

# The Truth in our Stars

## The Symbolism Behind Their Use in Flags

by Amy Langston

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**Abstract** Stars may be the most commonly used geometric figure used on flags. Because of this distinction, they hold an important place not only in vexillology, but also in the field of symbology in general. In this paper, I explore the meaning of this symbolism and its frequency, then further detail the symbolism for the stars in flags used around the world. I also address how the properties of the stars relate to their symbolism, including the color, number of stars, number of points, arrangement, positioning within the flag, and other matters such as their political, mythical, and religious significance. This paper is an expanded version of a presentation delivered at NAVA 46 in 2012.

### Introduction

Stars are one of the most common geometric symbols used today in vexillology. Among United Nations member states alone, nearly 45% of flags feature at least one star. They are also common in symbolism elsewhere; we see them on stickers, the Hollywood Walk of Fame, apparel, and furnishings. As such, addressing their significance, importance, and symbolism in flags is a highly relevant area of study.

#### Why stars?

Why are stars so frequently used in flags?

- They are highly symbolic. Stars can be used to symbolize nearly anything. They have become a default symbol to stand for any desired value or object of importance. Not only that, but the stars carry symbolism by themselves, namely a reminder of the celestial bodies, and the divinity they represent, that have served as fascination to humans for millennia.
- Versatility. Stars are versatile because the aspects of stars can contribute to the symbolism: arrangement, quantity, or number of points. These areas will be covered in detail in the subsequent sections.
- Aesthetic and imaginative appeal. Of course it is subjective, but it is a generally held opinion that stars have a tasteful appearance. Compared to other shapes, they are not as plain as other shapes such as squares or triangles.

#### Number of stars

As stated, stars are a default symbol to represent a thing or idea within the flag. In particular, the number of divisions or territories within a nation is a common meaning for multiple stars. Perhaps the most well-known example is the US flag, with each star representing a state within the Union.





**Current United States flag, 1959-**



**1818-1819**



**1865-1867**



**Battle of Guilford Courthouse, 1781**

There are other countries that use stars to represent a number of divisions as well.



**Dominica:** the ten stars are for the ten parishes



**Equatorial Guinea:** Six stars for the five main islands and the mainland



**Honduras:** States of the former Republic of Central America

Some flags in US states feature 13 stars for the 13 original colonies.



**Georgia**



**North Dakota.** It is worth noting that North Dakota is not one of the original 13



**Rhode Island**

colonies, and still features the 13 stars in the flag.

US state flags also use a particular number of stars for their admission into the Union.



**Arkansas**



**Missouri**

When a single star is used on a flag, it usually symbolizes the unity of the nation or an important cultural value.



**Cuba**



**Liberia**

This trend is found in US state flags as well.



**Massachusetts**



**Texas**

## Number of points

Five-pointed stars have long been the rule for flags, although this was not always the case. Before the first US flag, six-pointed stars were most common. When sewing the new US colonies flag, it was found that five-pointed stars were much easier to sew than six-pointed stars, because there are less points involved. This began the tradition of five-pointed stars for flags.

Due to this frequency, often the five points have no special significance to the star or flag. When the number of points is different, the symbolism is often something similar to several stars, such as number of provinces or important virtues. The reason a smaller quantity of stars with many points is chosen over several stars is to avoid an excess of stars in the flag.

This section will present flags with stars of other than five points and what they mean, as well as flags with five-pointed stars where the five points are symbolic of something.

### Australia and its territories

Australia's flag features both the constellation of the Crux Australis and an additional larger star under the Union Jack in the canton. Except for a single five-pointed star, each of the stars has seven points. The number of points with each star is related to its respective star in the constellation and its brilliance in the sky. Among the seven-pointed stars, six of the points symbolize Australia's six states, and the seventh is symbolic of Australia's several territories collectively. Australia's states and territories also feature Australia's depiction of the Crux Australis in their own flags.



**Christmas Island**



**Victoria.** Of note, while all of Australia's states feature the Union Jack in their canton, Victoria is the only of the states to also feature the Southern



**New South Wales,** on the other hand, features four eight-pointed stars in its flag. The eight-pointed stars are sym-

bolistic of the Southern Cross. All of the territories feature the Southern Cross except Norfolk Island.

The eight points are a holdover from the Eureka Stockade flag.



**Aruba** is one of the few political flags with a four-pointed star. The four points symbolize the four cardinal directions.



**Bonaire's** six-pointed star is symbolic of the six regions of Bonaire.



**Curaçao** features five-pointed stars in its flag. The points are symbolic of the five continents where its people claim ancestry from.

### Dutch Caribbean islands

All of the Dutch islands in the Caribbean feature stars in their flag except one, Sint Maarten.

Aruba and Bonaire's are

particularly relevant to this section for the reason that their flags feature a four and six-pointed star, respectively.

## South Pacific

Stars are an important symbol to the people of the Pacific islands. In addressing number of points, two particular flags are important: the Marshall Islands and Nauru.



The **Marshall Island's** flag features a twenty-four pointed star, more than any other flag. The

points symbolize the twenty-four districts. Four of the points are longer than other

twenty, symbolizing the cultural/political centers of the country.



**Nauru's** flag features a twelve-pointed star, symbolic of the twelve tribes native to the island.

## Miscellaneous



The least number of points in a single star is three, featured in the flag of the International Brigades. The three points are symbolic of continents where participants in the International Brigades came from.

## Color

Color is important, as it may change the meaning and symbolism in the star. Because colors have come to symbolize specific qualities in and of themselves, the color in the star will often be intended to represent that particular quality. Occasionally, the star is present in the flag so the color will be present in the flag.



The flag of *Flags of the World* features the most common colors used in flags.

### Black

The black star is a symbol of African freedom, and is occasionally used in African-related flags. Three African nations feature a black star in their flag.



**Ghana**



**Guinea-Bissau**



**São Tomé and Príncipe**



**Somaliland's** flag features a black star. Black is one of the Pan-Arab colors, and while it is com-

monly featured in Arab flags, it is rarely used within a star.

There are no national flags outside Africa featuring black stars.



## Blue

Little information exists to suggest any specific symbolism to blue stars. Honduras and Panama are the only national flags featuring blue stars. However, blue stars appear on the flags of maritime-related organizations, such as shipping companies, and sailing and rowing clubs. Perhaps this suggests the blue symbolizes the water.



**House flag of Metropolitan Shipping Ltd.,**  
Greek shipping company



**Cercle de la Voile de Paris,** French sailing club



**Royal Australian Naval Ensign.** This is a reversal of the colors on the Australian national flag.



**Nunavut,** Canada. The blue color is for the wonders of earth, sea, and

sky, the star itself is the North Star.

## Green

Green stars are sometimes used in Arab-related flags. Green is the most recognized color of Islam, so it relates to that. Most Arab or predominantly Islamic countries use green in their flags, but usually it is not in a star.



**Iraq,** 1963-1991



**Yemen Arab Republic**



In the flag of **Senegal** the green star is one of the Pan-African colors. Senegal is also a Muslim-ma-

jority country, so it possibly doubles in symbolism here.



The **Esperanto flag** is one other flag with a green star. The green is supposed to be "mutual recognition", the designer says.

## Red

Red stars, more precisely red five-pointed stars, are frequently a symbol of Communism. Originally, it was only a symbol of the USSR, but it evolved to become a symbol of Communism in general. As a result of this, some European countries have banned its use, notably Hungary.



**USSR**



**Yugoslavia**  
Some have viewed the red star as a symbol of resistance or independ-

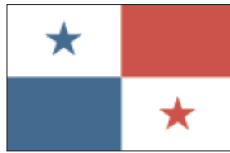
ence, and it has been adopted by separatist, guerilla, or various Leftist parties.



A version of the **Estelada flag**  
On a national level, there are a few countries that use a red star that do not associate it with Commu-

nism. In those cases, the color red is the star symbolizes what it does generally: liberty, blood, strength, etc.





**Panama.** In this flag, the red and blue balance each other, symbolizing the political parties.



**Tunisia.** The star blends with the crescent moon.

### White

White is the most common color for stars. Similar to how stars are a default shape for flags, white is a default color for stars. In many cases, the white color does not mean anything in particular. It is there because the star needs a color, or the white of the star provides a nice contrast against the other colors in the flag. Still, there are a few cases where white does mean something.



**Chile.** In this flag, the white is for the snow on the Andes.



**Timor-Leste.** The white is for peace, a common quality for white.



**North Carolina, USA.** The white in the star is for the default color, and to blend in with the lower bar on the fly.

### Yellow/Gold

Gold is a color of prosperity and wealth. It is consequently common to feature a gold star on a flag as a symbol of hope for a new nation.



**Burkina Faso.** The gold star is featured here as one of the Pan-African colors.



**Grenada.** The flag features gold stars as an homage to the people's African heritage, and the number of stars are for its divisions.



**Adygea, Russia.** The yellow stars are symbolic of the wheat grown there, and the quantity is for its divisions.



The Democratic Republic of the **Congo.** The "prosperity and hope" principle applies here. Most of Congo's flags have featured a yellow star.



## Atypical colors



**Copper—Arizona, USA**



**Brown—Dutch Guiana, 1954-1975.** Here, the stars are symbolic the continents the people of Dutch Guiana come from.



**Orange—President of Indonesia**



**Purple—Guinea Bissau Worker's Party**



**Silver—Nevada, USA**

## Arrangement of the Stars



The majority of the time, the arrangement of stars in a flag does not have symbolism in and of itself. Usually, the arrangement is designed for practical or aesthetic reasons, such as in flag of the **Philippines**. This section details the cases in which arrangement is important.

### Stars in the sky

As we have learnt, stars sometimes symbolize the celestial stars. When a flag uses them for this purpose, the stars are arranged accordingly. Several Oceanic countries feature the Crux Australis constellation using stars in their flag, which not only symbolizes the significance of the night sky and constellations in general, but also symbolizes the importance of the Crux Australis to that region of the world.



**New Zealand**



**Solomon Islands**



**Tierra del Fuego Province, Argentina**



**Similarly,** Alaska features Ursa Major and the North Star in its flag, symbolizing Alaska's northerly latitude.



In contrast to these, **Brazil's** flag features the night sky over Rio de Janeiro, as it appeared on November 15, 1889. Because it is not a constellation, the arrangement of the stars here is less ordered.



### Circle of stars

A circle of stars has been a common generic symbol throughout time for unity, peace, and solidarity. The number of stars in the circle usually means something. For the two subsequent flags, the quantity of stars is for the quantity of islands in their respective nations.



Cape Verde



Cook Islands



**European Union.** The 'peace and solidarity' principle applies here.



Similarly, the flag of the US state of **Tennessee** features three stars, which symbolize Tennessee's three landforms, arranged inside a circle,

to represent their unity. In addition, Tennessee was the sixteenth state to be admitted to Union, which makes it the original thirteen colonies plus three.

### Semicircles

Several Latin American entities feature semicircles of stars.



Venezuela



Manabí Province,  
Ecuador



Morazán Department,  
El Salvador

### Miscellaneous



Lastly, as an interesting case when it comes to arrangement, **Tuvalu's** flag arranges its stars in the position that its islands lay.



Geographic distribution can also be found in the flag of **Ward County**, Texas, USA.

### Religious symbolism

Stars have been used as a symbol by some religions. In ancient religions, as well as modern-day nature-based religions and revivals of ancient faiths, stars were sometimes revered as representations of the gods. The sky in general, and the things in it, were viewed with awe as an object of inspiration. Besides these, there are other religions that use stars within their symbolism.



Because the most common symbol within Christianity is the cross, stars are a less common symbol for that faith, though occasionally a circle of stars is used in Christian artwork, specifically Catholic. Interestingly, the designer of the EU flag notes religious inspiration in designing it. It is notable that of most countries that are historically Christian, stars are not featured in the flag. As such, we will be looking at other religions and their associated flags.

### Islam

The crescent moon and star is the predominant symbol of Islam. It is featured on many flags of countries with large Muslim populations. Both symbols are seen on national flags in the vast majority of cases, whereas on organizational flags it is usually only the crescent, as the crescent is sometimes its own symbol independent of star.

The symbol of the crescent moon and star is actually of pagan origin, and consequently, not all Muslims use it. In ancient times, the crescent moon was featured on the flag of the city of Byzantium in honor of the gods of the local people. When the Ottomans conquered the area, they began using the city's flag and symbol to represent themselves. Over time, the symbols became associated with Islam.

Nowadays, many countries feature the crescent moon and star on their flag—only one country features the crescent moon alone, the Maldives. Not all of these countries are devoutly Islamic; in fact, several of them are run by secular governments, and practice of Islam among the general population is not high. In these cases, the symbol on the flag indicates that regardless of actual devotional practice, the crescent moon and star is important to the historic heritage and culture of the nation.

The appearance of the crescent moon and star—particularly the star—is not uniform across the flags. Stars with five points, over ten points, and multiple stars are all used.

There are eleven nations that feature the crescent moon and one or more stars on their flag. For the flags with a single five-pointed star, the single star and five points does not have any special significance. It is a default symbol, like the five-pointed star is in other settings.

In flags with multiple stars or many points on a single star, the symbolism behind this multiplicity is unrelated to Islam.



**Pakistan**



**Turkey**



**Comoros:** The four stars symbolize the four main islands



**Uzbekistan:** The twelve months on the Uzbek calendar and twelve administrative divisions



**Azerbaijan:** eight points for the eight Turkic tribes of the world



**Rif Republic, 1921-1926.** The rare six-pointed star with a crescent moon is not found nowadays because of its association

with Judaism, but at this time there was not the same level of animosity between these two faiths.

### Flags of special note



The flag of Singapore features a crescent moon with five stars, yet it is not intended to be an Islamic or religious symbol. It is symbolic of a young nation. However, there are some Muslims in Singapore that like to interpret the crescent moon in this context.



The flag of **Bukhara** (modern day Uzbekistan) from 1921 features a hammer and sickle within the star. At this point in history, Uzbekistan was integrated in the USSR, so likely this is a combination of Soviet and Islamic symbolism.

### Judaism

The iconic Star of David is today the most common symbol of Judaism. The origins of this symbol and how it became intertwined with Judaism are not entirely clear, and there are multiple theories regarding it. It is important to note that it is really supposed to be two overlapping triangles, which is a common "good luck" symbol in the Middle East. That is why it is typical for the Star of David to look like the image below.



Like the crescent moon and star in Islam, the Star of David has also been controversial as to its relevancy to Judaism, or its appropriateness to be used at all. The Zionist movement began using it, and since then it has been commonly used in symbolism within Israel, and also as a symbol for the Jewish people throughout the world.



In respect to flags, Israel is the only nation to feature one on their flag. On the Israeli flag, it is blue, which has historically been used as one of the colors of Judaism. The blue stripes against the white field with the Star of David in the center are supposed to be reflective of the design of a tallit, the Jewish traditional prayer shawl. The flag below is the national, civil, and military flag.



The Star is also featured on other Israeli flags. On this air force flag, it is depicted in silhouette.



The Star is occasionally, albeit very rarely, used in other flags. Here, it is featured in the flag of Société Navale Nord-Africaine, a shipping company. The Star is used as an allusion to the Jewish heritage of the company founders.

### Unusual star usage



2005 **Mediterranean Games**—here are five colors used all in one star, similar to the technique the Dutch Guiana flag uses.



**Bismarck**, North Dakota, USA—In this flag, a star is used to represent the "a" in "Bismarck".



**Bloco de Esquerda**, Portuguese political party—A star is a person in this flag.



**Panau**, fictitious island in the video game Just Cause—The star's center is cut out, leaving only the outer points.



**Partido Aprista Peruano**, Peruvian political party—Letters are formed inside the star.





**Plano**, Texas, USA—The letter forms the star and the star is part of the letter



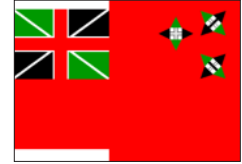
**Sliema**, Malta—The star is counterchanged



**Social Democratic Union, Macedonia**—The star has a stylized appearance



**Socialist Revolutionary Party, Portugal**—The star has an artistic appearance



One of the flags of **Te Kooti**—The stars are multiple colors



Shooting star on the flag of **Trogir**, Croatia

## Conclusion

We have covered the vast symbolism of stars as they represented in flags through their color, number, points, arrangement, and religious symbolism. Hopefully we will not take stars for granted as we now look to them as the important vexillological symbols that they are.



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**Acknowledgements**

Petr Exner Jr., Scot Guenter, Ted Kaye, Elizabeth Langston, Rick Langston, Edward Mooney, David Ott, David Pawson, Annie Platoff, Gus Tracchia, Bill Trinkle



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Amy Langston is a student of the world with diverse interests in travel, linguistics, religions, cultures, and – of course – flags. She lives in the United States (North Carolina) with her parents. After completing her final year of secondary school, Amy expects to enter university, where she will study Religious and Ethical Studies. She hopes to create a tradition of contributions to vexillology through the coming decades of her life.

