Contested Symbolism in the Flags of New World Slave Risings

Steven A. Knowlton

Throughout the summer of 1800, an enslaved blacksmith of Richmond, Virginia, named Gabriel conspired with fellow bondspeople to rise in arms and fight for their freedom. Among his plans was a scheme to paint a flag with the phrase "Death or Liberty" to be carried at the head of the column that would march into the city.[1] Gabriel's slogan inverted the words of his fellow Virginian Patrick Henry, whose famous oration on the eve of the American Revolution concluded, "Is life so dear, or peace so sweet, as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery? Forbid it, Almighty God! I know not what course others may take, but as for me, give me liberty or give me death!"[2]

It is a well-known irony of history that among those who fought for American independence from British rule—and couched their rhetoric in terms of "freedom" and "liberty"—were some of the largest slaveholders on the continent, including Henry.[3] In popular memory, their struggle against King George III has been valorized, but so have the efforts of those who sought emancipation for slaves. For example, historical markers now stand at key locations in Gabriel's career, and the Richmond History Center has made an artist's conception of Gabriel's image one of fifty key objects that define the city's story.[4] (Figure 1)

As Gabriel's adaptation of Henry's rhetoric demonstrates, opposing parties are known to assign conflicting meanings to shared symbols; flags are among the most prominent of these, as documented throughout vexillological literature.[5] Slaves who engaged in violent conflict with their masters often used flags modeled on those of their oppressors. Alternatively, they supplanted European flags with their own designs which often recalled important African symbols. This article catalogs instances of flag use in slave risings and explores the significance of these flags as shared symbols with contested meanings.
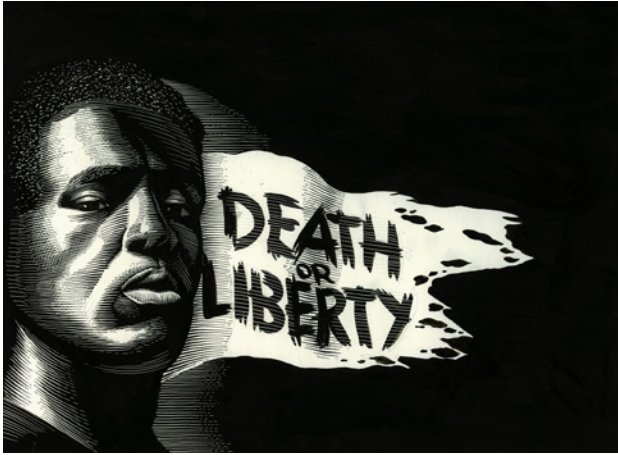
Figure 1. Mark Weakley, Death or Liberty *(1993). Source: Valentine Richmond History Center.*

Symbolic Conflict

The anthropologist Simon Harrison notes that "a shared symbol can become a site of struggle," as "groups with a long history of conflict may in fact be particularly likely to have much of their history and culture in common."[6] Elsewhere, Harrison posits a situation he calls "symbolic conflict." As he writes: "Competition for power, wealth, prestige, legitimacy or other political resources seems always to be accompanied by conflict over important symbols."[7] Just as Gabriel did, many slaves who rose against their masters chose to hoist a flag as one of the symbols of their cause. As Africans transplanted to the New World struggled to assert their self-mastery in the face of European subjugation, they either supplanted European flags with their own, or else adapted European flags to assign alternative meanings to them.

It is necessary to question the purpose of the flags flown by the slaves in their risings. Into the nineteenth century, European warfare required the use of flags to guide troops in their maneuvers. However, in most of the cases discussed here, except for the Haitian wars and the Stono Rebellion, the number of armed people was small enough that maneuver was not an important factor in the battles. Martial flags, nonetheless, fulfill other important purposes—particularly the projection of a group identity embodying armed might. For most enslaved people, the flags under which they were forced to labor were those of an army of white men; use by slaves of their own flags was a symbolic struggle against oppression that paralleled their physical efforts. An examination of the flags themselves will provide us with examples to understand this phenomenon.

Slavery and Resistance

With the European invasion of the Caribbean and South America during the sixteenth century, a new form of slavery arose in which enslaved people were bought in Africa, sold in the New World as commodities, and treated as inputs in an agricultural system of mass production. Using chattel slavery, Betty Wood notes, "the planters who bought captive Africans literally could afford to work their slaves to death. They were able to replace dead workers with newly imported men and women. In fact, the average life expectancy of an enslaved worker on the sugar estates of Brazil and the Caribbean was only around seven years after arrival from Africa."[8]

Resistance to slavery has a long history. The helots of ancient Sparta rose up twice in a century, and the revolt led by Spartacus against the Romans in 73 BC made him the "most famous slave in history."[9] Among Africans and African-Americans held as slaves in the New World, techniques of resistance were not limited to warfare. Subtle acts of what Peter Kolchin calls "silent sabotage"—such as "accidentally" breaking tools, working at the slowest pace possible, and feigning misunderstanding of orders—subverted in small ways a captor's hold on the enslaved person.[10] To escape what John Hope Franklin describes as "the harsh realities of everyday plantation life, the severe punishments for dereliction of duties, branding, mutilation, stealing, arson, murder, rape, and division of families, including the sale of children," many bondspeople ran away—often for just a few days, sometimes forever.[11] In several locations throughout the New World, escaped slaves created their own communities in the wilderness beyond the reach of European armies; these escapees, called maroons or *cimarrónes*, often found themselves engaged in warfare against those who would re-enslave them but occasionally were able to maintain their freedom.

However, the means of resistance most alarming to slaveholders was organized violence. Junius Rodriguez records that in the roughly 400 years that people of African descent were kept in chains in the New World, there were more than 60 major uprisings or plots to overthrow white oppressors, occurring in locales as widespread as Bahia, Brazil, and Albany, New York.[12] The first was in 1522—only thirty years after Columbus first sailed to the Caribbean—and the last was in 1864, the year before the United States permanently abolished slavery and two decades before Brazil became the last New World state to end slavery in 1888.

Slave risings occurred much more frequently in the Caribbean basin than in the area that is now the United States. Eugene Genovese suggests that the larger population of enslaved people in the tropics, coupled with a high ratio

of slaves to overseers—often 10 or 15 Africans to each European—"provided a favorable setting in which insurrectionary movements could mature."[13] In contrast, slaves in North America typically lived near whites and were more closely supervised, cutting off their opportunities to conspire.[14]

Although maroons were sometimes able to resist the colonial forces seeking to re-subject them, the risings of slaves against their masters were less successful. All but one of the New World slave risings were suppressed, usually with brutal tactics. In most cases, history does not record a flag used by the enslaved people, but in several episodes we do know of one.

Yanga

The earliest story of a flag used in slave rebellion occurred in Mexico in 1609 and involves a flag-like object rather than a cloth flag. A maroon named Yanga escaped from slavery near Veracruz and founded a maroon settlement, called a *palenque*, where he styled himself a king. When Yanga's soldiers learned of a Spanish expedition against the *palenque*, they made a pre-emptive attack against a hacienda, killing one Spaniard. That Spaniard was beheaded and his scalp mounted on a pole behind which Yanga's men trooped back to their homes. After nine years of sporadic warfare, Yanga and the Spanish viceroy reached an agreement in which the *palenque*, renamed San Lorenzo, became part of the Spanish colony; its citizens continued to live as free people, paying taxes, enjoying the rights of Spanish subjects, and governed by "captain" (rather than "king") Yanga.[15]

Stono

The next recorded use of flags in slave risings occurred in 1739 along the Stono River in South Carolina. On a quiet Sunday morning, twenty enslaved people led by a man named Jemmy broke into a warehouse and commandeered guns and powder. They proceeded southward toward Spanish Florida where they expected to find freedom. It is recorded that they marched with drums and a flag waving.[16] As they passed plantations, they burned buildings, killed white slaveholders, and recruited new marchers from the enslaved populace. At one point they "paused at a large field and 'set to dancing, singing and beating drums to draw more Negroes to them.'"[17] By chance, the lieutenant-governor of the colony met the column on the road and quickly turned to raise the militia. The next day the militia trapped the Africans—whose numbers had swollen to about ninety—on the banks of the Edisto River, defeated them in battle, and summarily executed the prisoners who surrendered. Their heads were mounted on mileposts along their march route.[18]

The army of the Stono Rebellion, largely composed of natives of the kingdom of Kongo, marched under white flags; if they bore any markings, it has not been recorded. The flags may have been constructed extemporaneously from materials obtained in the same warehouse as the guns and powder.[19]

Boni Maroons

Another flag of revolt was flown in Suriname in the 1770s. Several maroon settlements had been established miles away from the Dutch plantations on the coast. When the Dutch government began raids to disperse the maroon villages, the group of maroons led by a man named Boni began a series of wars that lasted from 1772 until 1791.[20] Numerous casualties and territorial losses led the Boni Maroons to surrender their autonomy, although they were never re-enslaved. During the first phase of the war, when they were defending their fort at Buku, the Boni Maroons displayed a yellow flag bordered in black, charged with a black lion.[21]

Saint-Domingue/Haiti

The most extensive selection of flags comes from the Haitian Revolution, which lasted from 1791 through 1804. This event, in a highly condensed narrative, started as a local slave rising which spread into open warfare occurring throughout the French colony then known as Saint-Domingue. As C. L. R. James pithily summarized the events of the following decade, "The slaves defeated in turn the local whites and the soldiers of the French monarchy, a Spanish invasion, a British expedition of some 60,000 men, and a French expedition of similar size under Bonaparte's brother-in-law."[22] After two years of warfare, the French revolutionary government, inspired by the ideals embodied in the Declaration of the Rights of Man, agreed to emancipation of all slaves in the colony in 1793. Until 1804, Saint-Domingue remained part of the French empire, governed semi-democratically under the leadership of Toussaint Louverture. But the rise of Napoléon Bonaparte as military dictator of France led to a change in policy, and in 1802 he sent an army under his brother-in-law Charles Leclerc to re-enslave the citizens of Saint-Domingue. The guerilla war that followed was exceptionally bloody—along with yellow fever, it killed well over half the French expeditionary force, and the French in turn committed countless outrages against civilians and prisoners. The final withdrawal of French troops in 1803 was accompanied by a declaration of independence and a new name for the country: Haiti, which derived from a name used by Taino Indians who had lived there at the time of Columbus.[23]

In the earliest days of the rising, some of the forces fighting in the northern province rallied under a flag, on which "was inscribed a motto calling for death to all whites."[24] Others used their flags to take a side in the ongoing French Revolution. In 1791, France was still a constitutional monarchy, and some of the Africans in Saint-Domingue had confidence in the king as a protector of their freedoms. One of the armies fighting in the north outfitted itself in royalist insignia, including a flag "soiled by the fleur-de-lis, and by the motto 'Long live Louis XVI'."[25]

As word of changes in France reached Saint-Domingue, some leaders hoped to reconcile royalist and republican sentiments: another army in 1793 marched behind a French tricolor with three *fleurs-de-lis*.[26] However, it is reported that when emancipation was declared, troops still carrying royalist flags "threw them down and took up the flag of the Republic."[27]

The period between emancipation and the rise of Bonaparte saw Haitians using the republican tricolor as a constituent province of France; however, Odette Fombrun records that Louverture assigned a special ensign to vessels of the provincial government—a white flag with the "head of a black man in the center."[28]

The two years of the final war for independence offer a confusing chronology in which many flags were flown—their documentation is often questionable—a situation which was paralleled in the development of the United States flag during the Revolutionary War. All the details are recorded by Fombrun, but two of the most famous flag-related events are worth noting.

It should be understood that the French army which arrived in Saint-Domingue in 1802 came under a cloak of subterfuge. Bonaparte had sent the forces, according to Carolyn Fick, to allegedly "protect the colony, preserve its peace and tranquility, and suppress any rebel elements that might emerge."[29] The army was to carry a tricolor flag inscribed with the motto, "Brave Blacks, remember that the French people only recognize your freedom and equality of your rights."[30] Louverture, who had nominal command over the forces, rejected this flag.

Over the next months, as the intentions of the French army to re-impose slavery became clear, there were a series of shifting alliances as some Haitian soldiers sided with the French while others fought against them. It is notable, however, that forces on all sides used flags derived from the republican tricolor. The emancipation promulgated by the republican government in 1793 had put to rest any monarchist sentiment among Haitians.[31]

There is a semi-mythical flag origin story that survives in Haitian folk memory. During the war, Louverture was forced to submit his forces to French control and was later captured and exiled to France. Leadership of the anti-French forces came into question, as did their flags. Jean-Jacques Dessalines was a Haitian general who served under Louverture and then aligned his troops with the French. However, he eventually embraced the cause of Haitian independence and was acknowledged as the leader of the Haitian struggle against the French. Because of the strong attachment to the tricolor as a symbol of emancipation, he continued to fly that flag—at the same time that Bonaparte's armies also marched behind it. The legend is that in the spring of 1803 Dessalines received reports that some Haitians suspected he was still aligned with the French because of his flag. In a dramatic moment, Dessalines personally slashed out the white stripe of the tricolor with his sword, or else tore it out with his bare hands—and a seamstress named Catherine Flon, the Betsy Ross of Haiti, sewed the red stripe onto the blue hoist, making a new flag for the independence movement. This moment is celebrated in Haitian art and song (Figure 2), and is even commemorated with a national holiday, the *jour du drapeau* on May 18. Both Fombrun and Philippe Girard offer considerable evidence that the event likely never happened in such a dramatic fashion and that the flags of the independence forces varied considerably.[32]

Figure 2. Madsen Mompremier, Dessalines Ripping the White from the Flag *(1995). Source: © Photo courtesy of the Fowler Museum at UCLA.*

P. C. Lux-Wurm has shown the tradition of white flags for France was developed prior to the emergence of notions of a white race.[33] Nonetheless,

an enduring association of the white stripe with the French oppressor remains part of Haitian folk culture, and the symbolic significance of removing the white stripe as a prelude to forcing the French from the island is indisputable.[34]

Although Fombrun documents the plain blue-and-red flag used by Dessalines, João Pedro Marques claims that Dessalines fought "under a new flag carrying the motto 'Liberty or Death'."[35] It is entirely possible, of course, that multiple flags were used by his forces.

Fédon

The French emancipation decree of 1793 extended beyond Haiti to all of its Caribbean colonies—and was a motivating factor in the 1795 rebellion in Grenada, led by Julien Fédon. Grenada was a French colony until 1763 when the British gained control. In 1795, Fédon, a free mulatto who owned a plantation in Grenada, marched with a band of free blacks and slaves on the British government's headquarters. The subsequent armed rising against British rule involved about half the island's 25,000 slaves, who enjoyed their freedom for a year until reinforcements helped the British defeat Fédon's army and push the Africans back into chains.[36]

The flag bearer of Fédon's troops carried a French tricolor bearing the phrase "Freedom and Equality, or Death."[37] This flag had been a gift to the rebels from the republican government of the neighboring French island Guadeloupe—along with weapons and other symbols of republicanism, including tricolor cockades and liberty caps for the troops.[38]

German Coast

Many of the Francophone slaveholders who had fled Saint-Domingue in the 1790s settled in Louisiana, a Spanish colony with a large Francophone population which became part of the United States in 1803. In 1811, they faced another slave rising. Along the German Coast, an area of plantations about 30 miles up the Mississippi River from New Orleans, Charles Deslondes gathered a group of his fellow slaves and seized weapons from the local armory. This was by far the largest slave rising in American history, as several hundred people took up arms to fight for their freedom and the rising occupied several counties.[39] As the group marched east and gathered followers, witnesses recalled them beating drums and waving flags.[40] When the New Orleans militia met the marchers in a pitched battle, the slaves were scattered into the woods and hunted down—after which their bodies were displayed in public. Although sources do not describe the flags, Walter

Johnson suggests that because many of those involved in the rising were also Kongolese, they may have resembled those used at Stono in 1739.[41] Alternatively, Daniel Rasmussen suggests that Igbo warriors from Nigeria had a tradition of carrying red flags into battle.[42]

Aponte

Further south in the Spanish colony of Cuba, a much briefer wave of violence broke out in 1812. José Antonio Aponte, a free black, organized a small group of slaves to kill their overseers and burn their plantations. Although the rising spread to a few neighboring plantations, the militia were able to repress the insurrection and arrest its leaders.[43] While the events were short-lived, memories of the rising were cherished in secret, and in 1836 Spanish authorities discovered a flag used by Aponte's group. David Geggus reports that it "bore a plumed cocked hat (as worn by Haitian officials) in place of the royal crown."[44]

Bussa

Four years later, the British colony of Barbados witnessed a slave rising led by a ranger, or enslaved plantation manager, named Bussa. The rising started with arson on a single estate, and within a day seventy plantations were aflame, but whites were not killed. The rebels seized arms and formed a column, led by a standard bearer.

Remarkably, his name is known to history—Johnny, from Bailey's plantation at the easternmost point of the island[45]—and the flags used in Bussa's revolt are the best documented of any discussed in this paper. Michael Craton records that "the flag was either that described later as being of white cotton with crudely drawn figures and a motto that 'from the spelling of the words . . . is conjectured to have been the work of a frenchman' or one of those notorious flags (now unfortunately lost) 'on which Black Men and White Women were introduced together.'"[46] Craton is referring to a flag reported by white witnesses on which a "rude drawing served to inflame the Passions, by representing the Union of a Black Man with a White Female"; but he regards such a flag as figment of the imagination of agitated slave-masters.[47]

However, David Lambert finds evidence that several flags bearing a variation on the theme of interracial mingling were flown by Bussa's warriors. "One of their flags [represented] . . . a white woman kneeling to a black man, in the act of raising her from her suppliant servitude, with the motto of 'Wilberforce for ever.'"[48] (Figure 3)
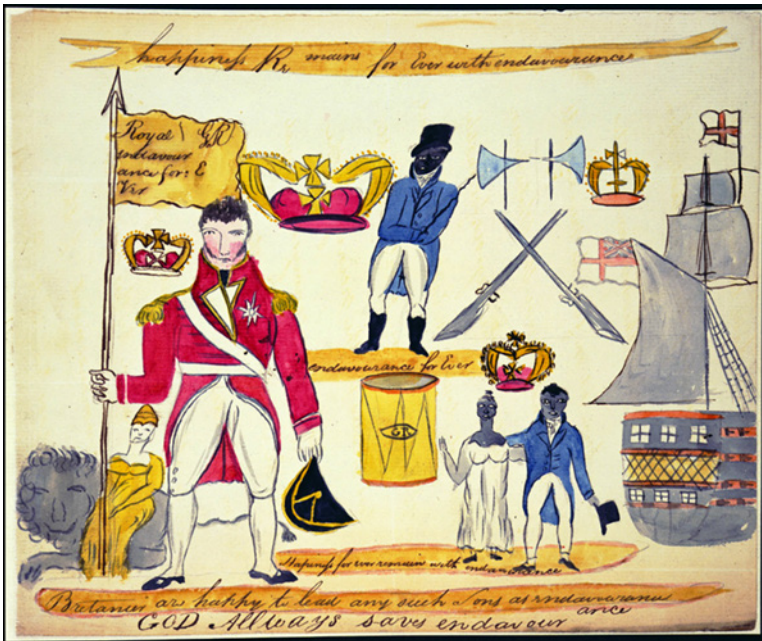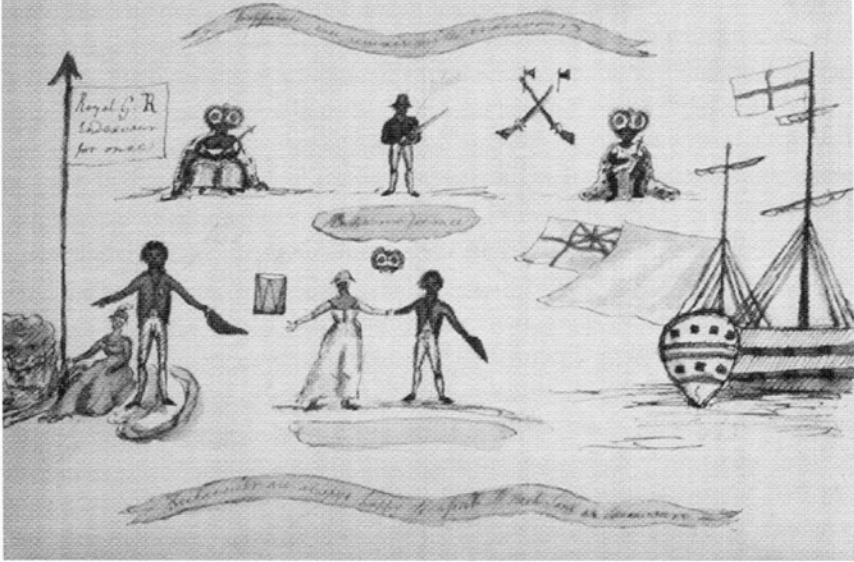
Figure 3. Alternate renditions of the flag flown during Bussa's rebellion. Sources: Top: David Lambert, White Creole Culture, Politics, and Identity during the Age of Abolition *(New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005). Bottom: The National Archives (United Kingdom), www.flickr.com/photos/nationalarchives.*

Lambert's book includes the drawings in Figure 3, which upon close inspection appear to be renderings of the same design.

The mottos read: "Happiness ever remains the endeavor"; "Royal G.R. Endeavour for once"; "endeavour for once"; and "Britannier are always happy to assist all such sons as endeavour."

Another source unearthed by Lambert "described a flag portraying 'a black chief, with a white woman, with clasped hands, imploring mercy.'"[49] Karl Watson also reports a flag with a "composite drawing . . . [including a] British lion, white woman and slave appealing to royal authority."[50] These may all be the same flag shown in Figure 3.

Despite the abundance of flags, Bussa's troops were repulsed twice in battle against the largely black militia of Barbados; British commanders in pursuit of the fleeing rebels burned many slave quarters and brought at least 300 men to trial—over 100 of whom were executed and their heads posted on spikes at the plantations whence they rose.[51]

Negro Fort

A particular class of maroons in Florida were called the Black Seminoles. For many decades in the eighteenth-century, Spanish rivalry with the British colonies in Georgia and the Carolinas led the Spanish to encourage slaves to escape to Spanish Florida, where they were emancipated. These free blacks often lived with the Seminole Indians of north Florida, where they became neighbors and comrades-in-arms. In a complicated series of events, the War of 1812 found a British force invading north Florida and establishing a fort along the Apalachicola River, which they garrisoned with volunteers from the Black Seminoles. When the British withdrew after the Treaty of Ghent was signed, the Spanish authorities refused to assure the American general Andrew Jackson that they would halt the flow of runaway slaves. In 1816, Jackson ordered an American invasion to suppress and re-enslave the Black Seminoles, and the fort along the Apalachicola became a battlefield in the First Seminole War. It is recorded that the Black Seminoles flew a red flag with the Union Jack above it. The battle of Negro Fort ended when the Americans shot a red-hot cannonball into the powder magazine of the fort, leveling the entire structure and and killing four-fifths of its inhabitants. The First Seminole War ended by Spain selling all of Florida to the United States, thereby ensuring that the Black Seminoles would find no refuge in that state. Many later fled to the Bahamas.[52]

Demerara

One of the largest slave risings involved nearly 10,000 people in the British colony of Demerara, now part of Guyana. In the dark of night on 17 August 1823, an itinerant enslaved cooper named Jack Gladstone—whose owner was the father of future British prime minister William Gladstone—spread the word among several plantations that 6:00 a.m. would mark the time for the enslaved people of Demerara to overthrow their oppressors. In nearly 50 separate locations, Africans rose up and locked away whites on their plantations, often in the same stocks that had been used to discipline slaves; very few whites were killed.[53] Due to the distances between plantations, the rebels formed into several armed bands to take on the British militia. The soldiers fighting against them testified that at least two of the groups displayed a black flag as their standard.[54] The Demerara rising concluded with another incidence of the rebels scattered by superior European firepower.

Bahia

The next decade saw two vexilliferous slave risings in the Brazilian province of Bahia. In 1826 the Cachoeira district witnessed a rising which declared its leaders "King and Queen of the Blacks"; during the ensuing battle the rebels flew a red flag and their king wore a crown and a green cape with gilded decorations.[55]

The Malês of Bahia were next to rise. This group of enslaved Muslims chose the propitious date of Lailat at-Qadr—a feast commemorating the revelation of the Koran—which was another quiet Sunday, 27 January 1835. Before the attack on the authorities of the city of Salvador commenced, the conspirators gathered in the chambers of their leader Manuel Calafate, and swore their loyalty upon "a rod and a white handkerchief with a purple border, like a flag with six little bags made of leather and cloth."[56] Although the rising spread throughout the city, the band of armed Malês never attacked anyone other than the Bahian police; despite their best efforts to escape the confines of Salvador, the Malês were defeated by Brazilian cavalry and their community suffered punitive persecution for months after the rising.

Slaves in Latin American Wars of Independence

It may be noted that the abolition of slavery in many Spanish-speaking Latin American countries accompanied the overthrow of Spanish colonial rule in the first half of the nineteenth century. Both enslaved people and recently

freed slaves were sometimes part of the armies seeking independence. Formerly enslaved soldiers who fought with José María Morelos in México rode under a black flag.[57] Those serving under José Gervasio Artigas in Uruguay used the blue and white flag of Argentina modified by the addition of a diagonal red stripe (this flag is now the naval jack of Uruguay), and the soldiers of José de San Martín in Chile used the blue and white horizontal bicolor of the "Andes Army."[58]

Expansionary Contests

The flags used during slave risings were seldom arbitrary designs. Instead, they called upon flag tropes well-known either among the enslaved population or to the oppressors. In either situation, the use of these flags was an occasion of symbolic conflict, the situation identified by Harrison in which conflict or competition among groups is accompanied by a struggle over the prominence or meaning of symbols.

According to Harrison, there are four types of symbolic conflict—two of which are represented in the flags of slave risings. Harrison calls the first type of flag conflict "expansionary contests": "In this, a group tries to displace its competitors' symbols of identity with its own symbols."[59] For enslaved peoples, such symbols were not simply developed anew in the Americas—long traditions of flag use in Africa informed the designs used in slave risings.

Another of the ironies of history is that trans-Atlantic slavery, whose very existence relied upon the deracination of millions of people, was a means of perpetuating and spreading the cultures of Africa in new lands. Although Africans who survived the Middle Passage had no knowledge of their destinations (and in fact often feared they were being transported to be eaten by white people), the slave traders who bought and sold them were keen to match the skills and attributes of their prisoners to the needs of the planters who formed their market. For example, rice plantations in the Carolinas were populated by slaves whose origins were in a region of Sierra Leone where rice was grown.[60] As a result, most of the slaves in the rice belt of the Carolinas shared the Mende language, religion, and culture, even if they worked on plantations with other Africans from strange villages. The same process in other colonies allowed for the religious and cultural legacy of various African nations to blend with the practices imposed by European masters and create a unique Afro-American hybrid culture—what Robert Farris Thompson calls "Africa *reblended.*"[61] Slaves searching for flags to convey their African identity would draw upon designs widely recognized throughout West Africa, rather than local symbols.

Recalling the Stono River rising, scholars highlight the significance of drums and flags displayed together. It is known that most of those involved in the risings were natives of the kingdom of Kongo located in the area around the mouth of the Congo River, including parts of both modern republics named Congo as well as Angola. John Thornton ascribes the particular combination of drums, dancing, and flags to established Kongolese military traditions; on the other hand, Mark Smith claims that the use of drums and pure white flags recalls ceremonies of Marian veneration typical of the Roman Catholic faith as it was practiced in Kongo.[62] The white flags of the Stono rebellion also hearken to the flags carried into battle by the army of the Kongolese emperor—a white flag with a dark-colored cross in the center.[63]

Whatever the pattern of the flag, it is clear that the Africans were reclaiming their warrior traditions of flag use to assert their group identity as proud free people. The predominance of red and black colors in the flags used, for example, in Demerara, the Negro Fort, and Bahia, have their roots in the competing religious traditions of West Africa. On one hand, these colors are frequently used in ceremonies of the "traditional" Niger-Congo polytheistic religion of West Africa—for instance, in designs celebrating the deity Elegguá, or Èṣù.[64] Èṣù holds the power over a person's fortune and his aid is invoked for new ventures, such as a rising against one's oppressors.[65] On the other hand, Islam has been practiced in West Africa since the tenth century, and red and black flags have been established markers of Muslim armies since medieval times.[66] The lion of the Boni Maroons is another Islamic symbol—tradition records that Ali, son-in-law of the prophet Muhammad, "carried a black flag charged with the figure of a lion."[67]

The Malês of Bahia, as well, called upon their religious tradition in shaping a flag of the traditional Muslim pattern to give courage to their conspirators. Most of the Malês traced their faith to their homeland in the Hausa nations of modern Nigeria. The Hausa had a tradition of military conquest that arose at the same time their rulers embraced Islam—providing Muslim flags with an aura of power.[68]

Proprietary Contests

The other strand of symbolic conflict is embodied in those occasions when enslaved people claimed symbols of European ideas for themselves, such as Gabriel's plans to use Patrick Henry's famous phrase, or the adoption of the French revolutionary tricolor by Haitian armies. Harrison calls these "proprietary contests": "a struggle for the . . . control of some important collective symbol."[69]

Since 1789, the tricolor has served as the flag of France—through constitutional monarchy, Jacobin radicalism, military dictatorship, Bourbon restoration, and the bourgeois republics of the last century. However, in the earliest phases of the French and Haitian revolutions, the tricolor had strong associations with emancipation and human equality. That Haitians recognized this symbolism can be seen both in the swift abandonment of royalist flags after emancipation in 1793, and in their struggle to retain the tricolor as a symbol for Haitians after Bonaparte's troops arrived to re-enslave them while also flying the tricolor. The Bonapartists were attempting to shift the meaning of the tricolor from "liberty and equality" to "glory"; Dessalines, by removing the white stripe whose origins lay in the royal flag, fought back by transforming the remnants of the flag of the revolution into a unique design for Haitians. Fédon's tricolor is also part of this symbolic conflict.

The flags used in Bussa's rebellion on Barbados play upon common English visual tropes to create new meaning. A young woman, personifying Britannia, was commonly seen in British iconography as the embodiment of British dominion;[70] in fact, she was the main figure in the seal of the colonial Barbadian government, and her trident lives on in the flag of independent Barbados. (Figure 4) The Barbadian slaves who reversed her position from enthroned to prostrate repurposed this symbol from a sign of dominance to one of weakness.

The struggle for the meaning of the symbol had practical consequences as well. As Karl Watson notes, a flag displaying a black man coupling with a white woman was "a deliberately calculated insult," given white mores about interracial sex, and spurred the white militia to greater fervor in their battles against Bussa's men.[71]

Figure 4. Postage stamp of colonial Barbados, showing the governmental seal with Britannia. Source: Stan Shebs, wikipedia.commons.org.

Conclusion

Looking forward a century or more, we can see the same symbolic conflict—in both its expansionary and proprietary contests—as former colonies

in Africa and Asia adopted new flags that sometimes recalled those of their occupiers, and sometimes asserted age-old cultural identities in their flag designs. Examples of post-colonial flags that carry forward the designs of former occupying powers include Fiji and Tuvalu, which include the British Union Flag. Less obviously, but no less importantly, many former French colonies in Africa have either explicitly incorporated French colors (Chad, Central African Republic) or emulated the vertical stripes of *Le Tricolore* (Senegal, Cameroon, Guinea, Mali, Côte d'Ivoire). As Healy has shown, the vertical tribar, regardless of its colors, has universally been acknowledged as the flag of democratic republics—an attribution directly related to its origins during the French Revolution.[72]

Other post-colonial flags resurrect those of former pre-colored regimes. Examples include Sri Lanka's lion from the kingdom of Kandy, Tunisia's revival of a modified Ottoman flag, and the flags which use the pan-Arab colors of green, white, red, and black, which had been associated with Arab caliphs and kings since the Hejira.[73]

Slave risings were sometimes spontaneous but often carefully planned. In either case, we see through the use of flags drawing upon African traditions and European enlightenment symbols that mere physical freedom was only one of the motivations for the struggle. The enslaved people were also fighting on symbolic terms to claim their group identity as powerful, equal humans. As Gabriel turned Patrick Henry's words around to claim their power for his own people, so did the Haitians who adapted the French tricolor and the Africans who displaced the designs of their oppressors with their own African-inspired flags.

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End Notes

1. Egerton, *Gabriel's Rebellion*, 51.

2. Henry, "Speech to the Virginia Revolutionary Convention in Opposition to the Intolerable Acts (1775), 982–83.

3. During the first two decades of American independence, Henry increased his slave holdings from 42 people in 1777 to over 100 people in 1797. Meade, *Patrick Henry*, 165 and 437.

4. "A History of Richmond in 50 Objects," Valentine Richmond History Center, http://www.richmondhistorycenter.com/exhibitions/online/RVA50.

5. See, for example, Baert and Harmignes, "Rexist Flags and Insignia" ; Crampton, "The Promotion and Acceptance of Political Symbols with Particular Reference to the German Flaggenstreit of 1926"; Guenter, "The Hippies and the Hardhats: The Struggle for Semiotic Control of the Flag of the United States in the 1960s"; Rabbow, "Flags: Life After Death"; Goldstein, "The Vietnam War Flag Flap"; Goldstein, "Whatever Happened to the Great 1989–90 American Flag Desecration Uproar?"; Culmer, "Trial by Jury in the Court of Public Opinion"; Moss, "'Yes, There is a Reason I Salute the Flag'"; Brownell, "The Cartoonist's View of the South African National Flag"; Purcell, "U.S. Civic Flags in Conflict with the Courts"; Whitney Smith, "'One Nation Under God'"; Jackson, "Georgia: The Long Search for a State Flag"; Donovan, "Two Irish Flags"; Jilek, "Symbols in the Spanish Civil War"; de la Brosse, "Flag Display and Precedence in Québec"; Coski, *The Confederate Battle Flag*; Carrión, "The War of the Flags"; Newman, "Old Times There Are Not Forgotten"; Whitney Smith, "Karl Marx and the American Flag"; Palmer, Cassidy, and Palmer, "The Pink, White, and Green of the Newfoundland Cultural Landscape"; Leib and Webster, "Black, White or Green?"; Gelber, "Political Culture, Flag Use and Freedom of Speech"; Burton, "Flagging Enthusiasm."

6. Harrison, "The Politics of Resemblance," 227.

7. Harrison, "Four Types of Symbolic Conflict," 255.

8. Betty Wood, "The Origins of Slavery in the Americas, 1500–1700," 65.

9. Powell, *Athens and Sparta*, 19.

10. Kolchin, *American Slavery*, 157.

11. Franklin and Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves*, xiii.

12. Rodriguez, *Encyclopedia of Slave Resistance and Rebellion*, xliv–xlix.

13. Genovese, *From Rebellion to Revolution*, 13.

14. Heuman, "Slave Rebellions," 221.

15. Landers, "*Cimarrón* and Citizen," 121–29.

16. Peter Wood, *Black Majority*, 314–17.

17. Thornton, "African Dimensions of the Stono Rebellion."

18. Peter Wood, *Black Majority*, 317.

19. Olwell, *Masters, Slaves and Subjects*, 22n12.

20. de Groot, "The Boni Maroon War 1765–1793, Surinam and French Guyana," 30–48.

21. Hoogbergen, *The Boni Maroon Wars in Suriname*, 75.

22. James, *The Black Jacobins*, ix.

23. Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*.

24. Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 110.

25. J. Ph. Garron de Coulon, quoted in Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 106.

26. Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 107.

27. Ibid., 158–59.

28. Fombrun, *History of the Haitian Flag of Independence*, 13.

29. Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 210.

30. Girard, "Birth of a Nation," 139.

31. Ibid.

32. Ibid.

33. Lux-Wurm, "The Development and Meanings of White," 129–35.

34. Whitney Smith, "Current Flag Usage in Haiti," 184.

35. Marques, "Slave Revolts and the Abolition of Slavery: An Overinterpretation," 24.

36. Candlin, *The Last Caribbean Frontier, 1795–1815*, 1–23.

37. Turnbull, *A Narrative of the Revolt and Insurrection of the French Inhabitants in the Island of Grenada*, 16.

38. Candlin, *The Last Caribbean Frontier*, 17.

39. Rasmussen, *American Uprising*.

40. Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams*, 19.

41. Ibid., 427n2.

42. Rasmussen, *American Uprising*, 26.

43. Childs, *The 1812 Aponte Rebellion in Cuba*.

44. Geggus, "Slavery, War, and Revolution in the Greater Caribbean, 1789–1815," 46n166.

45. Craton, *Testing the Chains*, 260–63.

46. Ibid., 263.

47. Edward Codd, quoted in Craton, *Testing the Chains*, 372n33.

48. David Lambert, *White Creole Culture*, 130.

49. *Annual Register for the Year 1816*, quoted in Lambert, *White Creole Culture*, 132n81.

50. Watson, "The Iconography of the 1816 Slave Revolt," 43.

51. Craton, *Testing the Chains*, 264.

52. Mulroy, *Freedom on the Border*, 6–17.

53. Craton, *Testing the Chains*, 267–90.

54. Bryant, *Account of an Insurrection*, 24 and 26.

55. Reis, *Slave Rebellion in Brazil*, 55.

56. Caetano Vicente de Almeida Galião, quoted in João José Reis, *Slave Rebellion in Brazil*, 117.

57. Vincent, "The Blacks Who Freed Mexico," 259.

58. Blanchard, *Under the Flags of Freedom*, 1–3.

59. Harrison, "Four Types of Symbolic Conflict," 263.

60. Rawley and Behrendt, *The Transatlantic Slave Trade*, 265.

61. Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*, 165.

62. Thornton, "African Dimensions of the Stono Rebellion," 1111; Mark M. Smith, "Remembering Mary, Shaping Revolt," 529–31.

63. Whitney Smith, "500 Years of Congo Flags," 172n13.

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66. Musa, "Origins of the Arab Revolt Flag," 266.

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68. Falola and Heaton, *A History of Nigeria*, 29–32.

69. Harrison, "Four Types of Symbolic Conflict," 258.

70. Major, *Madam Britannia*.

71. Watson, "The Iconography of the 1816 Revolt," 45.

72. Healy, "Evolutionary Vexillology," 41–64.

73. Musa, "Origins of the Arab Revolt Flag"; Wyllie, "Origins of the Colors of Islam."

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