

Vexillology: African Nations, Their Flags, and Histories

Africa is the second largest continent on Earth. It covers more than 30 million square miles and covers more than 20 percent of the Earth's land area. While frequently spoken of as a single entity, the continent of Africa includes 54 independent countries, plus nine territories and a few de facto states, and it's home to about a billion people. The flags of African nations reflect this same simultaneous unity and distinctiveness.

African History and Its Reflection in the Continent's Flags

Heavy colonization by European nations such as Great Britain, France, Belgium, and the Netherlands, took place in Africa from mid-19th century through mid-20th century, save for limited exceptions such as Ethiopia. The newly independent countries generally experienced an economic, public health, and financial decline in the post-Colonial era, which was compounded by political instability, colonially imposed borders that weren't in sync with natural or cultural divisions, and varied ethnic/cultural unrest, some of which are still issues today. The echoes of a Euro-centric past and a post-Colonial rise of pan-Africanism have had a strong influence on the design of the new African nations' flags.

The Study of African Flags

The field of vexillology, or the study of flags, is sometimes open to interpretation. Many African nations' flags have common vexillological elements such as Pan-African colors and stripe designs. In some cases, it could be argued that these countries' current flags may be reminiscent of their former colonial powers' flags. For example, flags with the tri-color stripes, or bars of color, may be said to echo similar European flags, specifically the French flag and its revolutionary roots, marking the African nations' fight for independence as a visual parallel to the French Revolution.

Why Flags Matter

Flags perform several practical functions. They serve as symbolic reminders of shared history and foster nationalism, especially important for independent states composed of multiple ethnic or other groups. Flags provide citizens with a recognizable national identity. Pan-African colors – red, green, and black - are used across several nations' flags. In vexillology, Pan-African colors are a recognized family of shades; red is for blood, green is for the land, and black is for the people. These colors, across their own national flag and reflected similarly in other regional flags, can remind citizens of the close international cultural, political and economic relationships among African states.

It's also thought that several other African flags followed the red, yellow, and green stripe style of the Ethiopian flag, in homage to one of the first independent states on the African continent. While the current Ethiopian flag has only tri-color stripes, the previous flag also had the symbol of lion in the center, a similar design element used by some other countries' flags. On the other hand, some of the nations that do not use Pan-African colors include Cape Verde, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Liberia, and Somalia.

Regional Similarities Among Flags

Flags across African nations show some regional similarities. For example, the eastern African nations of Senegal, Gambia and Burkina Faso have flags with similar stripe designs; Gambia and Senegal have tripartite design (horizontal and vertical, respectively) and Burkina Faso has two-color stripe design; Senegal and Burkina Faso also have a centered star, similar to the previous Ethiopian flag.

Some southern African nations' flags have similar designs, too. South Africa and Namibia have diagonal stripes of color. The central and eastern African nations of Zaire, Rwanda, and Somalia all rely heavily on the use of the color blue – not a color associated with the Pan-African movement - either as a full background or dominant background color. Whether the use of blue was a conscious

decision to go against the grain of unity and Pan-Africanism or not may be open to interpretation.

Examples of African Nations' Flags

Some flags, such as that of [South Africa](#), may echo colonialism as the national flag design changes over the years, at first repeating a similarity to the colonial British and Dutch flags in colors, symbols or layout before evolving into something completely independent of the colonial-influenced design. The current flag retains the red, white, and blue, and also includes the traditional Pan-African colors. [In another interpretation](#), the colors of the South African flag have no official meaning; however, the rightward-pointing Y-shape – or [pall](#) in vexillological terms - illustrates the concept of unity.

Ghana has a [tri-color flag with a black, 5-pointed star in the center](#), again, reminiscent of Ethiopia's flag. The colors of red, gold, and green symbolize Pan-Africanism and are another nod to Ethiopia and its own flag. The black star symbolizes the [Black Star Line](#), a shipping company started by African-American Marcus Garvey, an early 20th century proponent of the Pan-African movement. The flag has undergone several minor changes from its initial adoption in the post-colonial years to its current form.

[Zambia's flag](#) has a red, black, and gold tri-color badge on a green background with a golden eagle placed right above it, wings extended in flight. These colors incorporate the symbolic shades used by both the Pan-African movement and the Ethiopian flag.

Even the African Union has a flag. The Organization for African Unity, which later became the African Union, is a united group of independent African states. The organization's [previous flag](#) replicated the multi-stripe format using three colors: white, gold, and green, and a center emblem; the [new flag](#) centers a silhouette of the continent on a green background, situated over a white starburst and surrounded by gold stars, which is quite a departure from other African flags, without any vestiges of the former colonial powers' flags.