

## THE REAL AND THE IDEAL IN VEXILLOLOGY

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It is a reflection of the fact that vexillology has only recently received serious attention from scholars <sup>1)</sup> that we do not yet have an adequate conceptual framework for organizing data on flags. As the amount of information rapidly increases under the impetus of cooperation between vexillologists in all parts of the world, it becomes more and more important for us to ask - and answer - certain fundamental questions. The function of this lecture is to contribute in some small part to the beginning of such a dialogue.

There are many questions that could be asked which have not received sufficient attention. What is the nature of vexillology? Is it an art or a science or perhaps only a hobby? Can we proceed from description to categorization and analysis? What relation does our subject have to other fields and in particular to academic disciplines? Is vexillology a sub-division of heraldry or vice-versa? All these points urgently require attention.<sup>2)</sup> and it is a hopeful sign that the new International Federation of Vexillological Associations is to establish a Terminology Committee.

Our quest must not end here, however. We can also ask what is a flag? Is cloth an essential characteristic of flags? Are religious and commercial and political "banners" part of our scope of interest? Is a flag determined by form or function or both? Can the wooden pole of the primitive, bearing at the top the skin of a totemic animal or a flower or other emblem, be considered a flag? Can the painted representation of a flag on the tail of an airplane be considered a flag? And what of a picture of a flag? (In the United States the concern for flag desecration raises these points to practical judicial questions.)

Rather than outline the tentative answers which have formulated to some of these queries, today I should like to focus on one particular aspect of the "problem of vexillology", namely the question "What is it we wish to know when we seek to determine the design of a particular flag?". This is a practical subject for the many of us who keep files or notebooks of one kind or another in which data are recorded, although in the end the suggestions I am submitting to you - and in particular the distinctions I wish to make between the real and the ideal flag and between state and national flags - are only very tentative hypotheses dealing

with a small part of the field.

The problem which can be formulated generally in the question "What is the flag of X?" may be answered on a number of levels. Leaving aside for the moment the individual whose only interest is in a collection of well-painted pictures which can be displayed in an album without any regard for their history or symbolism, we are confronted with the very real perplexity of those who want to find out about a certain flag. Part of the confusion, I submit, arises from the uncoordinated involvement in flags and flag-usage of four distinct groups of people. The process usually begins when a group of legislators or other officials decides to create a flag. Very rarely do such people have any experience in the matter or any real knowledge of such questions as proportions, visibility, the laws of heraldic design, colorfastness, and similar essential points. What they create, therefore, is frequently an ideal flag, that is one conceived in the mind and perhaps described in words, but not actually made in cloth.

The next step is for a person or manufacturer to make an actual flag (drapeau en matière) for display or hoisting. In this process the most important considerations are likely to be difficulty of manufacture, availability of materials (paint, certain shades of cloth, etc.), and of course expense. In this process little or no attention may be paid to the ideal flag as conceived by the flag-designer and codified into law. In the extreme case a wholly new flag may be created! <sup>3)</sup> The same situation arises when we examine flags as they are actually flown by individuals and institutions. In too many cases there is greater concern for the cost of the flag or for the decorative effect it makes than for its accuracy. In many instances the use of an actual design will be so extensive that the correct ideal pattern will be forgotten and flag-buyers will even insist on the form of the flag which is familiar, even though in error <sup>4)</sup>.

Finally, we have a fourth group, the vexillologists, whose concern tends to be with ideal rather than actual flags. Here, however, the ideal may not be the idea of the flag-designer, but the idea of a fellow-vexillologist. That is, too frequently we acquire conceptions of flags which are based on pictures or descriptions found in certain books and it requires much argument and publicity to alter these conceptions. Thus the erroneous pictures of the flags of Annam <sup>5)</sup> and New England <sup>6)</sup> have been copied so often, the correct designs are almost unknown. These are cases of simple errors; but often the ideal flag shown by the vexillologist is based on the ideal pattern of the designer, as interpreted or reconstructed by the vexillologist. Here it would be useful to have an actual flag (correctly made, of course) to go by; but this may be unavailable. Thus we have the reconstructed flags of Cochin China <sup>7)</sup>, the Vikings <sup>8)</sup>, and Mongolia <sup>9)</sup>, which are obviously in error

because the author of a particular book could not resist the temptation to illustrate a flag for which he lacked a model. To make matters worse, the source material relied upon is often imperfect. Sr. Ávendafño has pointed out the varieties of "first-hand reports" on the Yemen flag <sup>10)</sup> and the typographical error which transformed the cloves on the Zanzibari flag into doves <sup>11)</sup>!

Closely related to the concept of real and ideal flags is the distinction between de jure and de facto flags. Quite simply; the former is the flag as defined by law, the latter is the flag as actually flown. Haiti provides a good example: officially, the national flag since 1964 has been a vertical bicolor of black and red, whereas in fact a picture of President Duvalier is frequently printed or painted in the center. In this case vexillologists have ignored (perhaps from lack of knowledge) an actual flag. Elsewhere the de facto flag - or flags, since uniformity may be absent - is shown rather than the de jure design. Examples of this are the first New Zealand flag which is shown with white fimbriations instead of black <sup>12)</sup>, the Illinois and Colorado flags <sup>13)</sup>, and the United Kingdom flag <sup>14)</sup>.

The errors found in flag books may be traced in some cases to the preconceptions of the author; he creates a world in his mind which he and others come to believe in - as in Jorge Luis Borges' short story Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius. For example, living in an age of nationalism, we assume that every nation has a national flag, whereas in fact many do not (including the United Kingdom, Canada before 1965, Singapore, and the Soviet Union). We assume that the wind blows a flag from left to right, whereas the Arabs assume the opposite (since our respective languages are written in these directions): the result is that the sword on the Saudi flag was shown pointing in the wrong direction in many books. We assume that the "royal standard" is a personal flag of a monarch - forgetting that in Britain its use was restricted to times and places where the Sovereign is present only under Edward VII - and therefore fail to note that the real usage of the royal standard in Afghanistan is not by the King, but by his subjects, as a symbol of their loyalty to him. We are similarly blinded to the importance of irrelevancy of such points as flag accessories (cravate, truck, pole-colors, fringe), color shades and proportions, the situations in which official explanations of symbolism conflict with traditional ideas. Since our subject is international, our outlook must be as well, difficult as this may be. Of course, no matter how conscientious we are, there will always be difficulties and mistakes. What can the researcher do when he receives two letters, each from a high government official, one insisting that a new flag is being adopted, the other protesting that no change will occur <sup>15)</sup>? Or what conclusion can be reached when actual photographs of flags from Bhutan show major variations of the design? Here we must reserve judgment, all the while carefully collecting and annotating our information for some future solution.

One serious problem facing vexillology relates to the framework within which are data is organized. Both from the standpoint of understanding the material one has collected and from the standpoint of presenting it to the public in a meaningful form, it is essential that our categories correspond to reality and not some ideal typology. As a working hypothesis, I should like to propose that function (within a social context) be accepted as the criterion for our organization. Thus we can distinguish between flags essentially serving as signals (e. g. of quarantine), as advertisements, as embodiments of group history and aspirations; and for other purposes. Then a further break-down is possible in terms of the unit or units being represented: there are flags of political entities (nations, provinces), of public corporations (the armed forces, a ministry of transport), of private corporations (a church, a business firm), of associations (from the United Nations to the Boy Scouts), and of private persons. The area of principal interest to most vexillologists is the first category and it thus seems most valuable to pay further attention to this.

In most flag books and charts the flags shown are given labels ("national flag", "merchant flag", "ensign") which evince an awareness of different functions. Unfortunately, these terms have never been carefully defined and much confusion exists; the German Kriegsflagge, for example, is not the same as the English ensign or Spanish bandera nacional, although the three terms in certain circumstances may properly refer to the same flag. Even in one language the obscurity is apparent: national flag may suggest the flag flown by private citizens, the flag which represents the nation to outsiders, the proper colors for a merchant vessel, the flag recognized by law as the "flag of X", the flag flown on public buildings, or the flag flown by a group claiming to speak as the authentic voice of the nation.

In order to clarify the situation and establish significant categories, I would like to borrow from the terminology of political science and propose six terms for standard usage. There are three principal functional types of usage - public, private and military - which a flag which represents a political and geographical region can have. (For the moment, in other words, we are not concerned with flags representing less than a whole territory, e.g. the personal standard of a military officer, a yacht club pennant, a regimental color.) There are also two principal areas of usage, land and sea. Combining these we can distinguish between the:

1. National Flag On Land (flown by private citizens);
2. National Flag At Sea (flown by merchant vessels and yachts);
3. State Flag On Land (flown on public buildings);
4. State Flag At Sea (flown on public vessels except warships);

5. War Flag On Land (flown on arsenals, forts, encampments etc.);
6. War Flag At Sea (flown on warships).

There may be from one to six of these functions fulfilled by a single design, but this varies from country to country. (No country or sub-national unit, so far as I have been able to determine, has a different flag for all six functions. Johore has five different flags, the same design serving as National Flag At Sea and On Land. The Colony of Aden almost qualified as a six-flag state. The de facto National Flag On Land was a red-white-black horizontal tricolor; at sea the British Red Ensign was used. The State Flag On Land was the blue-white with green star and blue flag with a red trapezium; at sea the British Blue Ensign with the Aden badge flew. Aden had no military forces of its own, but the Union Jack flew over forts and the White Ensign was hoisted on armed ships at sea serving at Aden.) In the United States and some other countries a single flag serves all purposes, except that certain U.S. yachts have a special National Flag At Sea.

Ideally, the day will come when the vexillologists of the world have reached agreement on such points as I have raised. Wording of flag descriptions will be standardized to eliminate possible misunderstandings; careful note will be taken of all the flags in use in a particular country and of the niceties of form and function of each; the manner of presentation of information on any given flag will be clear. It is probably too much to hope that the gulfs that separate the flag-designer, flag-manufacturer, flag-user, and flag-historian can ever be completely filled in: but if we, as scholars and crusaders in our own realm, can accomplish the above program, a rapprochement between the real and the ideal in vexillology will be well begun. While recognizing their tentative nature, I trust that the specific proposals and insights made here will be of some value in reaching that goal.

#### NOTES

- 1) Cf. Georges Pasch, Les croix sur les drapeaux (Paris: Duminet-Languissant, 1965), and the review of the same by P. C. Lux-Wurm in The flag bulletin, VI, No. 1 (1967), pp. 66-67.
- 2) Some of them are dealt with in my doctoral dissertation, Prolegomena to the study of political symbolism (to be published soon).
- 3) For example the city flag of Columbus, Ohio, is described by law as being blue with the city arms whereas in fact the arms appear on a vertical tricolor of red, white and blue.
- 4) For example, the flag of the Orange Free State which had eight stripes rather than the seven commonly shown.
- 5) Cf. Charles Romme, Dictionnaire de la marine française (Paris: Bachelier,

- 1833), plate H.
- 6) (Carel Allard), Algemeene en verbeterde hollantsche scheepsbouw ... (Amsterdam: Oostervijk, 1716), plate 34.
  - 7) Ibid, plate 78.
  - 8) "Our flag number", National geographic magazine, XXXII, No. 4 (1917), p. 338.
  - 9) Album de banderas y escudos de todo el mundo (Barcelona: Fher, n. d.) p. 15.
  - 10) Cf. The flag bulletin, II, No. 3 (1963), p. 33.
  - 11) The daily express (London), 7 November 1963.
  - 12) Cf. W. A. Glue, The New Zealand ensign (Wellington: Dept. of Internal Affairs, 1965).
  - 13) Details will be published in my Flag book of the United States (New York: Morrow, 1969).
  - 14) The proportions laid down in 1800 for the Unión Jack were 39 : 58; today 1 : 2 is almost universal, albeit without the sanction of the College of Arms.
  - 15) The case in point is Dominica.
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