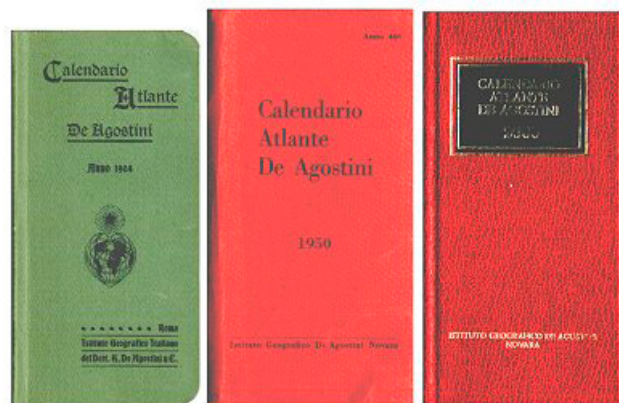# A Century of Changing Colours on National Flags

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The *Calendario Atlante De Agostini* is a geographical and statistical yearbook well known in Italy. It has been published since 1904 and contains a table of flags of independent states.

I have chiefly considered two different editions: the first dating from 1904 and the second from 2000. Moreover, I have consulted a third, intermediate edition, dating from 1950.

For each I counted how many times a single color is present on the flags (if there was a coat-of-arms, I did not consider it), and I have summarized the data in Table 1. Some remarks can be made.

Red, white and blue are the three most common colors on the flags in 1904 as well as in 2000, even if their frequency is somewhat decreased. The popularity of these colors is due to the fact that several of today's national flags were inspired by those arising from the two great revolutions, the American and French ones. Moreover, important and authoritative states, apart from United States and France – like the United Kingdom, the Neth-erlands and Russia – hoist ancient flags with the same tree colors. And these flags have been very influential, too. For example, in 1917 the King of Thailand added the blue on the previous national flag (which had only red and white stripes), to display the same three colors of the leading world powers of that period.

In 1904 red, white and blue were followed by the other colors at greatly lower frequency: the most common, yellow, was three times less frequent than red; green was almost six times less frequent than red and black no less than 23 times. But all three have seen a strong increase during the last century. Green gained most, being present on nearly half of all flags in 2000. It has surpassed yellow is approaching the frequency of blue.

The principal cause for this strong increase of green on the flags is that several African states between the 1950's and 1970's became independent, and widely adopted flags containing green. The Table 2 shows the development of African flags, based on the *Calendario Atlante De Agostini.*

It is plain that African flags have grown much more rapidly than the total number of flags: 13 times versus 3.7, and more than 80% contains green. It is even clear that the growth has occurred mainly after 1950. In fact, in that year the African flags reported were still only 7 out 84.

Why is the geen so attractive to the Africans? We can find at least four reasons.

1. The Panafrican colors. In the 1904 issue of *Calendario* only one flag out of four African flags (Egypt, Congo, Liberia ed Ethiopia) contained green: it was the red-yellow-green tricolor of Ethiopia. This flag has been

Color	1904 (percent)	2000 (percent)	Variation	1950 (percent)
Black (N)	3.5	20.3	+16.8	9.5
Blue (B)	63.2	50.0	-13.2	59.5
Green (V)	14.0	43.8	+29.8	23.8
Red (R)	80.7	72.4	-8.3	77.4
White (W)	75.4	70.3	-5.1	75.0
Yellow (Y)	26.3	42.2	+15.9	26.2
Others*	0.0	7.8	7.8	3.6

* Orange, purple and brown.

§ Total number of flags: 57 in 1904, 84 in 1950 and 192 in 2000.

Table 1

Year	Total flags	African flags	African flags containing green	% of African flags containing green
1904	57	4	1	25.0
1950	84	7	3	42.9
2000	192	52	42	80.8

Table 2

a sort of seed. Ethiopia was a nation never submitted to foreign powers, and it was considered a symbol of freedom. So in 1957, when the British Colony of the Gold Coast became independent as the Republic of Ghana, it adopted, as a sign of liberation, the Ethiopian colors. Since then, red, yellow and green have been the continental colors and they should represent the United Africa. Unfortunately, an African Union has never been realized until now, but a wide number of newly independent African states followed the example of Ghana.

2. The colors of the Panafrican Movement. In 1914 Marcus Aurelius Garvey (1887-1940), a Jamaican of African roots, organized a revolutionary movement to build a new African homeland to receive black Americans wishing to come back. Garvey's colors were green, black and red. His project was unsuccessful, but some African states, upon becoming independent, adopted the green, black, and red on their new flags.

3. Islamic colors. Green is the Islamic color par excellence, and is present in the flags of various African Muslim states, for example Libya (hoisting a plain green flag), Algeria, Comoro Islands, Mauritania, Sudan, etc.)

4. The meaning of green. It is very likely that the great popularity of this color is due to the its symbolism, which recalls the luxuriance of nature as well as the agricultural resources. Most of all, it represents the blooming youth and the hope for a propitious future. Nothing better suits a recent independent people and therefore several African nations chose green (among them Madagascar, Seychelles, Namibia, Gabon, and so on) for this reason rather than the first three reasons cited above.

Yellow attained a frequency of 42.2% in 2000 from 26.3 % in 1904. This increase is attributable to the fact that yellow is among the Panafrican colors. In fact, in 1950, before African independence, the flags containing yellow were 26.2 %, practically the same figure as in 1904.

Black is another color that has had a strong increase, from only 3.5% (just Belgium and Germany) in 1904 to 20.3% in 2000. In fact, black is among the four Pan-arab colors – the others being red, white and green. It appeared on the flags of some Arab states that reached their independence before 1950. And after that year, black has been chosen by several African states, too.

As I already observed, all the three most frequently used colors in flags - red, white and blue - show a decrease in usage. Blue has had the greatest variation, -13,2%. This is due to the absence of blue among the Panafrican colors, as well as among the Islamic and Arabs ones.

In conclusion, one can say that there has been an "African factor" heavily affecting the chromatic vexillo-logical trend. It is not surprising. In fact 27 flags out 100 are today from Africa while in 1904 there were only seven out 100.