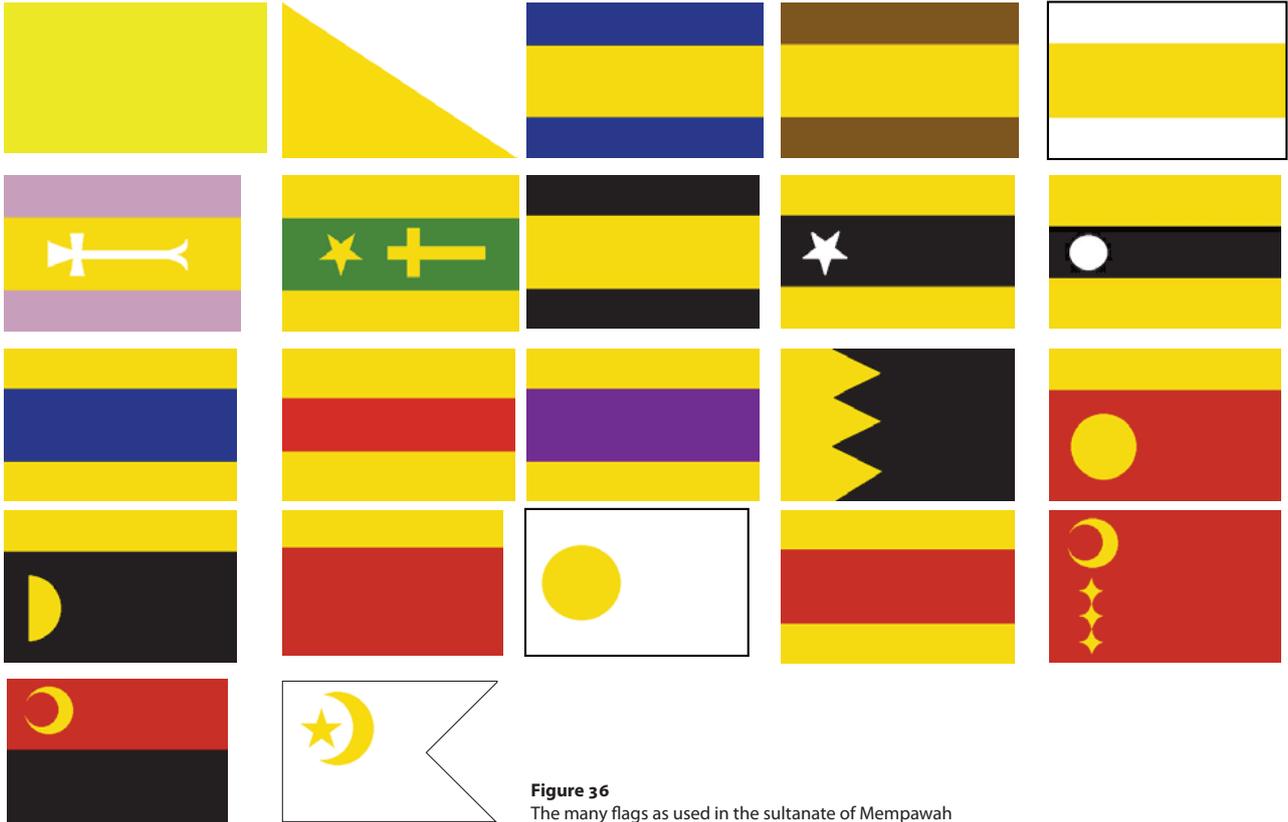


Figure 36
The many flags as used in the sultanate of Mempawah

10. Celebes

On Celebes three states competed for hegemony: the Bugi rajahnates of Soppeng and Bone, and the Makassarese sultanate of Gowa, all located on the southern peninsula. In the 17th century the sultanate of Gowa managed to expand into a powerful trade empire that dominated almost the whole of the east of Indonesia and so became a rival to the Dutch VOC in the Moluccas. In 1667 the VOC defeated the Makas-



Figure 40 The princely states on the southern peninsula of Celebes 1909 (1)



Figure 37
The flag of Gowa



Figure 38
The flag of Bone



Figure 39
The flag of Soppeng



sarese and from then on Gowa was just a small subordinate state. Bone profited from this downfall and from then on was the dominant state on Celebes.

Gowa had a flag with a Garuda (figure 37), but Bone (figure 38), Soppeng (figure 39) and also Banggai in the east all used red and white stripes.

11. Northern Moluccas



Figure 41
The flag of Ternate

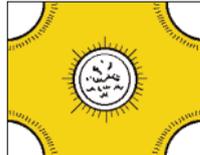


Figure 42
The flag of Tidore

Two sultanates that became rich and influential by the trade in spices dominated the Molucca islands in the far east: Ternate and Tidore. Both were based on small volcanic islands off the west coast of the much larger island of Halmahera. Ternate controlled most of the Moluccas until 1652, when it had to sign a treaty with the VOC. Tidore kept its dominance over Halmahera and the Bird's Head peninsula of New Guinea. Both kept their status as allied sultanates until the end of Dutch rule.

Both sultanates used the same kind of flag of royal yellow with sun symbols in white (figures 41 and 42). The central discs contained Koran verses in Arabic and referred to the dominant religion: Islam.

12. Southern Moluccas



Figure 43 The Southern Moluccas

In the Southern Moluccas (figure 43) there were no princely states, only small local lordships under direct Dutch rule. These island communities were quite prosperous and independent because their inhabitants were experienced seafarers. Each village chief (kamponghoofd in Malay-Dutch) had his own flag which was also used to represent the village. Many of these flags have been recorded and many of them are still preserved in the Rijksmuseum Volkenkunde in Leiden, the Netherlands. These flags are very diverse and colourful. They often show unique symbols and often are strangely shaped. Eight flags from the small islands of Haruku and Saparua (figure 44), south of much bigger Seram, are shown here as an example.

It is speculated that the flag of Oma on Haruku was inspired by the flag of Portugal with its armillary sphere. Portuguese ships were the first from the west to visit these parts. However, the armillary sphere only came into use on Portuguese flags in the 19th century.

The flag of Wasu on Haruku had the unique pattern of a decorated box made locally out of pandan-leaves.



Figure 44 The islands of Haruku and Saparua



Figure 45
The flag of Oma on Haruku

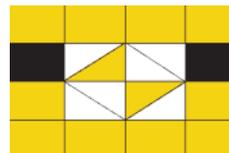


Figure 46
The flag of Wasu on Haruku



Figure 47
The flag of Ouw on Saparua



Figure 48
The flag of Kariu on Haruku



Figure 49
The flag of Porto on Saparua



Figure 50
The flag of Paperu on Saparua



Figure 51
The flag of Haria on Saparua

The crosses on the flag of Ouw (figure 47) on Saparua are abstractions of stars.

It is said that the lion on the flag of Haria on Saparua (figure 51) is not the Dutch lion. This can be seriously doubted, as next to the sword this lion has the bundle of arrows in its other front paw, unique for the coats-of-arms of the republic and later the kingdom of the Netherlands.

13. Conclusion: the future

The flags dealt with in this article form only the tip of the iceberg. There were many more flags and much research has yet to be done to survey these. Much information, like records and flagcharts, still languishes in libraries and museum archives. Vexillologists from the Netherlands and Indonesia should work together in the future to piece together this common part of their histories: from the Netherlands because most source material is to be found there and is often written in Dutch, and from Indonesia because these flags are part of their cultural heritage and Indonesians as no other will be able to interpret their traditional symbols. A very promising start has been made by Dutch heraldist Hubert de Vries, who on his website (3) not only discusses the devices of the princely states but also their flags.

Furthermore, what should be done is:

- preservation of these flags, in the Netherlands and in Indonesia;
- general analysis of the symbols and colours;
- determination of unknown symbols;
- mapping the exact territories of the princely states; this is already far advanced with Robert Cribb's Digital Atlas of Indonesian History (1);
- defining the exact nature of the relationship of each princely state with the Dutch authorities in colonial times;
- finding out when and why princely states ceased to exist;
- for states with more than one flag: determining the person or group of people to which each flag belonged, or which use or function it had;
- gather information from the Indonesian nobility themselves, as many who live in Indonesia or the Netherlands still wear their titles.

Notes

(1) From Robert Cribb, *Digital Atlas of Indonesian History* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2010), reproduced with permission

(2) D. Rühl, *Vlaggen van den Oost-Indischen archipel (1600-1942)*, Jaarboek van het Centraal Bureau voor Genealogie, The Hague, 1952

(3) pictures of these flags in the collection of the Rijksmuseum Volkenkunde can be found on www.volkenkunde.nl/collections by searching with *vlag* and *Indonesië*

(4) www.hubert-herald.nl by Hubert de Vries

Biography



Marcel van Westerhoven was born in Haarlem, the Netherlands, in 1966.

After his university education in chemistry and additional education in environmental science, he went on to work for a company that gives advice on sustainable development. His fields of expertise, currently as senior consultant, are materials and waste management, environmental impact assessment and Corporate Social Responsibility.

He is secretary of the Nederlandse Vereniging voor Vlaggenkunde (NVvV, Netherlands vexillological association) and board member of the Stichting Vlaggenmuseum Nederland (Netherlands flag museum foundation). He was also a member of the foundation that was responsible for the organization of the 25th International Congress of Vexillology in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, in 2013.

A member of the NVvV since 1990, he has been editor of *Vexilla Nostra*, the periodical of the NVvV, since 1995. For the successor of *Vexilla Nostra* since 2008, *Vlag!* magazine, he is the editor responsible for the vexillological content. To both *Vexilla Nostra* and *Vlag!* he has contributed many articles on Dutch municipal flags, his field of expertise.

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