

The Importance of National Symbols to National Identity

National symbols are very important to national identity. The importance of national symbols can vary, depending on the strength, history, and political environment of the nation. However, symbols are easily identified, and are used to "direct and organize, record and communicate." [1] National symbols are easily recognized entities that are used as means to communicate the history and culture of a particular nation. These symbols can be used to instill pride and unity in a nation's population. National symbols can be a single entity, such as the Eiffel Tower, an easily reproduced item such as a nation's flag, or something more intangible, such as a national anthem.

National symbols are often displayed at many major events, such as sporting contests. Symbols are used to signify the importance of holidays and other days of observation. For example, in the United States, a flag-bearing ceremony occurs, with a rendering of the national anthem, before a National Football League (NFL), Major League Baseball (MLB), or National Basketball Association (NBA) game is played. The pomp and circumstance that surrounds the ceremony is often tied in with recognition of the nation's active or retired soldiers, with the unfurling of football field flags and Air Force flyovers. Patriotism is further on display simply with the logos of these leagues. The official logo of the NFL is red, white, and blue, featuring white stars on a blue background, in a similar design to the American flag. Similarly, both MLB and the NBA invoke the national symbolism of the United States with official emblems that prominently display the colors of the U.S. flag.

Of course, this phenomenon is not unique to the United States. In the Olympic Games, the national flags of the top three contenders in each athletic event are displayed while the winner's national anthem is played. Who can forget the national pride displayed by sprinter Usain Bolt who, upon winning a race at the 2008 Olympics, seized the Jamaican flag and held it high as he and his countrymen celebrated his victory?

In the United States there are at least four holidays in which the American flag, and all things red, white, and blue are featured prominently. We recognize Flag Day, which celebrates the flag, Veteran's Day, in which military veterans are honored, Memorial Day, when we honor and mourn those who gave their lives in service of their country, and Independence Day, in which we celebrate our break from the British empire. All of these holidays are considered national holidays. We have parades, we place flags at gravesites, we dress up as Uncle Sam (another national symbol), and we wear the colors of the flag. Importantly, parades and flag waving reinforce the patriotism of American citizens who participate in these events, often extending beyond the date of the celebration. Jon E. Fox and Cynthia Miller-Idriss note that "[w]hile such experiences of exultation are necessarily infrequent and ephemeral, their impact on the national sensibilities of the ordinary people who engage in them can be more durable." [2]

This essay begins with a short look at relevant literature about the importance of national symbols. Symbols are meant to express the history and culture of a nation. Modern studies in

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psychology suggest that the impact of symbols is understood when the underlying structure of the symbol and the symbol's use and display are better understood. The essay then turns to examples of national symbols, including the flags of the United States and South Africa, the Eiffel Tower, and the Great Wall of China.

Human beings are social creatures. We join, and identify with, many different groups. Some of these groups are seemingly unimportant such as identifying with others who drink the same soda or beer. Some of the groups are activity based, such as those who smoke or those who play fantasy games. Others are unimportant, yet take on a life of their own. Sports fans know the feeling of euphoria when "their" team wins, or despair when that team loses. Those fans also know the feeling of unity with the fans in the stands or local bar who are rooting for the same team.

Alliance to one's country has roots in the social psychology of humankind. According to David A. Butz, "[p]rimitive forms of national attachment, such as attachment to tribes, chiefdoms, or states, may have existed even thousands of years prior to the first documentation of modern forms of national attachment." [3] Part of this attachment to the nation is the common understanding of the symbols of that nation. Butz continues by noting that ". . . national symbols often do not only represent the general concept 'nation,' but also condense the knowledge, values, history, and memories associated with one's nation. Further, it is clear that national symbols also hold the potential to represent the strong emotional attachments felt for one's nation." [4] He also notes that exposure to the national symbols of one's country can impact people's attitudes and actions. Importantly, these symbols can be of varying types. Fox and Miller-Idriss acknowledge that these symbols can include "[s]ongs sung, chants chanted, banners unfurled, and flags waved." [5] In short, people often identify more strongly with their nation, and their fellow citizens, when exposed to symbols of their nation.

Similarly, Karen A. Cerulo notes that national symbols are used "to direct public attention, integrate citizens, and motivate public action" and in "creating bonds and reinforcing goals among . . . citizens." National symbols are so strong that they "clarify and create society." [6] Yet, Cerulo notes that the type of symbol used can fluctuate based on the history and culture of the country and the needs of the national leaders. In her study of national anthems, she notes differences in music types between democratic and unitary forms of government, the political environment of the nation and the part that the country played internationally at the time the national anthem was composed. In other words, although every nation in the world has its symbols, the structure, function, and style of the symbol may vary across nations.

There is also an impressive literature, led by Michael Billig's *Banal Nationalism*, which purports that national symbols affect national identity far beyond the pomp and circumstance of flag displays and flyovers at sporting events and the parades and flag waving of national holidays.

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These everyday, "banal" examples of national symbolism and identity can be seen in the flags flown at schools and government buildings nationwide, by the daily Pledge of Allegiance recited by schoolchildren, and by the sports organizations discussed above that utilize the symbols of the state for the symbols of sport. Indeed, Michael Skey, in a discussion of Billig's contribution, notes that "it is through everyday language and practices that identities gain credence." [7] Therefore, the long-term impact of national symbolism at special events, when coupled with the everyday displays of national symbols, creates an environment in which everyday citizens can connect with their nations daily, often in unnoticed ways. Thus, "[f]lags don't have to be saluted or waved to work their national magic. The near complete assimilation of nationhood into the realm of the ordinary—not its sporadic or spectacular invocations—testifies to its prosaic power." [8]

The symbols of four countries have been selected for discussion so that the reader might understand tangible and intangible symbols, taken from across the globe, including both developed and developing countries. It is important to note that flags of two very different countries are included in this discussion in large part because flags are most often considered to be symbolic of the nation. However, the countries discussed here, South Africa and the United States, are very different. The United States has enjoyed a long, stable government. In contrast, South Africa recently changed its government dramatically and has a long history of strife between its people. Therefore, the flags today are employed differently. The Eiffel Tower and the Great Wall of China, the other two symbols examined, are more tangible and have become symbols of their countries because they have become identifiers for the national conscience of their countries.

The South African flag is a fine example of the importance of the national symbol. As most people are aware, South Africa had been separated by race for much of its history, although apartheid became recognized as a legal system in 1948. When the African National Congress (ANC) fell in the early 1990s, the country decided on a new flag. This flag is a symbol not only of the nation, but of the unity of the peoples who constitute the nation. The South African flag includes the colors of the former rulers, the ANC and Boers, as well as the colors of Nelson Mandela's political party. Some of the colors, black, green, yellow, blue, red, and white have deeper meaning. For example, in prior regimes, red has stood for bloodshed, green for the land, and yellow for natural resources. The flag features a sideways Y, which is symbolic of the newly formed unity of the races and tribes of the nation. [9]

The importance of the symbolism should not be understated. Given the history of separation, violence, and political resistance in South Africa, the inclusion of white and black governments and peoples, the overt call for the convergence of the people of South Africa into one, is arguably a major step in actualizing the process of togetherness. As Cheryl de la Rey argues, reconciliation is moving from a history of antagonism toward more favorable associations. The

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process of reconciliation was important enough in South Africa that Truth and Reconciliation Commissions were established to further the process. Moreover, "[t]he creation of a new sense of nationhood through a new national anthem and other national symbols, such as a flag, is often a way to foster a common identity among formerly divided societies." [10] The design of the national flag is a crucial symbol for the movement toward reconciliation in the country that had been torn by racial divide for so long.

The Eiffel Tower soars above the Paris skyline. While it was not always considered to be symbolic of France, it has become a symbol of France to the world. When the Eiffel Tower was originally built to commemorate the centenary anniversary of the French Revolution, many complained that the structure was an eyesore. During World War I, the height of the Eiffel Tower allowed it to serve as a radio tower. The Eiffel Tower radio tower intercepted a German signal that allowed the French to discover the identity of a suspected spy, Mata Hari. [11] As a result of the detection of an infamous spy, the French came to view the soaring tower as a symbol of French intellect, ingenuity, and progress. [12] According to Andrew Cai, "by World War II, national pride in the Eiffel Tower was so great that when the Nazis occupied France in 1940, Frenchmen cut the cables so that Hitler would have to walk up the tower instead of using the elevator." [13] Even today, ". . . no edifice is quite so closely associated with its home city as the Eiffel Tower and Paris—a statement of achievement, of excellence, of durable grace: a reminder of human endeavor in the era before computer modeling and high-lift cranes. . . ." [14]

Alan Cowell continues his articles by noting that the world is becoming ever more global, and that "[i]t is hard to argue that the tower belongs only to France." [15] However, the author concludes that, perhaps, while the world is globalizing, perhaps it is becoming a bit more French in the process. As such, the national symbol of France is a symbol of the role of France in globalization. Even as globalization marches forward, the symbol of France remains the symbol of an influential country as the world hurtles toward togetherness.

The oldest of the national symbols discussed here is the Great Wall of China. The Great Wall is approximately 4,000 miles long, and was originally separate walls built by competing Chinese dynasties. During the Qin dynasty (ca. 220 BCE), when China was united, the wall was connected to a length of about 3,000 miles. The Great Wall, as it stands now, was rebuilt and strengthened in the Ming dynasty (ca. 1600 CE) in an effort to repel nomadic tribes from the north. Today, however, the Great Wall is deteriorating, both from natural causes such as erosion and because of human use and misuse, such as taking portions of the wall for personal use. [16] Today, only about one third of the structure stands. [17]

The symbolism of the Great Wall is based largely on its history. Like the other symbols described in this essay, it is a symbol of unity for the country it embodies. The Great Wall was connected during the Qin dynasty, the first time that China was unified. As a result, the Great

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Wall represents the unity of the Chinese. Moreover, the Wall was built to repel invaders, which also represents the preservation of unity for the people of China.

Visitors to China have long been drawn to the Great Wall. Many travelers to China in the 1600s wrote of the Great Wall in awe-inspired tones. As the world has become more globalized, it is interesting to note that "[a]s greater numbers of missionaries and envoys visited China from the 16th century onwards, its image in the West became inextricably linked with the Great Wall. By the 18th century era of enlightenment it had become the ultimate symbol of both China and the Chinese civilization. Mendoza and Voltaire regarded the Wall as an aspect of China's strength; others later perceived it as a sign of weakness. But the Western fascination with the Great Wall has never abated." [18] In other words, not only is the Great Wall a symbol of the unity of China from within, but it also serves as a symbolic "shorthand" of China for the Western world. This is likely the reason that foreign heads of state and other dignitaries often visit this historic landmark. For example, Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama have walked on the Great Wall. Other world leaders, including former Russian president Boris Yeltsin, Syrian president Bashar al-Assad, and former Cuban head of state Fidel Castro, have stood upon the Great Wall when visiting China. [19] Because of its history, cultural importance, and architectural value, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) placed the Great Wall on its World Heritage list in 1987. UNESCO describes the Great Wall as a "cultural treasure to the Chinese civilization." [20]

However, some argue that the symbolism of the Great Wall of China is under attack by the leaders of China who wish to modernize the country. According to Tu Wei-ming, "the Great Wall, the symbol of historical continuity, is condemned as a manifestation of close-minded conservatism." [21] Yet, the meaning of this position is the continued impact that the symbol of the Great Wall has on the consciousness of the Chinese. The leadership would not need to condemn the symbolism of the Great Wall if the mindset attributed to its existence did not continue to manifest itself in the minds of the people. In other words, perhaps to the chagrin of Chinese leaders, the symbolism of the Great Wall still matters to the people of China and to those outside the nation.

Perhaps the most important national symbol, currently, is the flag of the United States. This is due to the role that the United States has played worldwide since the end of World War II. It might be the most universally loved and hated national symbol in the world. As mentioned above, Americans of all ages continue to salute the flag in school and at parades and sporting events. When the United States was attacked on September 11, 2001, stores in the United States were sold out of American flags because of the mass demand by Americans to stand as one in the face of terrorism. There was a nearly ubiquitous use of the flag on cars' bumper stickers, T-shirts, magnets, and of course those flown from front porches. The red, white, and blue, and stars and stripes from the U.S. flag clearly indicate the American flag, whether on women's undergarments

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(yes, they exist), patches, toys, or the paint job of an American-made automobile.

The flag is also a symbol of the United States' perceived ills worldwide. In the wake of 9/11, while Americans displayed the flags as a symbol of unity against the terrorists who wanted to fell the country, some people in the Middle East burned the American flag in the streets, as a sign of celebration and support for the terrorists who took on American hegemony. Thus, the national symbol of the United States is both a symbol of unity within the country and a symbol of discord in some areas of the world.

On a simple level, the colors and design of the American flag are rooted in the country's history. According to one website dedicated to the understanding of the importance of the American flag, "Red symbolizes Hardiness and Valor, White symbolizes Purity and Innocence and Blue represents Vigilance, Perseverance and Justice." [22] The 50 stars on the flag represent the 50 states of the union, and the 13 horizontal stripes represent the original 13 colonies.

More importantly, beyond the mere meanings of the colors and design, are the psychological impacts of the flag. As noted above, there are important manifestations that dedication to a national symbol can entail. In recent years, there has been a fringe movement toward burning the U.S. flag, even among American citizens. Although this practice was deemed "protected speech" by the U.S. Supreme Court in *Texas v. Johnson* (1989), there have been significant crackdowns on such actions in subsequent years. Indeed, because of the importance of the flag to many, if not most, of the American people, the reaction was swift and telling. According to Welch and Bryan, ". . . the flag remains a profoundly significant symbol of American civil religion, and given the emotional attachments to the flag, acts of flag desecration expectedly evoke the wrath of politicians and citizens alike." [23]

Because of the attachment felt by Americans to their flag, as suggested by Welch and Bryan, members of Congress have made several attempts to add a constitutional amendment banning the burning of the American flag. Local police have begun to arrest flag burners not for desecrating the flag, but on arson charges. Moreover, there are companies that began to produce T-shirts, belt buckles, and other items with a depiction of the American flag accompanied by the words "Try and Burn this one" or similar sentiments.

In conclusion, although it is true that we increasingly become "global citizens," we also continue to draw upon our national identity to understand ourselves. As new countries continue to be created, including recent addition South Sudan, the importance of national symbols in forging national identity should not be discounted. While globalism increases due to technology, economics, and politics, national symbols remain powerful tools for socialization and inspiration. Because people are social creatures who desire a sense of belonging, the nation remains an important basis for identity worldwide.