

# Geography and vexillology: landscapes in flags

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**Abstract** This paper aims to present how the national flags have on its symbolism a representation of landscape. In geography, both in academic levels as well as in school teaching, landscape takes on a central theme that has so far been the subject of scientific debate of great importance by geographers as a way of seeing the world and a form of representing a specific surface of the Earth. In vexillology, the symbolism of the modern nation-state has developed a number of examples where the arrangement of stripes (or even the coat of arms) of some national flags bring certain aspects that are not immediately apparent, but they may become beautiful examples of a stylized representation of the landscape. Therefore, in this paper we seek a dialogue between geography and vexillology, showing how the representation of landscape in the flags can become a relevant theme to be used in academic research and a fascinating resource to enrich the teaching in schools.

## Introduction

The last decades of the twentieth century saw the revival of interest in studies of the landscape geographers, both the number of publications, the associations made with the theme. The landscape, rather than a return to “classical geography” or even the new perspectives presented by the cultural geography, back to being inserted in geographical studies with a different approach. Both in academic level as well as in school education, the landscape takes on a theme that has been the subject of scientific debate of great importance by geographers as a way of seeing the world and a way of representing the specific surface of the Earth.

Historically, the *landscape* appears identified with the physiognomy of a specific area and its visible expression in painting from the XVI-XVII centuries, which the Dutch painters called *landschap*. Painters, to roam the fields, climbing mountains, doing sketches and drafts of nature, begin to find a new rhythm of inspiration that comes to serve later in the studios to create paintings of landscapes according to what was seen by the artist. Thus, the landscape until the eighteenth century was a synonym of painting, later becoming an object of interest to writers, poets and novelists.

At the end of the nineteenth century not only painters and writers, but also military and geographers became interested in the landscape and its representation. The study of landscape as a concept was made at a time when geography was seen as a synthesis of the relationship between the natural and human activity on the Earth's surface. Thus, the geography was seen as the science that made the synthesis of places, because each landscape (that makes these places) was different from other landscapes.



Furthermore, the landscape has served as a feature used to reinforce the discourse of national identity. The British geographer David Lowenthal, to analyze landscapes in Europe, for example, shows how they still remain strong icons of national identity, because they are linked to memory, the rural environment and regionalism, and even after heavily transformed by the action of man, continue to inspire affection, showing that geography is still valued largely through the lens of the nation. The landscape can thus be seen as a mosaic, a representation of existing apprehended under a certain perspective of spatial area (land, province, country, region, territory) which can be used to inspire affection in people who experience that environment and mobilize the collective consciousness of its importance as an "image" of the nation.

National flags, generally rectangular, in the same way of a picture, enable certain elements of the natural environment can be combined to form representations whose meaning resembles a landscape. This landscape can be "simple", when the flags have only horizontal stripes combined with solid colors and straight lines, or "complex", especially when the flags have coats of arms with varying degrees of stylization.

In this paper I present some national flags<sup>1</sup> that have a representation linked to the landscape from their degrees styling (from simple to complex), starting with the flags with horizontal stripes and then with the coats of arms of the civil and state flags, showing how geography can use them as a research topic, also serving as teaching material in the classroom.

## The landscape in the flags

### Ukraine

In the arts, the first notion to understand the location of objects in space is given by the horizon. The best didactic example for this understanding can be seen in the Ukrainian flag, which shows an "imagined landscape" as a simplified picture (figure 1). The two-color version of this flag came in 1848, after the Congress of Lvov, based on the colors used in the former Austro-Hungarian region of Ruthenia and blue shield with golden lion used by the principality of Galicia-Volhynia in the region between the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. It was with these colors – yellow upper and blue lower – the first national flag came in 1918, when the country gained brief independence. It was re-adopted in 1991, after the end of the Soviet rule, when the order of the colors was changed. In popular tradition, the blue stands for the sky, while the yellow band represent the vast fields of grains, especially wheat, growing in their territory and make the typical agricultural landscape of the country (figure 2). As a way of remembering the romantic tradition associated with the fields, nature and the rural life of its inhabitants, the agricultural landscape is also a way of creating unity around the cultural difference between ethnic Russians and Ukrainians living in the country.



Fig. 1: Flag of Ukraine



Fig. 2: A wheat field

### Estonia

On the Baltic region, the tricolor used by Estonia, in blue, black and white, is also an association with aspects of nature (figure 3). It was introduced in 1881 at the time of the Russian imperial rule by Estonian students and was adopted after the country's independence (1920); after the period under Soviet rule (1945-1990) it reappeared as a national symbol. The blue stands for the sky, the water and fidelity; black is associated not only with the color of the soil, but also the past of suffering and oppression of Estonians; white is the color of snow and the desire for freedom. In turn, the colors



Fig. 3: Flag of Estonia



Fig.4: A winter landscape



Fig. 5: Flag of Armenia



Fig. 6: A meaning for the Armenian flag



Fig. 7: Armenian landscape (1959) by Martiros Saryan



Fig. 8: Flag of Argentina

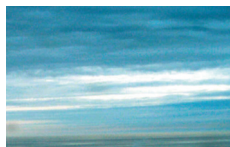


Fig. 9: Altostratus clouds

blue and white, the same flag of Finland, are associated with cultural ties of the Estonians with the Finns, while black represents the Estonian people because of the black coat used by peasants in the past. These colors are present in two other national symbols: the cornflower (*Centaurea cyanus*) and the barn swallow (*Hirundo rustica*). All these elements work together to create the metaphor of a common landscape during the winter, because the black stripe is associated with a “dark moment in the history of the country”, so it recalls a crucial aspect of this syntax to be compared with the inside of a dark forest (figure 4). Recalling the natural spaces, the stylization of its horizontal stripes provides a landscape that allows remembering the homeland as native soil.

### Armenia

The Armenian flag, in the colors red, blue and orange, also has a meaning that refers to the elements of the landscape (figure 5). These colors are deeply symbolic: red stand for the blood shed by the Armenians for freedom and independence; blue symbolizes the sky and hope; orange represents the soil, the hard work, the agricultural fields and the courage of the Armenian people. While the red is associated with blood in the majority of sources consulted, it also symbolizes the mountainous areas of Armenia, the Christian faith and the constant struggle to survive in the country. In a video posted on the internet<sup>2</sup>, celebrating the day of the national symbols of Armenia, kids draw the elements of the national flag, with red symbolizing the warmth and energy of the sun, blue for the sky of the country and the orange representing the vast wheat farmland (figure 6). The horizontal tricolor structure of the flag provides common elements that may become to a landscape that is experienced by most people, as the agricultural fields and the image of the sky (as in the symbolism of the flag of Ukraine). In the arts, the sensitivity for the landscape and the use of symbols of cultural identity was through the initiative of the Armenian painter Martiros Saryan (1880-1972)<sup>3</sup> who became famous for his paintings of the Armenian homeland. Between 1921 and 1925 the painter traveled to various regions of the country, describing and painting his canvases with themes outdoors. The zeal for the transmitting of the real and tangible side of nature and nation's life is striking at this time, illustrating the potential of the landscape in the current national flag colors (figures 7).

### Argentina

In South America, Argentina has on its national flag the symbolism of a landscape depicting the sky through the blue and white colors (figure 8). The basis of the flag was adopted in 1812 by revolutionary leader General Manuel Belgrano (1770-1820), whose inspiration is said have received by looking at the sky on the banks of the Paraná River, in present-day city of Rosario. These colors were used to distinguish the Liberation Army of the Spanish troops (who wore a red insignia). Another version of this story says that on May 25, 1810, crowds with blue and white ribbons converged on Buenos Aires to demand independence and was said that on that day the white clouds dissipated to reveal a blue sky and a bright sun, ensuring a prosperous future for the new nation with the deposition of the Viceroy of Spain. It was thus that the “Sun of May” was added to the blue and white flag in 1818. The sun is also a symbol of much indigenous peoples of the region, mainly of the Incas. The idea of the landscape in the Argentine flag looks like something simple, but it demonstrates an attempt to build an ideal of the nation in the first decades of the nineteenth century, when there was a strong movement by the search for a national identity. The sun, both as metaphor freedom (and as an element of indigenous cul-





Fig. 10: Flag of Antigua and Barbuda



Fig. 11: Flag of Malawi



Fig. 12: Flag of Kazakhstan



Fig 13: Flag of Kiribati

ture), showed up as an appropriate symbol for this purpose. From the point of view of geography, this time of year, which coincides with late autumn (May), presents the entry of cold fronts from Antarctica toward the equator, which are characterized by pushing the clouds in medium altitude (called of cirrostratus and altostratus), forming a band that goes along with the front toward the north-northeast of South America. So, the symbolism of the flag reveals a climatologic and meteorological situation in the region (figure 9).

#### Antigua & Barbuda and Malawi

The landscape on flag of Antigua and Barbuda has relation with tourism and the African ancestry of the population of these islands (figure 10). It was adopted in 1967, even as Associated State to Britain and confirmed after the independence (1981). The flag is formed by a peculiar design with two outer triangles that make up a division into "V", alluding to the victory, where appears a radiant sun which marks the birth of a new era on the horizon. The black color stands for the African ancestry; below, the blue stripe represents the Caribbean Sea, while the white stripe is associated with clear sand beaches. The red represents the dynamism of the people. In fact, the flag image recalls a landscape view from west to east, where the black color on the horizon symbolizes the look with regard to Africa (red, black and yellow are pan-African colors). The colors yellow, blue and white also indicate the main tourist attractions of the island: sun, sea and sand.

Pan-African colors are the basis of other flag to create a sense of order with landscape: the Malawi (figure 11). Occupying an area on the shores of Lake Nyasa, the former British colony has adopted its flag in 1964, along with independence; it was based on the colors of the Malawi Congress Party. The green stripe represents the cultivated land and its forests, fields, natural resources along the country's western border. The black horizon on top stands for the African ancestry. The red rising sun of independence is signal a new era, a symbol of hope and freedom for all of Africa whose symbolism of the red central band is associated with the *kwacha* (sun dawn) and refers to the origin of the name of the country in native language, which means "reflected light", "bright haze" or "flaming water", an allusion to the sun rising over the waters of lake Nyasa. The flag thus shows a landscape sighted by the viewer which is graphically expressed of the west to the east, if the flag is oriented in north-south position, as if a person were in the green field sighting the horizon with red the reflected red water in the lake. Red also stands for blood and the struggle for independence.

#### Kazakhstan and Kiribati

Another former Soviet republic, the Kazakhstan gained its independence in 1991, using a flag all light blue, color that represents the breadth of the skies of the country; this is also a traditional color that symbolizes the unity of the nomadic peoples. Under the figure of the sun appears stylized a golden eagle, known as *berkut* (*Aquila chrysaetos*), which is the traditional symbol of freedom and recalls the ideal of life of Kazakh people. The hoist of the flag shows a stylized figure known as "national ornament" (figure 12). As a reconstruction of the identity of the Kazakh people and their nomadic lifestyle, the flag represents a landscape view above the horizon, in the breadth of the sky, since the relationship with the geographical space does not imply a territorial attachment, whose reconstruction of the national identity is based on nomadic lifestyle on the steppes with the eagle as a symbol of cultural renaissance in the post-Soviet period.

In Oceania, the Kiribati flag, adopted in 1979, symbolizes a landscape visible from their islands (figure 13). The flag was a result of local competition and its design was based on the old colonial coat of arms used on the British blue ensign for the archipelago since 1937. The blue and white waves represent the Pacific Ocean, which covers about 5 million square kilometers along the Kiribati. On it appears the figure of the sun in front of a red horizon that stands for the dawn and awakening of the new nation, as well as the equator line, which cross the islands for about 4000 km. The frigate bird (*Fregata ariel*) is the symbol of authority, freedom and sovereignty over the waters of the ocean and is a symbol of local status. The landscape designed by the flag, the frigate bird stands out like a bird culturally significant to local people as an element of sovereignty in relation to the breadth of the archipelago along the Pacific Ocean. It also is a metaphor of the "birth of the nation", embodied by the sun and the waters, whose image of the frigate bird assumes the role of sovereignty, as a way to restore the local culture and turn it into a discourse of national unity.

## The landscape in the coats of arms of the flags



Fig. 14: Flag of Slovakia



Fig. 15: Coat of arms of Slovakia

### Slovakia

The coats of arms are the best ways to represent landscapes because, despite the heraldic rules be highly symbolic, they can usually be printed, painted, sculpted and presented in the same role of a picture or portrait to the observer. As the national flags generally use simple colors, their combinations and variations also use the coats of arms as elements of differentiation. National arms vary from purely symbolic representations (more stylized) to essentially allegorical images (less stylized).

In two flags with the pan-Slavic colors, there are two coats of arms that recall a landscape stylized: Slovakia and Slovenia. In the case of Slovakia (figure 14), the first bicolor flag in red and white was hoisted for the first time on 23 April 1848 as a sign of liberation from Austro-Hungarian Empire. The blue band was added in August 1848 and the order of colors was established in 1868. In 1919 the country became part of Czechoslovakia and 1st January 1993 has declared its independence, adopting the flag with the coat of arms, consisting of a shield-style pre-Gothic in red background with a hill triple in blue with a white cross double (cross of Lorraine). The three hills represent the stylized mountains of Tatra, Fatra and Matra. In terms of physical geography, these mountains are part of the Western Carpathians; the Tatra mountains are located on the border of Slovakia with Poland, the Fatra mountains are in central massive of Slovakia and the Matra mountains is currently located in the north of Hungary, near the border with Slovakia. The mountains also symbolize the three saints: St. Constantine and St. Methodius (who was said to have brought Christianity to Slovakia in the 9th century, represented by the cross of Lorraine), as well as St. Benedict. Originally, the hills were painted green to represent the northern boundary of the Hungarian domain in region (and still appear on the coat of arms of this country), it started to be painted in blue as a symbol Slovakia after 1848 (figure 15).





Fig. 16: Flag of Slovenia



Fig. 17: Coat of arms of Slovenia

### Slovenia

Slovenia national flag was introduced on 25 June 1991 on the occasion of the independence from former Yugoslavia (figure 16). Using the colors red, white and blue, the coat of arms was created by sculptor Marko Pogacnik, whose symbolism has a relationship with the nature of the country. The arms (figure 17) consist of a blue shield with a white silhouette of a mountain, where the three peaks represent the Mount Triglav – highest mountain in the country – and the Julian Alps. The three six-pointed stars are derived from the emblem of the ancient duchy of Celje and, at the same time, remember the three important dates of Slovenian freedom (1918 against Austria-Hungary rule; 1945 for the German occupation at WWII and 1991: independence of former Yugoslavia). At the basis of the shield, two wavy lines represent the coastline of the Adriatic Sea. Thus, the coat of arms of this country shows natural and historical features (mountains, waters, sky and “cultural” stars) as an icon of the country around a landscape that can be imagined by its citizens. The Mount Triglav and Julian Alps are located in the northwest of Slovenia, while the Adriatic Sea is located southwest of the country and the rivers Drava and Sava are east of the capital Ljubljana. Seeing the country from south to north and from east to west from a map, we can imagine this landscape and its elements through these arms on the flag.



Fig. 18: Flag of San Marino



Fig. 19: Coat of arms of San Marino

### San Marino

One of the most interesting cases of how the landscape can be seen in a single scene is provided by the flag of San Marino, which first appeared in 1797, but its final version was adopted on 6 April 1862 (figure 18). It consists of a rectangle bicolor in blue (representing the sky) and white (for the clouds and the snow of Mount Titano), where is inserted into the arms of the republic, formed by a shield in heart shape. Inside the shield, three white towers represent the castles Guaita, Cesta and Montale, situated on the summit of Mount Titano, stands for the ability to San Marino defend their freedom. Each tower is decorated with white ostrich feathers, which is an allusion to the Latin word *penna* (feather) to the region of the Apennines, in which San Marino is located. The coat also has a crown, representing the sovereignty of the country, with branches of oak and olive twigs. Below, a white banner brings the Latin inscription *Libertas* (Freedom). On 22 July 2011 a new law adopted by parliament has fixed the colors and correct design of the flag and the coat of arms of San Marino (figure 19).



Fig. 20: Flag of Costa Rica



Fig. 21: Coat of arms of Costa Rica

### Costa Rica

The national territory can be seen across the landscape in the coat of arms of the state flag of Costa Rica (figure 20). The center of shield has an image of three peaks that represent the country's main volcanoes (Arenal, Poas and Irazu)\* on a lush tropical forest that stands for the isthmus of the American continent, where appear in the foreground the Pacific Ocean to the background of the Caribbean Sea. The two merchant vessels in the style of mid-nineteenth century recall the importance of maritime trade. In the background appears too the figure of the rising sun and the seven silver stars to symbolize the provinces of the country (San Jose, Alajuela, Cartago, Heredia, Guanacaste, Puntarenas and Limón). The shield is also adorned with small golden grains of coffee, known locally as *el grano de oro* (the golden grain), as the main crop. In a white banner on top appear on the country name “Republic of Costa Rica” and their location, in the blue band above: Central America. The first version of this coat appeared on 29 September 1848 and the last significant change occurred in 27 November 1906 (figure 21).





Fig. 22: Flag of El Salvador



Fig. 23: Coat of arms of El Salvador



Fig. 24: Flag of Nicaragua



Fig. 25: Coat of arms of Nicaragua



Fig. 26: Flag of Bolivia



Fig. 27: Coat of arms of Bolivia

### El Salvador and Nicaragua

In the coat of arms of El Salvador national flag, adopted on 17 May 1912, appears a stylized representation of regional landscape (figure 22). The shield is formed by an equilateral triangle that has three angles, symbolizing liberty, equality and fraternity, where each of its angles represents the three branches of government (executive, legislative and judiciary) and the equality of all people under the law. Inside of this, a mountain range formed by five volcanoes located in a green field surrounded by two seas stands for the volcanic nature of the soil, as well the five Central American nations that became independent between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. The date of independence, achieved on 15 September 1821, is written below the rainbow (symbol of peace), surrounding the figure of a Phrygian cap (republican symbol of liberty) above the mountain range, completing the elements in triangle.

The shield is adorned by five national flags in blue and white, which makes up the civil ensign of El Salvador and remember the banner of the five nations that formed the Federal Republic of Central America. The set is adorned by two branches of olive leaves, tied by a ribbon in blue and white, which represent the fourteen departments in which the country is divided administratively. The design of the arms is completed by two legends: the first at the base of the triangle has the words "God, Union, Liberty" and the second, surrounding all arms, bears the name "Republic of El Salvador in Central America" (figure 23). The same symbolism appears in the triangular emblem that makes up the coat of arms on the flag of Nicaragua, which contains the two seas, the five volcanoes, the rainbow and the Phrygian cap (figure 24). However, the triangular emblem is involved only by golden inscriptions "Republic of Nicaragua" and "Central America" in a circular format (figure 25).

### Bolivia

The coat of arms of Bolivia was first created in 1825 and its second version appeared in 1826, receiving new changes on 14 July 1888 and 19 July 2004, date of the last version of the arms. The first time that the coat of arms appeared on the national flag was in 1851 (figure 26). It is formed by an oval shield which are inserted the landscape elements: the rising sun symbolizes the birth and splendor of the country (as well as this is an Inca symbol), with the image of the Cerro Rico de Potosi (who is one of the richest silver mines in the world) and Cerro Menor with the chapel of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. On the basis of the shield, a white llama (*Lama glama*), a bundle of wheat and a Bolivian mountain coconut (*Parajubaea torallyi*), represent, respectively, the animal, agricultural and vegetal riches of the country. The shield also contains an edge in blue where it writes the name of the country in golden letters; bellow, ten stars of gold, representing nine departments of the country (Beni, Chuquisaca, Cochabamba, La Paz, Oruro, Pando, Potosi, Santa Cruz and Tarija). The tenth star alludes to the department of Litoral, which was lost to Chile during the War of the Pacific (1879-1883). The ornaments surrounding the coat of arms are: an Andean condor (*Vultur gryphus*) – national bird that symbolizes the pursuit of limitless horizons of the country –, a garland of laurel and branch of olives representing the triumph after independence. Also appear two guns crossed, two rifles with bayonets and an axe to the left of the shield and a Phrygian cap on his right, as symbols of military force, authority and freedom of Bolivia. The six tricolor flags displayed in spearheads stand for the national symbol maximum of Bolivia (figure 27).





Fig. 28: Flag of Ecuador



Fig. 29: Coat of arms of Ecuador

## Ecuador

Similar elements of a local landscape are present in the coat of arms of Ecuador national flag (figure 28), formed by an oval shield which appears the figure of a golden sun surrounded with the white line of the zodiac in which are written the signs of Gemini, Cancer, Aries and Taurus, that stand for the months of March, April, May and June (1845) – key dates in the Ecuadorian independence. The Mount Chimborazo, whose snows form the headwaters of the Guayas River, occupies the lower part of the shield. Over the river, the steamboat is the same model built in 1841 in the shipyards of the city of Guayaquil; it is painted with the national colors, with a picture of a caduceus – symbols of navigation and commerce. The shield is adorned by four national flags supported by spears, which recalls the struggle for independence. Among them, there appears a laurel on the dexter and a palm on the sinister, representing, respectively, the glory and peace of the nation. An ax tied to a bound bundle of wooden rods form the “Fasces” as symbol of the republican dignity. Perched on the shield, appears the figure of an Andean condor (*Vultur gryphus*) with open wings, representing the power, the greatness and loftiness of the homeland. The coat of arms on the flag was regulated at 31 October 1900, but his first release dates of 6 November 1845 (figure 29).

## Conclusions

In recent decades, the interest about the landscape between geographers has increased again, now with strong connections in its many dimensions involving the history, culture, arts, literature, and music. The vexillology plays an important role in this process, because the study of the flags can become too a topic of interest for studies on the representation of landscape. How geography seeks to understand the social and natural processes that affect the man on the Earth's surface and vexillology cares about the history, meaning and use of flags, both can work together as important resources for academic research and teaching in schools concerning the various ways of representing the landscape.

National flags in bicolor and tricolor horizontal analyzed show that the use of simple stripes, whose order of the colors and the introduction of symbols (sun, stars, birds) act significantly to recreate landscapes of interest to the nation's unity. In many countries they are representative, where there is a wide ethnic, religious, linguistic and cultural diversity of its population within a national territory. The representation of the landscape is also important because it is widely accepted by most peoples as “neutral” and the flags, as visual objects, turn into great means for its dissemination.

The use of the landscape also served as an important factor in creating an imaginary of nation by the nationalists (especially in South and Central America). Since the independence of these countries and throughout the nineteenth century, most of the colonizers and the colonized had the same religion, ethnicity and culture. It was necessary, therefore, to construct an imaginary of nation around the territory and its natural resources, and the use of arms on the flags was a great visual medium (if we remember that much of the population at that time was illiterate) by governments to inspire the affection of a people for your homeland. Thus, although many countries do not adopt national flags that have meanings around the landscape so clearly, the





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natural elements are present in most of these symbols, showing that the role of nature and the environment is significant and can become a large topic for future research involving the relationship between geography and vexillology.



## Notes

- 1 Other flags of interest with respect to the landscape in dependent territories are Greenland, Guam and Sint Eustatius.
- 2 Sources: Day of the State Symbols of Republic of Armenia - June 15 (National Anthem). In: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ifoOCQoLqnw>>. Day of the State Symbols of Republic of Armenia. In: <http://yeraguyn.com/en/>> Access: 20 April 2013.
- 3 Source: Memorial Museum of Martiros Saryan. In: [www.saryan.am/eng/index.html](http://www.saryan.am/eng/index.html)> Access, 20 April 2013.
- 4 The three mountains also symbolize Chirripó Grande (the highest mountain in Costa Rica), the Irazu (highest volcano) and Poas (largest volcanic crater).

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