Liberian County Flags in Historical and Cultural Context

Steven A. Knowlton

Abstract.   The flags of Liberia's counties are often derided in social media forums as "childish", "poorly designed", or "ugly". However, such judgments, derived from European flag design traditions, fail to account for the cultural and political context in which the flags were created. This paper explores the historical circumstances of their introduction in the mid-1960s—a time of rising discontent among indigenous Liberians opposed to the government dominated by Americo-Liberians. The introduction of county flags—which draw upon Americo-Liberian quilting traditions and serve as a genre of flag design unique to the nation—served the political and cultural purposes of the ruling elite. This paper also addresses the reception by European and American audiences of flags employing an African artistic tradition, and how that reception is reflected in social media discussions of Liberian county flags.

Social Media Discovers Liberian Flags

Each of Liberia's fifteen counties has a flag, and they share a certain design aesthetic (Figure 1). That aesthetic has provoked widespread ridicule among those who discuss flags on social media. Commenters call them "abnormally unprofessional",[1] "horrifying",[2] "hideous",[3] and "a vivid example of bad taste and bad design";[4] note that "they look like they were made in MS Paint";[5] observe that the flags look like they were drawn by "4 y.o. [year-old] kid";[6] refer

to them as "the gold standard in awful flag design… a form of torture";[7] think they "look like they were taken directly off some parent's refrigerator";[8] and declare, "I would like to say they've used clip art, but I don't know where you would find clip art that bad".[9] Others ask, "Which one do you dislike the most? LRL [laughing really loud]"[10] and "can we just take a moment to understand Liberia's urgent need for good graphic designers… I am distraught".[11] Although discussion of Liberian county flags appears in most social media platforms, it is most common in Facebook and Reddit, where discussion of flags is quite common compared to other platforms.

While the references to Microsoft Paint and clip art—two rather unsophisticated types of computer graphic software—are bizarre when discussing flags

Figure 1. Liberian stamps showing the county flags. (CaptainCrape post to Reddit r/vexillology, <reddit.com/r/vexillology/comments/71uto9/liberian_county_flag_stamps>)

introduced in the 1960s (and reflect a rather computer-centric view of flag-design that detaches it from the fabrication of actual textile objects), the consensus among commentators seems to be that the county flags of Liberia are childishly simple in their renderings of the objects that serve as their charges. Negative comments outnumber positive comments roughly tenfold. (Ironically, those flags that feature the most naturalistic renderings of their charges—typically civic flags with detailed seals—also come in for a fair share of online abuse.)

Stylization and Genre in Vexillography

Criticism on social media comes from all corners and does not necessarily reflect the opinions of those who are well-versed in vexillology or design. (There is little discussion of Liberian flags in formal vexillological literature.) Nonetheless, those who engage with flags informally on the internet are in some way intersecting with vexillology and it behooves those undertaking more formal vexillological investigation to consider popular understandings of flags. As Scot Guenter notes, flag design and aesthetic judgment of flags is a popular practice among flag enthusiasts.[12]

The specific criticisms of Liberian county flags—that they are crudely drawn or childish—ignores that fact that almost all flags feature stylized images. Rather than carping that the cross of Sweden lacks appropriate woodgrain and nail holes, or that Vietnam's star is insufficiently scintillated, most flag design critics accept that symbols are reproduced "through simplification, exaggeration, or idealization" rather than in exacting detail (Figure 2).[13] Stylization is "ubiquitous and most likely quite unavoidable" due to the gap between what is seen and the technology available to reproduce it in an artistic medium; this is all the more true when working in textiles, which are less amenable to detailed depictions than oil paints or lithography.[14] The manner in which stylization is accomplished is one of the markers of a shared culture: audiences who employ a common visual vocabulary will recognize the salient features of an object—typically its silhouette, and the caricature-like inclusion of distinctive attributes—despite their stylization, while "a true grasp of its style by any external group is impossible, because the stylistic character of these objects is impenetrable to all but the cultural group that originally created" them.[15]

Popular understandings of "good flag design" often elevate flags that are stylized in a way similar to heraldic designs. This European artistic tradi-

Figure 2. Top row: the flag of Sweden and a wooden cross; Lower row: the flag of Vietnam and the star Vega. (Sources: <freeimages.com>; Ihar, "BBC Cross", <flickr. com/photos/ihar/30611184>; WINHON Flags & Decoratives Store, <aliexpress. com/item/32856734126.html>; Sabri Zain, "Fancy a bit of astronomical scintillation?", <longstantonskies.blogspot.com/2012/04/fancy-bit-of-astronomical-scintillation.html>)

tion features stylization of animals, crowns, mountains, and other charges using techniques originally developed to paint the shields of armored knights. Another European flag tradition, that of striped flags with or without simple heraldic-style charges, is also highly favored in social media discussions of flag design. (Interestingly, many flags designed in either of these styles could also easily be drawn in Microsoft Paint.) When faced with a vexillological pattern that derives from a different tradition, many outsiders fail to grasp that it is stylization rather than ineffectual artistic rendering.

As Željko Heimer observes, one of the aims of vexillology is to identify the means by which flags serve as collective symbols that both face "inward" by speaking to members of a group using shared symbolism and face "outward" by presenting the group as a unified body to external observers.[16] Stylization has an inward-facing aspect to it, as it draws upon shared knowledge of how objects are transformed in an artistic tradition.

Stylization on flags, then, is one way of creating a "genre" of flags. Each "family" of flags—heraldic flags, sigillistic flags, Japanese prefecture flags— can be distinguished in part by the technique of stylization employed in the

design of its flags. Liberian county flags may be seen as their own genre of flags, drawing upon a tradition of textile arts not used in other flag genres: the quilt.

As Perry Dane notes, "genres—even successful ones—have a history. And flags themselves—as political symbols, markers of identity, and carriers of emotional resonance—also have a history. And all that history might have a good deal to say about a particular genre's place in flag design."[17] To explicate the way that quilting traditions, with their own methods of stylization, were employed to create the genre of Liberian county flags—and the political and cultural purposes of the creation of that genre—let us begin with some history of the flags, and the nation they represent.

The Historical Context of Liberia's County Flags

Overview of Liberia

The flags for nine of Liberia's counties were first presented on 29 November 1965 on the occasion of the 70th birthday of President William V. S. Tubman, as a gift from Tubman to the counties (Figure 3). (There were only nine counties at the time; later flags were adopted as more counties were created.)[18] The flag presentations were preceded by the creation of new counties from areas that were previously governed as frontier provinces. The complex intersection

Figure 3. A display of Liberian county flags surrounding the national flag. (<emansion.gov.lr/images/front/flagsDSC_0456.jpg>)

of circumstances—a national celebration of the president's birthday, the creation of new political structures—gives context to the investigation into the political and cultural milieu in which the flags' designers operated. A brief overview of the developments of Liberian history leading to 1965 must form the foundation of the analysis.

Liberia is a sparsely populated country that stretches along 550 kilometers of the West African coast, extending about 200 kilometers inland. Although its population approaches 5,000,000 today, in the 1960s there were a little over 1,000,000 residents.[19] Before the 16th century, people speaking languages in the Kruan family moved westward into the area and settled alongside Mel-speaking residents, who had lived there since before 1300.[20] Around 1500, Mande-speaking people left the savannas north of Liberia and made homes in the forested areas.[21] By the 19th century, 16 ethnic groups lived within the current borders (Figure 4).[22]

Generally speaking, land was owned collectively by the residents of a community, with a focus on subsistence agriculture, although surplus was used for trade. After Portuguese voyagers first contacted residents of the area in 1461, a
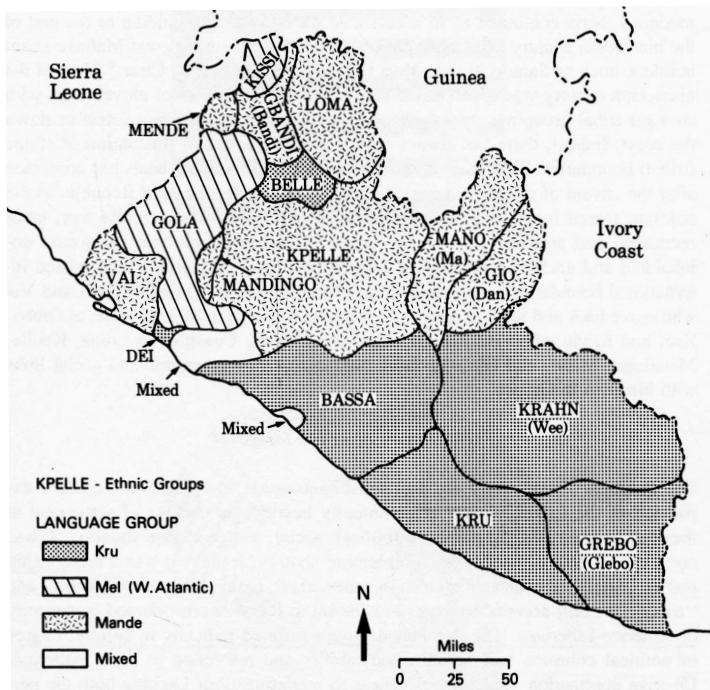

Figure 4. Ethnic groups of Liberia. (Liebenow, Liberia: The Quest for Democracy)

system of exchange emerged in which European goods were traded for agricultural products, gold, and slaves. The area became known as the Pepper Coast or the Grain Coast, for the melegueta peppers, also called "grains of paradise", acquired there. However, there was no European encroachment upon the independence of the peoples living along the Grain Coast or its interior.[23]

The Colonization of Liberia by Free Blacks from the United States

During the early 19th century, the United States was experiencing a change in the way some enslaved people were treated. In many of the northern states, gradual abolition of slavery took place during the late 18th and early 19th century, resulting in a growing population of people called "free blacks". While no longer enslaved, free blacks did not enjoy equal rights with white people; for example, they could not vote and were limited in the occupations they were able to pursue. A number of prominent white leaders were concerned that the presence of free blacks would destabilize the slave society of the United States, as their example would discourage enslaved black people from accepting their fate, and would blur the "color line" that required black people to be enslaved and white people to be free. There was also concern that free blacks would organize mass risings of enslaved people against their captors.[24]

An idea that was frequently voiced throughout the period was that free blacks should leave the United States, perhaps to go to Africa or to Haiti. While this idea was resisted by most free blacks, it gained credence among influential white leaders. In 1816, the American Colonization Society (ACS) was formed for the purpose of encouraging free blacks to move to Africa. With the cooperation of President James Monroe, in 1821 a U.S. Navy officer named Robert Stockton acquired territory on the Grain Coast by threatening a local leader with execution, and the ACS became the administrator of a "colony" for free blacks.[25] Despite the general unpopularity of colonization among the free black population, there were some people willing to risk the venture, and in 1822 the ship *Elizabeth* sailed into the harbor at Cape Mesurado bearing 88 free blacks, the first Americans to make their homes in the region. The colony was named Liberia, from the Latin *liber*, meaning "free", and the capital named Monrovia, in recognition of the support the ACS had received from Monroe.[26]

The American settlers were not necessarily welcomed by the indigenous inhabitants of Liberia, and a number of military conflicts ensued. Nonetheless, over the next three decades immigration from the United States continued and settlements were established at several locations along the coast and

the banks of large rivers. The American towns were under the administration of the ACS, or the other colonization societies that sponsored them, such as the Mississippi State Colonization Society. After a series of incidents in which British officers refused to acknowledge the authority of the ACS administration over the settlements—among other actions, the British would not recognize the flag of Liberia as that of a sovereign state—expatriate Americans declared Liberia an independent nation in 1847; around 3,000 citizens were subject to the newly established constitution.[27]

While the Republic of Liberia was a unitary, not federal, state, its counties were an important part of its politics. The original constitution called for legislative representation to be apportioned among the three original counties of Montserrado, Grand Bassa, and Sinoe.[28] Each county comprised settlements that had been founded by separate colonization societies, and communication between them was limited because there were no roads.[29] Because of their isolation from one another and the capital, each county enjoyed a fair measure of self-governance.[30] They raised taxes internally and created budgets and public works projects independently.[31] Maryland County was another former colony that was annexed in 1857, and Grand Cape Mount County was created in 1924 from territory acquired by the Liberian government in 1849.[32]

Cultural and Political Clashes between Americo-Liberians and Indigenous Liberians

From the beginning of the republic, the Americans and their descendants (who became known as Americo-Liberians) built a society which privileged their own status against the descendants of Liberians who had been living in the country before 1821. Although at first the jurisdiction of the government extended only to the few coastal towns occupied by Americo-Liberians, within a short time indigenous Liberians came to live in the towns, and a caste system developed. The uppermost class was Americo-Liberians holding government office, who often had lighter skin than other Liberians; they were followed by darker-skinned Americo-Liberians working as farmers and laborers; third were the "Recaptives" or "Congos", enslaved Africans from other parts of the continent who had been on ships bound for the Americas that were intercepted by the U.S. Navy and brought to Liberia; and lowest were indigenous Liberians.[33]

The society dominated by the Americo-Liberians was strongly oriented toward American customs and values. American fashions, including waistcoats and tailcoats unsuited for tropical weather, were de rigueur for officials
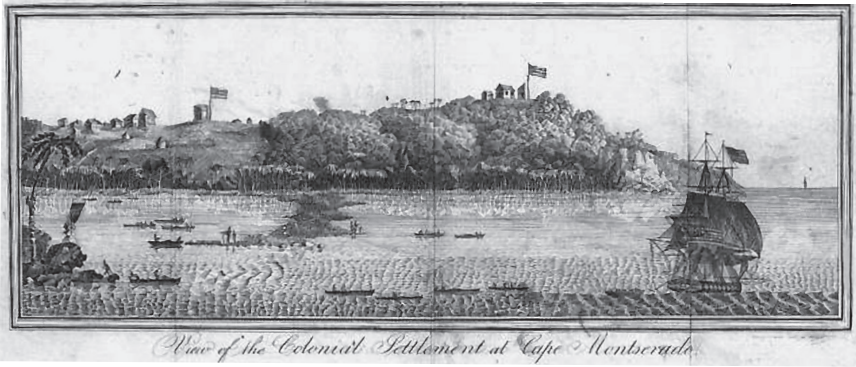
*Figure 5. Monrovia in 1825; the flags are difficult to discern but likely appeared as in Figure 6. (*The African Repository and Colonial Journal *1, no. 4 (June 1825): 129, reproduced at <loc.gov/exhibits/african/images/montsera.jpg>)*

and leading merchants; fellowship in Protestant churches was very common; English was the language of government and trade; and the iconography of the new republic emphasized both ties to the United States and the notion of a country founded for free blacks.

Americo-Liberian Iconography

The flag adopted for Liberia when under the administration of the ACS was identical to the U.S. flag, except the canton bore a white cross rather than stars (Figures 5 & 6).[34] In anticipation of independence in 1847, Governor Joseph Jenkins Roberts (later the first president) assembled a committee of seven

*Figure 6. The seal of Liberia, flanked by its pre- and post-independence flags. (*Travel Sketches from Liberia*)*

Figure 7. The flag of independent Liberia, shown at an Independence Day celebration, late 19th or early 20th century. (<history.com/news/slavery-american-colonization-society-liberia>)

women to design a new flag, because the former flag was "not comprehensive enough in its significance of the things that we stand for here in Africa."[35] The committee's design included eleven stripes of red and white, and a blue canton with a single white star. Later government publications attributed the nickname "The Lone Star" to the flag, with the blue canton representing the continent of Africa and the star indicating that Liberia was the first republic therein. The stripes correspond to the number of signers of the declaration of independence, and the three colors symbolize the three counties originally constituting the nation (Figures 6 and 7).[36]

The national anthem has a similar Americo-Liberian emphasis, including lyrics such as "We'll shout the freedom of a race benighted."[37] The seal, also adopted in 1847, depicts the ship *Elizabeth* that brought the first Americo-Liberians, American-style agricultural implements, a dove (symbol of peace), a palm tree, and the motto, "Love of Liberty Brought Us Here" (Figure 6).[38] The interpretation given to the seal emphasizes such Americo-Liberian notions as "the fact that through peace prevailing in the country we shall disseminate knowledge among all its inhabitants" and "the sun just emerging… symbolizes the rising or coming into existence of the new Republic".[39]

Another important cultural marker for Americo-Liberians was the celebration of Matilda Newport Day. This holiday commemorated an occasion in 1822 when the first group of Americo-Liberians came under attack from indigenous people who wished to resist the Americos' encroachment on land claimed through gunboat diplomacy. The legend of Matilda Newport says that Newport, who would later be a member of the committee that designed the national flag, saved the fort when, after all the artillerymen had been killed, she lit a cannon with coals from her pipe and drove away the advancing indigenous soldiers. The celebrations of Matilda Newport were characterized by rhetoric championing the cause of "civilization" against "hostile" indigenous people.[40]

Expanding Control over Indigenous Peoples by Americo-Liberians

Through continued migration from the United States—eventually, the final tally of Americans who moved to Liberia was around 15,000—and natural population growth, the Americo-Liberians came to number around 150,000 today.[41] In parallel with French and British movements to control the interior of their neighboring colonies of French Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire, and Sierra Leone, the Liberian government gradually expanded the area it controlled, through the use of military force and commercial ties that linked the people

of the hinterland to the merchants and officials on the coast. By establishing sovereignty over inland territory, the Liberian government could control the extraction of natural resources and trade, impose taxes and forced labor, and exclude Europeans who wished to enter the same markets.[42]

By the 1920s, the Liberian government held effective control over the entirety of its current territory. Such control was achieved, in part, by measures that broke down traditional governance at the village level, and instead imposed "indirect rule" similar to that seen in British colonies. "Indirect rule" saw the central government appointing leaders of an ethnic group who then oversaw the administration of the territory in accordance with the dictates of Monrovia; the result was "the amalgamation of clans into chiefdoms" whose chiefs were "elected" in a manner that was susceptible to manipulation by Monrovia.[43] Liberian troops were frequently used to exert control over areas that had been accustomed to self-rule. This state of affairs allowed the Liberian government to impose radical changes to the economic and social life of indigenous Liberians, such as the abolition of domestic slavery in 1930 and the concession in 1926 of a gigantic tract of land for the Firestone Tire and Rubber Company to grow rubber trees.[44]

The domestic slavery, often referred to as "pawning", was a long-standing system in which people unable to pay their debts would indenture themselves or a relative for a limited period.[45] Because America-Liberian rule had weakened the traditional authority of indigenous leaders who guaranteed against abuse of indenture, a system of forced labor came about; government officials worked with those who held the indentured people in bondage to sell the enslaved people's labor on plantations within Liberia and in other parts of Africa, notably the Spanish colony of Fernando Pó (now Bioko, part of Equatorial Guinea). Although a League of Nations inquiry led to the resignation of President Charles King in 1930, the export of labor continued through at least 1935, and forced labor was used on the Firestone plantation as late as 1965.[46]

While the indigenous people of the hinterland were under the rule of the Liberian government, they were not full members of the body politic. They could not vote, and the territory they occupied was not represented in the Liberian legislature. There was no independent judiciary.[47] Instead of having counties, the interior of the nation, "inhabited by uncivilized Liberians", was divided into provinces whose administrators were appointed by the president of Liberia.[48] Resentment in the frontier provinces toward the Liberian central authorities was widely expressed through means such as refusal to pay taxes

and even armed resistance, and the notoriously violent and corrupt Liberian Frontier Force frequently resorted to deadly measures to quell unrest.[49]

The "Unification Policy" of William V. S. Tubman

In 1944, a new president took office determined to better integrate the frontier provinces and their people into the Americo-dominated Liberian nation. William V. S. Tubman was, himself, something of an outsider in the insular world of Liberian politics, as he hailed from the easternmost county, Maryland, and had built his network of supporters in a rural area where Americos and indigenous people interacted more freely than they did in the capital (Figure 8).[50] Tubman was re-elected every four years until his death in 1971, and his administration is widely seen as a transformative era in the nation's history. Among his initiatives were expanded economic ties between Liberia and the developed nations of Europe and the Americas that increased the standard of living for many Liberians (an aspect of which was the first use of the Liberian national flag as a "flag of convenience" for multinational shippers who register their ships in Liberia to take advantage of its relatively lax maritime code).[51] He also elevated the presidency to a quasi-monarchical role and urged a policy of "unification". The latter two aspects of his administration are most relevant to the discussion of county flags.

Figure 8. President William Vacanarat Shadrach Tubman (served 1944–71). (flickr/ELCA Archives)

Through his policies, and through personal gestures such as travelling to remote areas of the country to hear the concerns of Liberians living outside Monrovia, Tubman engendered a great deal of genuine admiration and affection from his compatriots.[52] Using the power of patronage, he cultivated clients who supported him in return for access to government funds and American markets.[53] He also gradually put into place a system of secret police and spies that reported any dissent from the Tubman line, with dire consequences to those perceived as disloyal.[54] By the 1960s, a cult of personality had developed around Tubman, and his birthday was celebrated as a national holiday and extravagant gifts such as airplanes and yachts were "donated" to the president by the "grateful" residents of a different county each year. His name or those of his family members came to grace many a public facility.[55]

Tubman's "Unification Policy" was intended to bring the indigenous people of Liberia more fully into the society ruled over by Tubman. Full citizenship was granted to all Liberians in 1947.[56] Roads, schools, health care facilities, and communications were extended into the hinterland provinces, and administration of justice was made more transparent.[57] Of note, though, is that the Unification Policy did not have the effect of giving the indigenous peoples of Liberia a greater voice in its governance, but rather of bringing more Liberians under the sway of the national government organized along Americo-Liberian principles. For example, the greater provision of government services to the hinterland actually extended the reach of Monrovia into the countryside. Similarly, schools that were erected in the rural areas had a curriculum oriented to Americo-Liberian history and ideals.[58]

Tubman made gestures toward acknowledging the value of indigenous cultures, such as occasionally wearing traditional dress during visits to the interior and establishing an African cultural center to preserve the arts of indigenous peoples.[59] Liberians were encouraged to discontinue speaking in terms of "uncivilized brethren" or "country people" or even "Americo-Liberians" but rather to embrace "social pluralism" that encompassed Liberians of all backgrounds.[60] At the same time, Tubman insisted on retaining the symbolic dominance of Americo-Liberian iconography, by dismissing calls to change the seal, motto, or flag of Liberia, and retaining holidays such as Pioneers Day and Matilda Newport Day that celebrated the triumph of Americo-Liberian culture over indigenous resistance, by noting that "if the defenders of the Commonwealth had lost the day in the Battle of the Fort Hill there would have been no Liberia."[61] In fact, during this period patriotic exercises such as flag-raising and singing the national anthem and other patriotic songs were mandated at the nation's universities and colleges as well as at public schools.[62] Despite this indoctrination, some indigenous Liberians resented the Americo-Liberian dominance of national symbols. One common retort to the national motto ("Love of Liberty Brought Us Here") was "The Love of Liberty Met Us Here".[63]

The most dramatic event related to the Unification Policy was the creation in 1964 of four new counties from the hinterland provinces (Figure 9). Lofa, Bong, Nimba, and Grand Gedeh counties became the constitutional equals of the five coastal counties, with rights to elect members of the national legislature and the same local government structures as the rest of the country. In addition to the advertised effects of greater integration of indigenous Liberians into the body politic, the erection of a civil service bureaucracy in each of the new counties also provided Tubman more opportunities to offer patronage.[64]
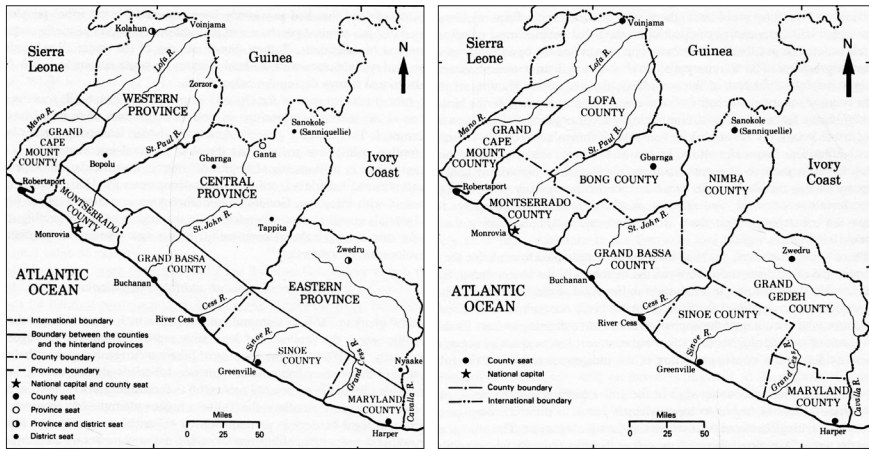
Figure 9. Administrative divisions of Liberia, before and after the creation of new counties in 1964. (Liebenow, Liberia: The Quest for Democracy*)*

Just over a year later, the flags of the nine counties of Liberia were unfurled for the first time. But the establishment of the flags was not directly in response to the creation of the new counties; in fact, they had a long gestation period.

The Development of County Flags

The idea for county flags was first broached by Tubman in his annual address to the legislature of 1961. Reflecting on what he deemed successful efforts at national unification to date, he said, "Fortunately we have endeavoured to instill national consciousness into the hearts of the people of the country. We must now take measures to nourish this national cohesiveness by the introduction of another element in our political annals—the use of territorial and county flags to foster a deeper county and territorial spirit. It is therefore recommended that you authorize the design of a county or territorial flag for each county and territory within the Republic."[65]

This rhetoric, with its emphasis on fostering loyalty to local government rather than ethnic groups or villages, underlines one of the purposes of the Unification Policy—to reorient indigenous power structures in ways that better served the Tubman administration. A spirit of county pride would align personal identity with the formal structure of power through which Tubman's patronage flowed.

The legislature, by then a rubber stamp for Tubman's initiatives, on 11 April 1962 passed An Act to Authorize the President of Liberia to Set Up Committees in the Respective Counties and Territories to Design County and Territorial Flags for Each County and Territory within the Republic, which stated that,

> Whereas, the people of Liberia have shown a deep spirit of National consciousness, and in order to nourish our National cohesiveness, it is conducive to introduce another dimension in our political annals; and

> Whereas, the use of County and Territorial flags would foster a deeper County and Territorial spirit; Now Therefore…

> The President is hereby authorized to appoint…Committees for the purpose of designing a County or Territorial flag for each County and Territory within the Republic…. Each Committee…after completing a design of the flag, shall make its report to the President for submission to the Legislature.[66]

At some point between 1962 and 1965, the committees must have reported to President Tubman, and his office approved the designs as we know them. However, no legislative action finalizing the flag design process was recorded in the nation's law code.

Given Tubman's grip on the civil affairs of Liberia, it is questionable how much say the committees truly had over the designs of the county flags. To be sure, some intervention came between the committees and the final design, as a template was imposed that placed "a miniature Liberian flag in the upper left corner to indicate that [the county] is an integral part of the nation."[67] There is also a similarity in design that one might credit to a single artistic vision.

(The placement of national flag in the canton of a sub-national or colonial flag is a practice with its roots in the British Empire; it has also been seen in French colonial flags and is a common device on naval ensigns. The canton is the area of a flag that is most often visible regardless of wind conditions; having a national flag in that position means that the symbol of the politically superior polity will almost always be seen while the symbols of the inferior political or administrative unit may or may not be apparent to the observer.)

29 November 1965 was a momentous day in Liberia, as it was Tubman's 70th birthday.[68] A three-day celebration included visits by heads of state, church services of thanksgiving, military reviews, fireworks, and presentations

of gifts to the president from citizens filled the streets of Monrovia.[69] Secondary sources report that 29 November was the day when the county flags of Liberia were presented as a gift to each county from President Tubman.[70] However, it is clear that the flag of Montserrado County, where Monrovia is located, had already been designed and distributed; newspaper reports show that "along the streets of Monrovia… the Liberian Flag, the Montserrado County Flag, and pennants in the Montserrado colour—pink—will be displayed" (Figure 10).[71]

It is regrettable that the only documentation of this gift of county flags is found in a *Flag Bulletin* article by G. de Graaf, which lacks citations.[72] It would be very useful to look over the documentation of the flag presentations. I have been unable to locate any information in the Liberian newspapers of the day, and the Liberian national archives were destroyed during the civil war of the 1990s.[73]

The flags have retained the same designs to the present day and are recognized within Liberia as important symbols. The flags of all of Liberia's counties are displayed at the national capitol building in Monrovia, and individual county flags are flown at government installations within each county.[74] While the flags are not frequently found in photographs from Liberia, this may be due in part to the nation's extreme poverty which makes flags a luxury beyond the reach of most Liberians. The flags are used as symbols of local identity:

*Figure 10. An early depiction of the Montserrado County flag. (*Daily Listener (Monrovia), 27 November 1965, 1)

for example, they are waved at inter-county soccer matches, displayed on signs marking county boundaries, and have even been used to mark the claims of competing counties in territorial disputes.[75]

The First Nine County Flags

In the years after 1965, the Liberian government assigned an official interpretation to each county's flag:

Montserrado (Figure 11): "The dark-blue and red represent the original inhabitants of the county and the immigrants from the new world. In the center of the flag is a circle in which Providence Island, the first home of the early settlers, is depicted."

Grand Bassa (Figure 12): "Blue is one of the historical colors of the country and it signifies loyalty to the state. The red and white stripes stand for the four men who represented Grand Bassa County at the Constitutional Convention of 1847 and signed the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. They were John Day, Amos Herring, A. W. Gardiner, and Ephraim Titler."

Sinoe (Figure 13): "The white represents purity and the green, cutting across the county, represents the tropical forest."

Maryland (Figure 14): "Yellow represents one of the colors of Maryland's original flag. The green represents the green grass of the county. In the middle of the flag is a palm tree and a lighthouse. The pale-blue stands for the sky lit by the rays of the lighthouse."

Grand Cape Mount (Figure 15): "The white is the standard color of the county and it represents purity and peace. In the center of the flag stands Cape Mount on which the city of Robertsport is located."

Bong (Figure 16): "Purple signifies the dawn and orange represents newness. Both colors thus depict the dawn of a new county. Within the white field at the upper right corner of the flag are two geological instruments symbolizing the mining industry in the county."

Lofa (Figure 17): "The green represents the forest of that county and the blue stands for the Lofa River. An arm holding a bunch of fagots stretching across the river represents the unity of all sections of the county."

Nimba (Figure 18): "In the center of the flag is a circle in which the natural resources of the county are depicted."

Grand Gedeh (Figure 19): "The green symbolizes the virgin forest and the natural wealth of the county. The white stands for purity; the blue indicates peace and prosperity. Grand Gedeh Mountain, after which the county is named, towers above the forest with the golden rays of the rising sun beaming above its peak."[76]
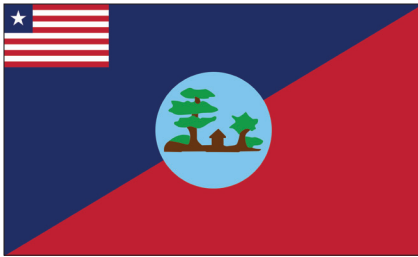

Figure 11. Flag of Montserrado County. (Wikimedia Commons)
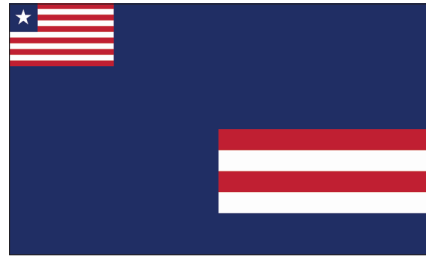
Figure 12. Flag of Grand Bassa County. (Wikimedia Commons)
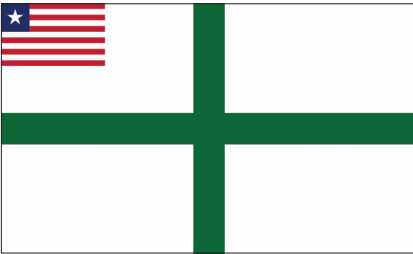
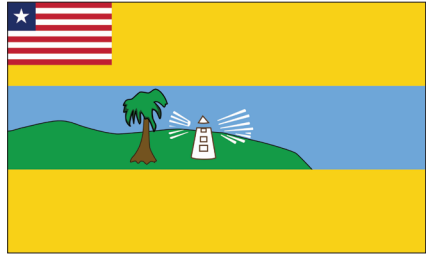*Figure 13. Flag of Sinoe County. (Wikimedia Commons)*

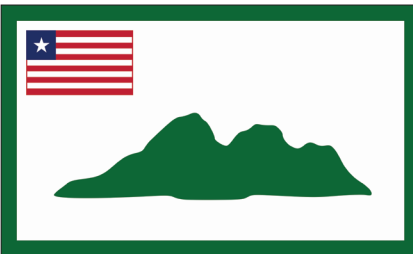*Figure 14. Flag of Maryland County. (Wikimedia Commons)*

Figure 15. Flag of Grand Cape Mount County. (Wikimedia Commons)

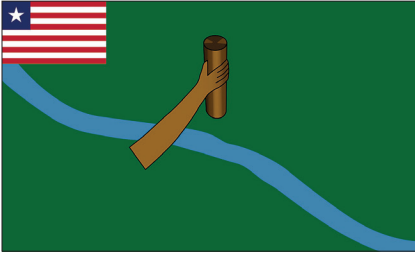*Figure 16. Flag of Bong County. (Wikimedia Commons)*

Figure 17. Flag of Lofa County.
(Wikimedia Commons)
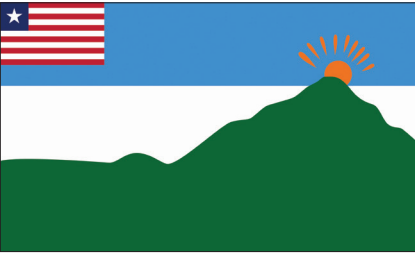

Figure 18. Flag of Nimba County.
(Wikimedia Commons)

Figure 19. Flag of Grand Gedeh County.
(Wikimedia Commons)

Liberian County Flags
as a Genre of Quilt-inspired Designs

Recalling that Liberia's county flags constitute a "genre" of subnational flags, we can look for those features that define a genre: a similarity of form or style. The county flags of Liberia share the design characteristics of the charges being rendered largely in blocks of color, without shading or much detail and featuring outlines that are more suggestive than literal; offering few points of perspective in landscapes; and having large blocks of sharply contrasting color. To the viewer familiar with other forms of textile arts, those features also define a genre of quilting that is among the most prominent artistic traditions of America-Liberian culture.[77] Designs for quilts are traditionally created through either embroidery, "pieced" fabrication, or "appliqué".[78] Embroidery is the creation of designs by sewing that leaves thread visible on the surface of the cloth. In pieced quilts, smaller pieces of cloth are joined at the seams to create a larger fabric; designs of pieced quilts are usually geometric and abstract. In appliqued quilts, smaller pieces of cloth are sewn directly onto a backing fabric; appliqued quilts are more frequently used to create representative art.

Figure 20. Appliqued quilts in the African American tradition (a & b), and in Americo-Liberian style (c, d, & e). (Baumgarten and Ivey, Four Centuries of Quilts*; <quiltindex.org/fulldisplay.php?kid=1E-3D-1173>; Beck Cohen,* Soft Diplomacy*)*

Appliqued quilts of the style popular in Liberia have their roots in the United States (Figure 20). While some applique traditions are known in Africa, they are most prominent among the Fon people of Benin and the Akan people of Ghana.[79] In contrast, there no quilting tradition among the indigenous people of Liberia; traditional Liberian textile arts emphasize the creation of complex patterns within woven cloth, using looms adapted to the short-fiber cotton that is grown in the country.[80] Examples include "country cloth", *kpoikpoi*, and *boubou*, the wearing of which is a mark of high status.[81]

The Continuation of American Quilting Traditions among Americo-Liberians

American quilting traditions may incorporate some designs introduced by enslaved Africans remembering motifs from their homelands; for example, Barbara Brackman notes that "pictures of warriors, royalty, animals, and mythical figures" in American quilts have many features in common with African applique designs.[82] However, the basic techniques combining quilting and applique were developed in the United States by white people carrying on traditions from England and Germany.[83] Enslaved people, especially women, were made to share in the work, and developed unique traditions; to this day, African American quilting is a robust pastime that has many highly regarded practitioners.[84] (Although appliqued quilts are strongly influenced by European traditions, Eli Leon has found that pieced quilts made by African American crafters exhibit many artistic traditions that were brought from Africa.)[85]

Well before the first Americans came to Liberia, quilting traditions were well established in African American communities. Several quilts known to have been made by enslaved women survive from the early 19th century.[86] Thus, when Americo-Liberians were starting their lives in Africa, those who knew how to make quilts carried on the tradition. There was less need for warm quilts to protect against chilly weather, so Liberian-made quilts are thinner than American examples.[87] But artistic conventions show continuity between the United States and Liberia. Within the United States, quilting styles vary from region to region; because many American migrants to Liberia came from Tennessee, Kentucky, Virginia, and Georgia, the quilting traditions in Liberia reflect the patterns most commonly used in those states.[88]

Quilts as an Americo-Liberian Cultural Marker
(and Their Influence on County Flags)

The quilts of Liberia came to be one of the most important artisanal out-
puts of Americo-Liberian society and were used to promote Liberian culture
internationally. From the earliest days of independence, quilts were featured
in exhibitions of the nation's artistry, including in national fairs in 1857 and
1858.[89] In 1892, a Liberian quilter named Martha Ricks gained international
fame when she sewed a quilt of the "coffee tree" pattern as a gift to Queen
Victoria, and was granted an audience with the monarch (Figure 21).[90] Ricks's
quilt, and others from Liberia, were exhibited at world's fairs as evidence of
the capabilities of the Liberian people.[91] The Liberian government made gifts
of quilts an important component of international diplomacy, and promoted
quilting through state-supported apprenticeship programs.[92] One of the meth-
ods of cultural assimilation practiced by Americo-Liberians administration was
to offer quilts as "prestige cloth" gifts to leaders of indigenous communities;
this accorded with widespread customs of exchanges of textiles as markers of
respect, but as Stephanie Beck Cohen notes, "the selection of a textile made by

*Figure 21. Martha Ricks, and a reproduction of her "coffee quilt" pattern.
(National Portrait Gallery, London; Stephanie Elizabeth Beck Cohen,* Soft
Diplomacy*)*

the small portion of the population handling the nation's governance in the 19th century helped to solidify that group's authority through material culture."[93]

While Liberian quilting patterns clearly hark back to applique styles of the United States, they "are created with distinct compositional structures, content, and techniques".[94] Although Liberian quilts in the 21st century have incorporated indigenous textiles as a gesture toward reconciliation after the civil wars of the 1990s, the basic artistic patterns are rooted in African-American quilting traditions, and quilts of the 19th and 20th centuries tended to use blocks of solid-colored fabric. Images were depicted as though on a single plane, without perspective or detail, and with generalized outlines. Some of these features are due to artistic convention, and some are due to the limits of the medium of appliqué.

When preparing the county flags of Liberia in 1965, the designers were clearly recalling the proud Americo-Liberian quilting tradition. The stylization of most of the charges is very similar to the stylization seen on quilts, with large blocks of single colors, omission of detail or shading, and a flat perspective. Considering the role of quilts in Liberian cultural life, as the preeminent artisanal product of Americo-Liberian culture, we can assess the uses that the new county flags served when adopted in 1965.

As Tubman himself stated, the administration was endeavoring to extend a spirit of "national consciousness" to the county level; that is, to encourage Liberians of all backgrounds to identify with the national and local governments alongside or instead of their ethnic group or village. Earlier efforts along this line had sometimes included honoring the traditions of indigenous Liberians, but had more often taken the form of encouraging adoption of Americo-Liberian customs and rituals by indigenous people. The county flags serve the same purpose—to impose an Americo-Liberian aesthetic on the symbols of local government, even those local governments whose existence was ostensibly intended to strengthen the voice of indigenous Liberians in the national political system. The stylization of the flag's elements recalls the stylization of appliqued pieces on Liberian quilts, and the use of Americo-Liberian visual culture was a means of unifying the nation according to Tubman's plans. The designs of the Liberian county flags, then, were an artistic decision with political implications, and should be analyzed with that historical context in mind.

The End of "Unification Policy" and the Creation of New Counties

For a decade after Tubman's death in 1971, Americo-Liberians continued to dominate Liberian politics, although indigenous people gained more opportunities and influence. Debate over the appropriateness of Americo-Liberian symbols arose under the administration of William R. Tolbert, president from 1971 to 1980. After much debate, Matilda Newport Day was abolished.[95] In 1974, Tolbert announced that he thought the national flag, anthem, and motto should be changed.[96] However, in 1978 a commission appointed to consider the issue ("with a view of stamping out every and any idea that may suggest class distinction, separateness or sectionalism among the people of Liberia") recommended against making any changes; it noted that it was not its intention "to merely propose changes apparently to satisfy the whims and notions of a few purported academic detractors."[97] The national flag continues in wide use, and some even commend it as a unifying symbol for a nation seeking to recover from more than two decades of ethnic strife. Augustine Konneh, for one, writes that "in Africa, there is a traditional belief in totems as symbolizing the ethnic groups to which people belong.… The flag to us can be equated with a totem symbolizing the nation of Liberia, which we must hold in great reverence and adoration."[98] It still has its detractors, such as the politician Martin Kerkula, who declared in 2014 that the flag is a symbol of disunity and he would not offer it any respect.[99]

Despite the Tolbert administration's efforts to reduce tension between Americos and indigenous Liberians, ethnic rivalries led to a coup d'etat led by Samuel Doe of the Krahn people in 1980, and then a pair of civil wars in 1989–97 and 1999–2003. Under the post-Tolbert regimes, six more counties were created: Bomi and Grand Kru in 1984, Margibi and Rivercess in 1985, River Gee in 2000, and Gbarpolu in 2001 (Figure 22). The new counties are largely populated by a single ethnic group apiece, reversing the "National Unification" policy that sought to undermine ethnic solidarity by substituting loyalties to county and the nation for kinship-based identity.[100] Constitutionally, each new county has the same role in public affairs as the original counties, and incentives to establish strong visual symbols.

Figure 22. Liberia's counties, as of 2001. (<electionpassport.com/electoral-systems/ liberia/>)

The Six Most Recent County Flags

Each new county also has a flag. In several cases, the counties have provided an official explanation of the flags' symbolism through a series of "County Development Agenda" documents used for planning recovery from the civil war.

Bomi (Figure 23) "shows a rich, fertile land crisscrossed with rolling hills, with trees in the background. The hills represent the rich iron ore, while the trees depict the fertility of the soil."[101]

Grand Kru (Figure 24) "has ten vertical stripes; four green, four yellow and two white, with a palm tree in the center.... The green represents the evergreen rain forest, the green vegetation and the savanna that represents the potential for huge private sector investment in the areas of logging and cattle breeding. The yellow depicts the long belt of gold deposits in the County, while the white represents purity."[102]

For **Margibi** (Figure 25), "The County's flag is comprised of two major colors, green and red. The green color represents the forest region of the County and its abundant natural vegetation. The red represents the county's share of the struggle that brought in the military and subsequently transformed the
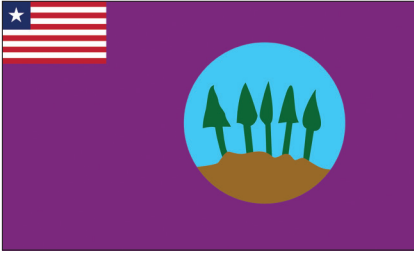
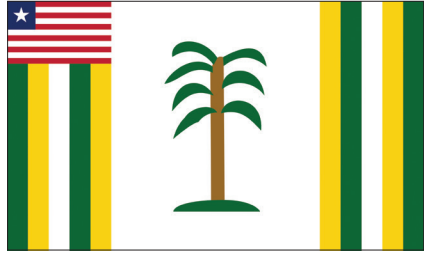*Figure 23. Flag of Bomi County. (Wikimedia Commons)*

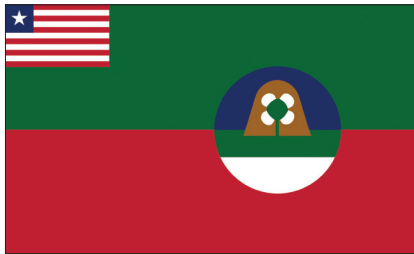*Figure 24. Flag of Grand Kru County. (Wikimedia Commons)*

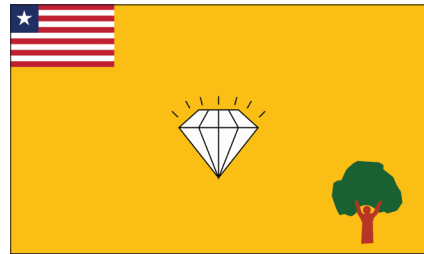*Figure 25. Flag of Margibi County. (Wikimedia Commons)*

Figure 26. Flag of Gbarpolu County. (Wikimedia Commons)

Figure 27. Flag of Rivercess County. (Wikimedia Commons)

Figure 28. Flag of River Gee County. (Wikimedia Commons)

country from Military to Civilian rule…. In the middle of the flag are a rubber tree and a rubber tapper, which is an indication of the abundant rubber farms and plantations found across the County, which provide employment for thousands".[103]

Gbarpolu (Figure 26) "consists of a gold background on which a centrally placed diamond is flanked on the right by a tree [that] symbolizes the richness of its resources".[104]

For the counties of **Rivercess** and **River Gee**, an official interpretation of the symbolism is unavailable, although some reference to natural resources seems likely (Figures 27 and 28).

The Quilt-Influenced Flag Genre Continues

Despite the very different political motives that occasioned the creation of the new counties, the flags designed after 1980 continue in the Americo-Liberian quilting aesthetic. Grand Kru and Rivercess even use plant designs reminiscent of the famous coffee tree quilt of Martha Ricks. There are several possible explanations for this phenomenon, but one that is worth consideration is to look again at Perry Dane's notion of "genre" in flags. Dane notes that successive entries in a genre are created because the new flag's adopters wish to convey a sense of belonging to the same political tradition as the originators of the genre.[105] Similarly, a discussion of the tricolors of francophone countries in West Africa finds that the adoption of flags within a certain design aesthetic is one way that newly formed political entities stake a claim to the same status as polities already flying flags using that aesthetic.[106] Both observations are plausible explanations for the persistence of quilt-styled flags for Liberian counties even after the end of the Tubman era.

Reception of Liberian County Flags in the Internet Age

Understood as political symbols with cultural references embedded in them, Liberia's county flags are a fascinating artifact of the development of the country's national culture. However, the frequent online criticism of the flags seldom references the history or context of the flags' designs. Rather, they are critiqued simply as images. And intriguingly, many of the same commenters who censure Liberia's local flags also deride local flags of the United States, whose characteristics are overwhelming the opposite of those of Liberian county flags. While American local flags are usually presented with seals, lettering, maps, or all three, Liberia's county flags are typically quite simple (barring the inclusion of the national flag), with a few design elements that are easily recalled and are easily distinguished at a distance.

To find the source of the ill-will toward Liberia's county flags, then, we must look elsewhere than commonly accepted design standards. A broad generalization of negative comments is that the Liberian flags are crude, unso-

phisticated, or childish. It has likely not escaped the notice of commenters that Liberia is located in Africa, and is populated almost entirely by black people. Among Europeans and other white people, there is a long history of stereotyping Africans and African Americans as, among other things, stunted in cultural and intellectual development.[107] In what Curtis Keim and Carolyn Somerville call "evolutionism," the notion is proposed that the culture and material conditions of white people represent the most advanced state in which humans can live, and that the failure of people of other races to achieve the same attainments is proof of their status as lesser beings.[108] While polite society frowns upon making such statements explicit, "jokes" based on the inferiority of the culture of Africans can serve to express similar sentiments while retaining some ambivalence as to the intentions of the teller.[109]

The reception of Liberia's county flags by social media commenters, then, suggests that their distinctive designs, while not crossing any lines of formal vexillographic principles, do provoke disdain because of their conspicuous representation of a unique black cultural tradition. The logic of racism requires *a priori* inferiorization of black culture, which is used as justification for the exclusion of black people from normal consideration as fully human.[110] Critiques of Liberian county flags follow this pattern; rather than being judged against the commenters' own criteria, they are simply declared unacceptable and their designers' very capabilities as visual artists are impugned.

Conclusion

The county flags of Liberia constitute a unique genre of flags—based in the Americo-Liberian cultural tradition of quilting, serving the political needs of a 20th-century administration, and distinctively stylized. The study of these flags provides insight into the means by which textile traditions outside of heraldic banners can inform vexillography, and how flag genres can be self-perpetuating even after the initial purposes which motivated their development have ceased to operate. The reception of Liberian flags among social media commenters on vexillological sites reveals some of the ways that racist thinking informs judgment of vexillographic design as well.

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