

IMPERIAL BANNERS? POST-COLONIAL RELATIONSHIPS ON THE FLAGPOLE

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ABSTRACT: *This research was conducted to examine trends in the flags of post-colonial nations around the world, grouping them by the empire to which they belonged. A flag is the preeminent symbol of a nation, typically representing a country's most important values. As empires broke up, dozens of new countries struggled to find and establish common identities. As expected, countries that went through similar colonial experiences produced flags with similar values, reflecting their history with imperialism. This research compiled data of what was represented on the national flag of every former colonial country and tallied how many from each empire (Portuguese, Spanish, French, and British) included certain values or ideas. The resulting information showed that the institution of independence was much more prominent in Portuguese and Spanish countries than it was in French and British countries, caused by greater struggles during their colonial period. This project reveals how flags can be used collectively as a powerful tool to analyze geographic and historical trends, using national symbols as a point of comparison between countries across the globe.*

Keywords: *Flags, vexillology, colonialism, identity*

INTRODUCTION

Flags are strongly connected to the concepts of patriotism and national identity, and as such they reveal a lot about who they represent. Like any symbol, they are dynamic over time, depicting only a snippet of a people's values and how they define their country. However, their strong presence on both the national and international scales means that flags must be the best representation of their people as possible (at least ideally). Therefore, understanding the vexillology of independent state flags can reveal quite a bit about a country's identity, and flags are common symbols that can be assessed all across the world. While some countries have flown the same flags for centuries, other states are much newer and thus have more recent symbolism. Post-colonial countries are prime examples of states that have defined their own symbolism after gaining independence, and their flags may be a window into how they view themselves and the world around them. European empires dissolved over a matter of centuries for a myriad of reasons across the world, involving countless different cultural groups and leaders. Of course, no country has had the exact same history or experiences. However, former colonies (as defined in this paper) all share the same status of having been controlled by an often-distant European power that viewed them more as an asset than a separate people group with its own agency. Despite the wide array of circumstances affecting former colonies, imperialism has had an important and lasting impact on all of them. Colonialism is ultimately a geographic endeavor: nations aim to control as much territory as possible and extend their influence wherever around the globe they can. The system creates patterns between seemingly unrelated areas across continents and oceans, and the human geography influenced by empires lives on through time into the modern era. This paper will explore patterns in the flags of countries around the world that were formerly parts of select European empires through the late 20th century.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

There are four major sectors of vexillological writing: individual flag analyses, studies in flag usage, databases and reference works, and geography in flags. Each level provides completely different information and views on the topic of flags, using the subject in different ways to assess societies and cultures.

Analysis of individual flags is a common theme in vexillology. The flag of the Confederate States of America is perhaps the most striking example as modern debate focuses on the history of memory and symbolism; significant amounts of articles and books examine the flag's use, arguing whether it can be used as a facet of regional pride or merely a symbol of racism (Leib and Webster, 2007). These discussions are prevalent with other flags as well; scholars typically look at how a flag is used to determine what it means to its people. The Protestants of Northern Ireland, for example, use loyalist flags mostly just to mark territory as Unionist, as their culture does not

place the same intrinsic value in their banners as, say, Americans do (Jarman, 2007). The nationalistic implication of flags thus varies from country to country as well. The national flag in the US is flown so often and without notice that the patriotism it evokes is often taken for granted, as it is such a mainstay of the American landscape (Billig, 1995). In Sweden, on the other hand, the national flag was for a long time used mainly as a racist symbol, far removed from the celebratory national pride evoked by the American flag; Swedes have different conceptions of nationalism, and that is seen in how they use their state banner (Lofgren, 2007). There is no overarching way that flags are interpreted or used around the world, but they almost always include important symbols of their country.

What these studies do not typically include, however, is an analysis of the actual vexillological symbolism present on individual flags. This sort of information is detailed in many reference works, which explain what the colors and images on a country's flag represent. There is no shortage of works describing flags, which range from the CIA's broad World Factbook to Smith's (1975) tome detailing the symbolism, history, and context of countless flags around the world in great depth. While these works rarely discuss how nations view their flags and their symbolism, they provide a strong background and explanation of their imagery.

From these explanations, it is possible to create datasets organizing the world's flags by factors such as color, type, and other characteristics. Morales-Ramirez's (2015) study addresses this approach with all the national flags of the world, but it did not attempt to group them by history or compare them much between each other. This study is one of the most interesting broad analyses of the geography of flags. It sought to explain how flags can be used to teach geography by highlighting the semiology, the study and interpretation of symbols, they present. A flag that has a depiction of a physical water feature, for example, can help students visualize that feature within the country (The Gambia's use of a blue stripe on its flag, for instance, symbolizes the Gambia river, the country's defining physical feature) (Morales-Ramirez, 2015). Morales-Ramirez (2015) focuses mostly on the educational benefits of geography in flags, but does include a section on comparative analysis, grouping country flags by continent and graphing how many use each color, revealing trends across regions of the world. A similar study by Kaye (2009) investigates specifically flags with maps on them, taken from a wide source of countries, subdivisions, and organizations from around the world; the researcher interestingly concludes, among other things, that North American flags account for about half of the world's flags depicting maps. What both of these studies mention, but do not investigate in any depth, is different flags' relationships to and history with each other. Research like these projects tends to see the world of flags as the sum of its parts, rather than the community of symbols as a whole.

Noticeably lacking from geographical flag analysis is much about the post-colonial world. There is not much discussion of the flags of African countries, despite their vast numbers and the enormous populations living under them. In Eriksen's (2015) edited collection of essays on flags, he acknowledged that the studies contained within his volume examine only a very small region of Europe and America, ignoring Africa and eastern Europe; he claims that many third-world countries have an "indifference" towards their national flag. This is not to say that eastern Europe has been completely neglected: Matjunin (2000) found that the flags of former Soviet states represented a wide range of cultures and peoples with their symbols. Other places around the world, however, are generally neglected or altogether omitted from intensive vexillological discussion.

A study that grouped flags by former colonial power, in addition to continental location, could shed light into the lasting impact of colonial rule on foreign nations' cultures. A major criticism of imperialism is the artificial state boundaries superimposed upon maps as European powers gave up their overseas empires, creating effectively nationless states (Hyde, 2016). These countries were still able to decide upon their own unique flag design to represent their people, and the symbols chosen under such circumstances are worth investigating. Geography has proven to play a major role in vexillology, from religious icons to physical landscapes, and it is likely that the post-colonial world is no exception to this trend. Given their history of colonialism, it is possible that common themes permeate through the different cultures under the same empires, and these ideas may be reflected in national flags.

DATA & METHODS

This research included both qualitative and quantitative methods. Together, these two types of data revealed trends within the flags of former empires. Detailed below are the specifics of the methodology and data collected.

Qualitatively, the research sought to determine what was represented on individual flags. While of course many flags share similar colors and symbols, they do not bear the same meaning in every case. Overall layout of a flag's design can also convey a message, such as a tricolor, and must also be individually analyzed to determine meaning. The first step of the project was thus to compile a database of each country's symbology.

To collect data, an attempt was made to find the most trustworthy, objective sources. Wherever possible, flag descriptions were taken from official government websites, found by searching "government website [country]"

flag.” This ensured that the recorded symbology on each flag matched its original meaning, or the meaning that its people associate it with, most directly. When a government website was unavailable or insufficient, the research relied on the CIA World Factbook, which includes brief, straightforward descriptions of every national flag. Though not as official as the home country’s government, the CIA is certainly a reputable source representing the American government, and likely has the next best information available. The CIA factbook was also cross-checked against those government websites that could be used, to ensure that the information was consistent. If the CIA provided different information, it was included in the report as well, listed after the home government’s description. Data was compiled for both official explanations of flags, as well as popular interpretations of what colors and symbols mean to the people of that country. Seven former Portuguese countries, 21 former Spanish countries, 27 former French countries, and 62 former British countries were analyzed in this project. Of these, government websites were found for three Portuguese countries, five Spanish countries, six French countries, and 36 British countries.

Countries were included, as depicted in Figure 1, if they achieved independence directly from their colonizer or were significantly influenced by their colonizer throughout history. The Philippines, for example, achieved independence from the United States, but were colonized longer and more significantly by Spain, and thus were included as a Spanish country. Belgium and Luxembourg, on the other hand, were at one point owned by Spain, but over time passed to Austria and then to the Netherlands, from whom they ultimately gained their independence; therefore, these two countries were not included under Spain. The British and French mandates in the Middle East following World War I were considered colonies and thus included in the research, as they were under foreign rule and had to earn their independence. Belgium, the Netherlands, and the United States, though also important imperial powers, were not included in this study due to the small amount of countries they would have represented (each of the three fully controlled fewer modern countries than Portugal). Germany was excluded as well, as they were a power for only a short time and passed their colonies mostly on to the British and French, who held a stronger influence. Only fully independent modern countries were included, in order to avoid oversaturating the data with the myriad of current overseas territories and smaller elements of modern countries. Macau, for example, though notably controlled by Portugal, is not a separate country (despite its status as a Special Administrative Region in China), and thus did not contribute to the overall data.

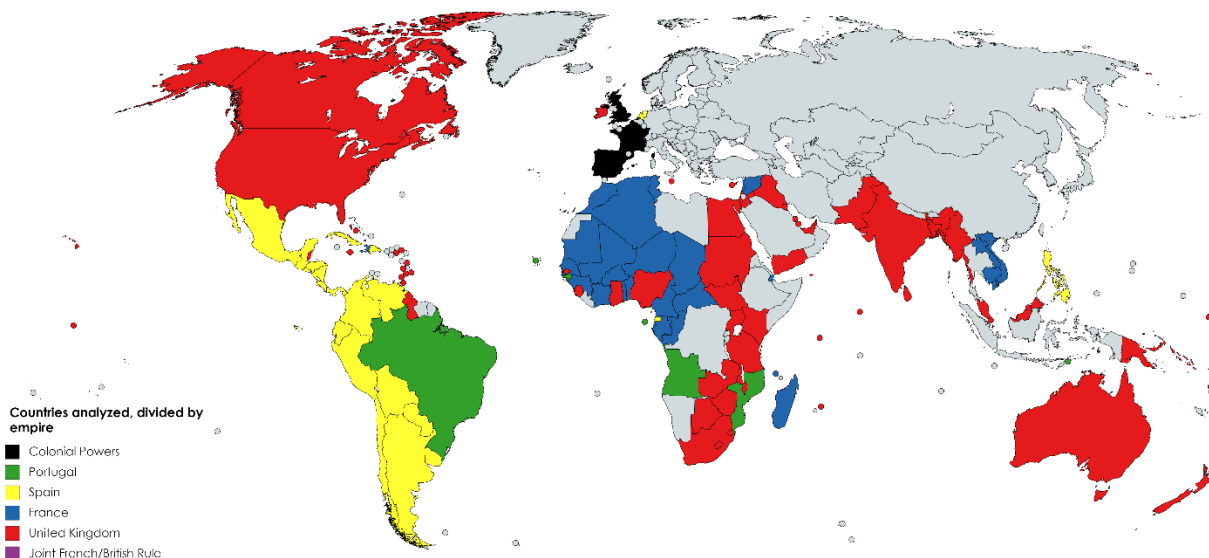


Figure 1: Countries of flags analyzed, divided by empire.

A spreadsheet was used to quantitatively compile the data. Each colonial empire had a different sheet, with the colonizing power’s information listed at the top, and the former colonies listed alphabetically from top to bottom. From left to right was listed the country name, and image of its flag, the region of the world it inhabits, whether or not the country was in conflict to achieve independence, the flag’s colors and their meaning, any symbols and their meaning, and additional notes about the flags design or history. Once compiled in the spreadsheet, the data

could be viewed collectively to examine trends within former empires, regions, and methods of independence. Displaying the imperial power’s flag at the top of each list also allowed comparisons with the former empire itself, both stylistically and in terms of meaning.

Representation of ten elements or ideas on flags were quantified: symbols of the country’s colonizer or anything from western history or culture, the idea of independence (anything relating to the country’s sovereignty), symbols of the indigenous population (any non-European cultural icon), and sacrifice or struggle were the main elements examined in the research. Ideas of internationalism (the country’s relation to other nations around the world), nature, peace, religion, the country’s constituency, and unity. Western history, independence, indigenous symbols, and struggle were chosen in order to analyze countries’ relationships with their former colonizer and how countries have defined their national identity using their history and culture. The other ideas were chosen as they are fairly common throughout world flags, and thus were a simple trend to examine. From the original data, the number of flags that portrayed each of these concepts was tallied by empire. The colors used on each flag were similarly tallied and compiled by empire. Additionally, the number of countries that went through a conflict associated with their independence was also compiled. Each flag’s data were accounted for from the overall spreadsheet individually to accommodate different wording of similar ideas, specific symbols, and collective meanings of flags. The “independence” category, for example, included all flags that referenced the independence of their country specifically; this often manifested itself in the color red representing the “blood of those who fought for national freedom,” but also included more specific instances, such as Brazil’s inclusion of the constellation visible at the time of their declaration of independence. Once there was a number count of each category by empire, the data were converted to percentages to show the proportion of each imperial power’s former countries that display certain ideas and colors on their flag.

RESULTS

The results of this research are displayed Table 1 by percentage of countries within an empire displaying each category. Many categories of ideas were fairly similar between empires, but there were a few percentages that differed substantially. There was significant variance in the proportion of countries that placed the fact of their independence on their flag. The former British empire had the lowest representation of independence with only 32% of former colonies including it, compared to 56% of French and 76% of Spanish colonies, while 100% of Portuguese countries celebrated independence on their flag. These percentages follow the relative pattern of independence conflicts by empire; 11% of British colonies fought for independence, as did 22% of French, 67% of Spanish, and 57% of Portuguese countries. Spain’s empire had the fewest accounts of indigenous or pre-colonization symbols on their flags, at only 10%, compared to France’s high of 78%. Experiences of sacrifice or struggle were most common in Portugal’s empire at 86% of countries, while the United Kingdom held the low at only 27%. The idea of peace was included in only 26% of both British and French flags, but was more prevalent in Spain’s and Portugal’s former colonies, at 38% and 43% respectively.

Table 1. Percentages of flags within each empire representing selected ideas.

Concepts	Portugal (7)	Spain (21)	France (27)	United Kingdom (62)
Colonizer/Western History	29%	19%	15%	26%
Constituency	43%	19%	11%	16%
Independence	100%	76%	56%	32%
Indigenes (Non-Europe)	43%	10%	78%	53%
Internationalism	43%	29%	44%	23%
Nature	71%	57%	59%	61%
Peace	43%	38%	26%	26%
Religion	0%	0%	30%	18%
Sacrifice/Struggle	86%	48%	52%	27%
Unity	0%	5%	33%	27%

Direct references between the flags of imperial powers and their former colonies were not exceedingly common. Brazil was the only Portuguese country to draw even a vague connection to its former colonizer; its colors derive from those of the houses of the original Empire of Brazil, marking them as a vestige of old European nobility. No Spanish country appears to have drawn influence from Spain's flag or symbolism. In fact, two countries' flags were inspired by the United States, in direct opposition to their Spanish history. French countries included four pure tricolors, ostensibly inspired by that of France itself. Additionally, Haiti's flag intentionally mimics part of the French flag as an interesting means of separating itself from Europe. Four British countries include the entire Union Jack in the canton of their flag (similar to the UK's modern overseas territories), making them the most obvious connections between former colony and imperial power. Canada and South Africa both also explicitly drew all or some of their colors from those of their colonizers; the red and white of Canada's flag represent England and France, respectively, while the red, white, and blue on South Africa's flag represent both the United Kingdom and the Netherlands.

DISCUSSION/CONCLUSIONS

As national symbols, these flags and the data extrapolated from them suggest several key points about state identity trends within former empires. If countries with similar colonial overlords share trends of symbolism, either by official explanation or popular interpretation, their shared imperial experience likely established common identities among the people as subjects of their former empires.

One of the most striking discoveries was the varying prevalence of references to independence on national flags. Having national sovereignty as an explicit point on a flag suggests that it is an absolutely integral part of the national identity. While independence is of course crucial to any country, including it on a flag suggests that it is not taken for granted in that country. By not including sovereignty on a flag, a country may yet have a strong enough national identity in other areas that they can stand out against their colonial history without emphasizing their new independence and nationhood. If a country struggles to stand out on their own in the international stage, or is disunited within its own borders, the idea of independence may be the state's most important institution.

The inclusion of independence on flags was most prominent in the Portuguese empire, followed by those of Spain, France, and finally the United Kingdom. With every single Portuguese country celebrating its sovereignty on its flag, one can infer that the empire's colonial history is incredibly important to its former subjects. This may indicate that perhaps Portugal's reign was abnormally harsh or controlling, or that they held on to their overseas possessions for such a long time (most of their colonies did not break away until 1975) that their status of independence is completely unprecedented in the modern world and thus worthy of celebration more than countries with shorter periods of colonization. Spain's colonies also understandably reference their independence, considering that they had the most violent separations, with two thirds of their empire earning independence through conflict. A country forged in blood is more likely to commemorate its sovereignty to honor the sacrifices of its forebears and the magnitude of their triumph over a more powerful foe. Even Argentina, which itself has become a significant power since breaking away from Spain, still represents a key moment of their path to independence on their flag: the sun refers to an independence rally in the early 19th century during which sunshine notably shown through the clouds (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Flags of Argentina, Haiti, eSwatini, and Mozambique.

This trend is contrasted with the flags of French and British colonies, which had much lower instances of independence representation. With some key exceptions (according to legend, Haiti's flag, shown in Figure 2, mimics the French tricolor but without the white center to symbolize the removal of the white man from their country), the empires of the United Kingdom and France are more well known for dissolving diplomatically rather than through war or conflict. The period of decolonization following World War II saw British and French

politicians encouraging autonomy and sovereignty, ultimately giving in to independence movements around the world. Without having to sacrifice lives for their freedom, many countries may have placed their values elsewhere within their nation. The fact of their independence simply does not play as important a role in their identity, as its price was not paid in blood. This allows former French and British countries to focus on more traditional or unique aspects of their nationhood, forging an identity on their flag that represents their people and country beyond its mere existence. One way this trend manifests itself is in the inclusion of religious icons and indigenous influences on flags. Where the Portuguese and Spanish empires tended to leave such cultural symbols off their flags, French and British countries had higher rates of religious symbolism, most often in predominantly Muslim countries, as well as influences of pre-European society, such as the crescent on the flags of Comoros, Maldives, and Brunei (Figure 3). Some countries include unique cultural icons, like eSwatini's use of its traditional spears and shield (Figure 2), which are instantly recognizable as a southern African set of weapons. Strong national identities that can be defined by a country's own history or culture do not need to rely on their independence as a point of pride on their flag, as their society has already proven itself before fighting for or receiving sovereignty.

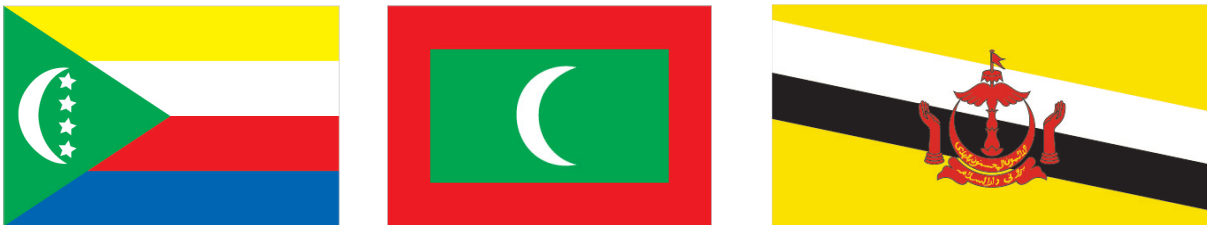


Figure 3. Flags of Comoros, Maldives, and Brunei.

Interestingly, the idea of peace was represented more often in Portuguese and Spanish colonies than on French and British ones. Again, this may be reference to their harsh colonial past and violent breaks from imperialism. While countries want to remember their blood and sacrifices for independence in order to honor those who gave their lives, they of course would not desire war any more than is necessary. A nation that struggled through cruel imperialist oppression or fought through a bloody conflict in order to exist knows violence all too well, and can be expected to know the value of peace in their country. Coupling peaceful ideas and violence in the same flag, such as that of Mozambique (Figure 2), in which red represents the struggle for independence and white peace, provides an interesting dichotomy of national identity. Many post-colonial countries had the problem of forming a nation around artificially drawn boundaries, and reached for the common experience to which its citizens could relate. If nothing else, such a country is united in the fact that it went through struggles under its colonizers and on the road to freedom, and are hopeful for a vibrant, peaceful future. This memory is easy to harness into a national identity, and makes for a compelling flag that everyone in the nation can relate to and support.

Overall, there was little relation directly to colonizing countries themselves. With the obvious exceptions of Commonwealth realms that include the Union Jack, and occasional tricolors in Africa, there were few overt references to a colony's former overlord. Some countries had specific hostile references to their former ruler (e.g. Haiti's symbolism of the end of white French control, Egypt's reference to the end of British oppression, and the Netherlands' celebration of the revolt against Spain), but most specific references were less aggressive. In general, colonial history on flags was kept broad or vague, allowing a single country to blend in with the general experience of imperialism, rather than with a specific empire's legacy. Without overt symbolism, specific colonial heritage can only be discerned by trends within empires when flags are compared; especially bloody empires yield especially bloody post-colonial flags. At the same time, any explicit, nonnegative reference to a colonizing power suggests a powerful continuing relationship between the two countries.

This research attempts to use vexillology to analyze the legacy of empires today through flags. Vexillology used in this nature is by no means a perfect method for studying the world, and patterns are certainly not perfect. But flags can be used to augment other types of study, when used in conjunction with an expanded geographic or historical study, vexillology can be quite revealing. Collecting dozens of flags together to create statistical data reveals trends in desired areas of interest, providing larger implications of colonialism's effects today than a single country's story. While this method may overlook specific accounts or important individual experiences, it delivers a useful view of the bigger picture, providing insight into how countries around the world have handled and identify with their colonial past. Every flag is unique, both in meaning and presentation, and every nation should be proud to

fly their own. The impacts of colonialism are still felt globally today, and of course play a significant role in many peoples' national identities, as well as basic international relations. Understanding how post-colonial countries celebrate their history and culture on the flagpole can speak volumes as to their relationship with and memory of their former empire and colonial ruler.

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