

Micronesian Flag Cultures: An Exercise in Comparative Vexillology

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Vexillology has barely begun to develop in research and analysis areas where it could have the most impact. For example, far too little exploratory work has been done in the area of comparative vexillology, across societies or subcultures, for the purpose of identifying or predicting parallels or rhythms in human behavior. Understanding how and why different societies use flags the way they do can help us recognize and perhaps respond to aspects of cultural change, ranging from the slight to the monumental. That is, shifts in flag use, once better understood, might possibly be read as symptomatic of recognizable economic, political, philosophical, and social changes, so thorough and knowledgeable input from vexillology could very well benefit those working in other social sciences. Also, for its own health and viability as an intellectual movement, practitioners of vexillology should be establishing and sustaining discourse with those working in such fields as anthropology, psychology, history, semiotics, culture studies, and communications studies, specifically in those topic areas where flag usage in human activity is a shared concern. Comparative vexillology could help foster more such cross-disciplinary conversations, by virtue of the cultural journeys into new political and social systems it requires for the investigating vexillologist.

We might look to some excellent (but so far underutilized) studies as suggesting ways comparative vexillology could meaningfully develop in

the future. Ron Hassner's *God for Harry! England and Saint George!* offers a paradigm based on the theories of two early fathers of sociology, Weber and Durkheim, and provides a context for a more specific comparing and contrasting of the development and evolution of flag culture across the wide range of European states.¹ William Crampton's doctoral thesis, "Flags as Non-Verbal Symbols in the Management of National Identity", needs to be published and circulated, as its probing of the method and success of Nazi use of flags and symbols in the rise of Hitler's Germany could be the foundation for further comparative vexillological analysis of effective flag use in different fascist states.² Robert F. Bonner's *Colors of Blood* does a wonderful job of delineating how reflecting upon shared and varied flag culture perceptions of two sides in a civil war (in this case, that of the United States) can point us to core and significant ideological and hegemonic distinctions, and become a model applied to other civil wars throughout the world.³ And in his epic *Quo Vadimus*, when Peter Orenski hypothesizes that the "elitist sway of heraldic tradition appears to be a key element in explaining the limited participation of individual citizens in the vexillographic life of their communities",⁴ he specifically calls for more cross-cultural comparative work on municipal flags in Scotland, Ireland, Slovakia, Japan, Zimbabwe, and South Africa. I commend these four masters in flag studies. They give us four very different approaches to develop comparative vexillology, yet each shows great promise as a model for future work that would enhance our discipline.

I would like to suggest a far more modest exercise—let us reflect upon the significance of flags within the broader context of an emergent civil religion within the political cultures of three different but adjacent political entities of the northern Pacific, among island peoples scattered between Hawaii and the Philippines. My purpose here is not to set up a taxonomy of flag designs, but rather to initiate a discussion of the influences on the cultural similarities and differences in flag use in Guam, the Republic of Palau, and the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM). In making these rudimentary reflections, I wish to draw from three different disciplinary perspectives: 1) anthropologically, we need to be aware of the lasting influence of pre-colonial, non-flag-related indigenous methods of reinforcing group identity that compete with the flag in the hierarchies of

civil religion; 2) historically, we need to be aware of the legacy in flag culture derived from European and American colonialism; and 3) economically, we need to be aware of the current struggles to survive, and the impact economic relations with the United States and international tourism have upon flag usage. We should also keep in mind the political differences inherent in the varying statuses of colony (Guam), republic (Palau), and confederation (FSM), and look for further exploration in the future of flag practices, motifs, and references that might replicate based on these statuses with other colonies, republics, and confederations.

Social scientists have three strategies to obtain data directly from humans. The target population may be treated as subjects, as respondents, or as informants. In vexillology the latter two approaches seem the most feasible and worthwhile. In the past, working with the flag of Singapore or with the flag of the former Republic of Vietnam as it is used in California, I have drawn upon ethnographic work which treats the target population as informants,⁵ and I believe that treating our target group as informants rather than respondents can ultimately lead to deeper insights. However, as a main source of information, ethnography requires the researcher to live for an extended period of time among the group, to participate, observe, and interview with a focus upon flag interpretation and usage in the given society. For some initial work in comparative vexillology, with limited time and travel opportunities, I have chosen for this exercise to emphasize treating my target group as respondents—a cohort of students I had the opportunity to teach in Guam in the summer of 2003. After explaining some about vexillology and my purpose, I assigned them the essay topic of explaining the significance of flags on their particular islands. They were all adults completing their bachelor's degrees in communicative disorders and included citizens of Guam, Palau, and the FSM, and as they were taking two intensive, upper-level classes in a row with me, lasting all afternoon every workday for a month, I had their complete attention, and they seemed motivated to want to work with me as respondents.⁶

The general populations these respondents represented are comparatively small—Guam has 163,941 inhabitants; the FSM 108,143; Palau 19,717—and in the cases of the FSM and Palau, spread out over a range of

islands.⁷ Although my fundamental source of information for this analysis was the student essay responses, I followed this up in the month I spent in the Pacific islands to get to know and then interview other citizens (particularly of Palau and the FSM). I also supplemented this with inquiries to appropriate governmental bodies and participation in and questioning through a Micronesian listserv. Certainly more data could be retrieved from these target groups over time, but I have accumulated enough responses to help me postulate some interesting distinctions between the meaning of flags for the three island groups, and some predictions for how flag culture might proceed for them in the future.

The flags of these three entities are diverse in imagery and origin. The flag of Guam is the oldest, created by Helen L. Paul, the wife of an American naval officer; it became the official territorial flag during the heightened martial atmosphere of 1917.



Guam flag



Federated States of Micronesia flag



Palau flag

The flag of the Trust Territory in the Pacific, which the United States administered for the United Nations, was a blue field with six stars in a hexagon and was in use 1962-1978, the stars representing the different island groupings included in the territory. When the Federated States of Micronesia voted, through a constitutional convention, for independence in 1978, that earlier flag was modified, the number of stars reduced to four to represent the member island states of Chuuk, Yap, Pohnpei, and Kosrae. Palau chose to pursue independent nationhood, receiving official independence in 1994, and its national flag is a striking image of a yellow moon on a sea of blue.

Each of these entities has a distinct flag culture; these may be charted in a rudimentary comparative analysis.

Palau

When asked about the use of flags in their society, the first response from Palauans is that the use of flags is relatively new, introduced from outsiders in recent generations. That being said, a considerable range of flag uses can then be catalogued. First mentioned was always the use of flags as representing distinctive teams in sporting competitions. Tiny Palau is itself further divided into sixteen administrative regions which it calls “states”, though “villages” might better fit our understanding of such units. These communities become very supportive of their athletic teams, and the teams have their own flags, something like our use of school mascots. One Palauan described the honor of seeing his state’s sport’s flag, emblazoned with a breadfruit tree and fish, which he said represented strength. He noted that his official state flag, carried in special parade ceremonies, displays a big bowl of taro leaf with coconut milk soup, because his state is known for the best vegetable soup in Palau.

According to this respondent, the official state flag can also be found on the license plates of all motor vehicles registered in that state. Car owners pay property and road tax to the state whose flag is depicted on their license. I did not get a count of the autos in Palau, but with only 36 km of paved roads and 25 km of unpaved roads in the entire country, and two-thirds of the population living in the area of Koror, I imagine the total count of motor vehicles for some Palauan states must be rather small. Modeled on the U.S. organizational structure, each Palauan state has a governor, a legislature, and a state office—even though some of these states have fewer than 100 people!⁸

Palauans are a people dependent on the sea, so the state of emergency flag is very significant, though it performs a referential rather than hortative function. When it flies, they know that boating and fishing are permitted, but when it is pulled down, it is a signal that boating outside of the reef is forbidden. Palauans identified their national flag to me, reacted positively when I commented on its beauty, but did not single it out for

reverential praise or higher significance. They seemed much more concerned that I learned and respected what they deemed the best way to savor the chewing of the betel nut, an activity highly praised by Palauans. They have official flag protocol copied from American models, but in their everyday culture, their body politic has not evolved a civil religious hierarchy consumed by a focus upon the national banner to evoke one shared, strong communal response.

Federated States of Micronesia

Like the Palauans, the citizens of the FSM tended to describe a range of different flags to me, rather than focusing in solely upon the flag of the confederation itself. Although greater in number than Palauans, they are spread across four different major islands (three with still more subsidiary islands under their jurisdiction). A former fisherman from Pohnpei, now in his thirties, explained that the only flag use he recalled from his youth was flags as markers of sports teams representing different municipalities during competitions on the most important political holiday each year, United Nations Day. (As Pohnpei is the capital of the confederation, this would also draw in participants from the other islands.) Interestingly enough, the champion of the athletic competition was acknowledged by gaining the supreme honor of bearing the U.S. flag in the closing ceremony of the games. He noted that following federation the custom continued, but the flag of the U.S. was then replaced with the flag of the FSM.

An inhabitant of Chuuk also emphasized the use of municipal flags in sport competitions, but he noted the most significant gathering on his island was in June for Constitution Day. Also, during an annual fishing festival on Chuuk called *Umwul Samol*, an interesting tradition of gender-specific flag usage occurs. The men engage in a fishing competition, and when they return, referential flags are raised indicating how many fish are caught by different challengers. At the same time, women are competing at home preparing local dishes to be compared and judged. As the women cook, they usually fly the flags identifying their respective clans before their homes. Winning with the most fish or the best cuisine brings honor to the entire clan.

Denizens of the various islands all acknowledged the flying of government flags on civil religious holidays for their particular state constitutions, for their particular days of liberation from the Japanese in World War II, and for the shared anniversary of their group confederation. These respondents identified with their home island first and the confederation second. They also made a constant thread of references to the use of Protestant Church flags, particularly in parades and ceremonies marking the anniversary of the arrival of missionaries to the island, or on such major holidays as Christmas and Easter. It was noted that church flags were carried both at the beginning and end of processions on these occasions. The flag of the United Church of Christ flies annually for an entire week during a series of interdenominational, ecumenical, rotating church services throughout congregations across Pohnpei.

But flags are not common possessions in Micronesia. A fellow from Chuuk who wanted to get me a Chuukese flag reported that his parents had a much more difficult time tracking one down than he had expected; so after much searching, they settled upon sending me the one small FSM flag they could locate. One respondent explained “if you happen to have one, like for instance the FSM flag, people will say how lucky for you to have the flag.” (Joysleen Daniel, “Flags in Pohnpei”, author’s archives). Flags can nevertheless still have significant hortative value. One respondent, after we became friends, later told me of how her older brother had become fascinated by Greenpeace when the activists visited their island. He eventually joined the organization to help protect the oceans he so loved, and not much later died tragically working for Greenpeace in Latin America. Although the flying of flags before homes is not the custom in Pohnpei, this student’s elderly mother now keeps the flag of Greenpeace, which was shipped with the condolences of the organization, always before her home as a memorial to her lost son.

Just as I found correct chewing of a betel nut of more significance in formative Palauan identity, so would I argue that, among Micronesians, singing, dancing, and chanting still take greater precedence in establishing cultural cohesion than any sort of flag ritual or protocol.

Guam

Although given the same essay assignment as the respondents from Palau and the FSM, the Guamanians focused almost exclusively upon either the American flag, the flag of Guam, or as was most common, upon both. The only exception was to note the use of religious banners carried in the fiesta processions that are a highlight of the saint's day celebration for each of the distinctive villages of Guam.

Guam is the transportation, commercial, and globalization hub of all these Pacific islands, and given its long history under Spanish control from the end of the 1600s until 1898, it is not surprising that flag culture here shows a Spanish legacy in the use of banners by the Roman Catholic Church, a very powerful institution on the island into the 21st century. A territory of the United States for over one hundred years (although under Japanese control 1941-1944), Guam appears in many ways quintessentially American today, with evidence of the dominant U.S. culture everywhere—but scratch the surface just a bit, and many earlier social traditions, beliefs, and practices can still be found to flourish. In the area of flag obeisance, certainly influenced by the constant and strong presence of the U.S. military (always a strong conveyor of civil religion), the American flag is honored and respected as it would be in conservative towns throughout the United States. The corollary of this strong framework of tradition associated with the national flag of the colonizer is that Guam has a richer civil religion for its territorial flag than almost all the U.S. states have for their state flags. Guamanians have a pledge and a hymn to their flag, and they learn to sing the hymn in both English and in Chamorro, the indigenous language. The singing of this hymn in Chamorro, while gazing on the flag of Guam, was the most common and most discussed civil religious activity among all the respondents.

In Palau and the FSM, the earlier languages remain strong and English is still learned and spoken as a second or third language. Chamorros only make up 37% of the population of Guam today,⁹ and though there is a conscious effort to try and save the language, English has substantially subsumed it in recent generations. For a 20th-century social movement emphasizing Chamorro cultural and political identity, even though the

flag design and rituals came from the colonizer, the appropriation of civil religion around the Guam flag occurred. I would suggest much might be learned if vexillologists worked with linguists to trace connections between the loss of native languages over time in colonial settings and look for possible parallels with the rise in appropriation of flag rituals and ceremonies to help restore or revive indigenous identity. There are some interesting side avenues to explore here—for instance, when a governor of Guam involved in the Chamorro rights movement was accused, tried, and found guilty of corruption in the 1980s, he committed suicide on the day he was to report and turn himself in for prison. Casting his downfall as an imperialist attack on a national freedom movement, he literally wrapped himself in the flag of Guam, chained himself to a statue of a revered ancient Chamorro warrior leader, and then shot himself in the head while holding a placard that read “I regret that I have only one life to give to my island.”¹⁰ The nature of his death has precluded his entry into the pantheon of civil religious symbols for his society, but clearly that seems to have been one of his goals.


Some of the respondents discussed funeral ceremonies for island government officials as an example of a ritual that combined honoring of both the American and the Guam flags in interesting ways. Indeed, in the funeral of Senator Angel C. C. Santos in July 2003, his casket bore a Guamanian flag to the cemetery, and during the graveside service the Guam flag was presented to the mother of the deceased. However, an American flag was then presented to the oldest son of the senator by a representative of the U.S. Air Force. People displayed and waved Guam flags during the procession to the cemetery, and small Guam flags and flowers were placed atop the casket before his encryption.¹¹

Predictions for the Future

As 2003 draws to a close, it appears that the two most significant influences upon how flags will be interpreted and culturally used in Palau, the FSM, and Guam in the decades ahead will be 1) economic relations with the United States and 2) how tourism, the major industry, might develop or change. Although receiving significant financial support from

Comparative Influences on Vexillification

	Palau	FSM	Guam
Non-vexilloid cultural antecedents as alternatives	High	High	Low
Colonizer's traditions	Low	Low	High
Potential for rapid changes based on future tourism and development	High	Medium	Low

the U.S. (for military basing rights and political support in the cases of Palau and the FSM, both of which were part of the Coalition against Iraq), all of these entities depend upon tourism—particularly Japanese tourism, which has declined in recent years. A devastating typhoon that hit Guam in 2002 worsened matters. With fear of the SARS epidemic and the ongoing war on terrorism, Pacific Islanders are understandably concerned about the reliability of tourism in the future. However, there is room for hope. Plans are currently in negotiation to have an *All Star Survivor 8* season show filmed in Palau (Australian officials estimated the promotional value of hosting *Survivor*; *The Australian Outback* at \$2.6 billion).¹² Such programming would reach more than 40 English-speaking nations, and its promotional effect could radically change this tiny republic. Should a massive flow of English-speaking tourists begin, how Palauans market their flag imagery or choose to identify themselves through flag ritual and ceremony could well evolve in significance and importance. And even if *Survivor Palau* never comes to pass, as older languages give way to English, as fishing gives way to instant messaging in places like Pohnpei and Kosrae, as mass media and the outstretched fingers of globalization accelerate their reach into Micronesians' daily life, what happens to flag culture in these places deserves the attention of flag scholars, not only for what it will teach us in the specific, but for the growing recognition of trends, rhythms, and currents that might occur across cultures—comparative vexillology. 

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Endnotes

1. Ron Hassner, 'God for Harry! England and Saint George!' The Evolution of the Sacred Flag and the Modern Nation State", *Flag Bulletin* 39.1 (2000): 5-47.
2. William Crampton, "Flags as Non-Verbal Symbols in the Management of National Identity". Doctoral Thesis. Department of Government, Faculty of Economics and Social Studies, Manchester University (U.K.), 1994.
3. Robert E. Bonner, *Flag Passions of the Confederate South* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).
4. Peter Orenski, *Quo Vadimus: An Essay on the State and Future of Vexillology* (private printing, personal copyright, 2003).
5. See Scot M. Guenter, "Majulah Singapura: National Day and Flag Culture in a Southeast Asian City-State", *Raven* 6 (1999): 9-18 or Scot Guenter, "Flag Use in Expatriate Culture: Rethinking Vietnamese Identity", a lecture delivered at California American Studies Association annual meeting, Los Angeles, Calif., 26-28 April 1996.
6. All of the respondents participating wrote these essays on 3 June 2003. The collection is held in the archives of the author. All subsequent data and analysis, when not referred to another source, is taken from those essays or the subsequent interviews that were pursued with the cohort and two additional citizens each of Palau, the FSM (Kosrae), and Guam. The cohort of sixteen included ten from Guam, four from the FSM, one from Palau, one from N.M.I. (Saipan—but born and raised on Pohnpei in the FSM). To simplify this comparative analysis, the N.M.I. essay was not used in this paper. Ages of the respondents ranged from 23 (the youngest) to 49 (the oldest). Five of the respondents were male, eleven female.
7. "List of Countries by Population", *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*. Online. July 2003 estimates. (Source: C.I.A., 1 August 2003). 12 September 2003. http://www.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_population
8. Kate Galbraith, Glenda Bendure, and Ned Friary, *Micronesia* 4th ed. (Melbourne: Lonely Planet 2000), 319.
9. "Guam", *The World Factbook*. C.I.A. 1 August 2003. 12 September 2003. <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/gq.html>
10. Peter DeBenedittis, *Guam's Trial of the Century: News, Hegemony, and Rumor in an American Colony* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1993), 15.
11. Mark Alexander Pieper, "Legacy Thrives in Memory", *Pacific Daily News*. Online. 19 July 2003. 12 September 2003. <http://www.guampdn.com/news/stories/20030719/localnews/601504.html>
12. AyaK, "'Survivor 8' Considers Filming All Star Survivor Edition in Palau", 11 June 2003 *RealityTVWorld.com*, 2 September 2003 <http://www.realitytvworld.com/index/print.php?sid=1288>