

# Pristine Toponymy and Embedded Placenames on Islands

JOSHUA NASH

*University of Adelaide, Australia*

Pristine placenaming or pristine toponymy is a concept first put forward by Ross (1958: 333). Ross considers a toponym pristine “if, and only if, we are cognisant of the actual act of its creation.” This paper redefines and extends Ross’s definition of pristine toponymy and considers the role of pristine toponyms and pristine toponymies on small islands which were “toponymically uninhabited” prior to European colonization, that is, they had no recorded toponymic history.

**KEYWORDS** pristine toponymy, embedded placenames, islands, Norfolk Island, toponymic methods, toponymic fieldwork

## Introduction

There is a great need for theory and methods in toponymy which consider a linguistic analysis of toponym structure in parallel with a detailed cultural analysis of the socio-historical significance of toponymic processes. This article presents an argument for the efficacy of using “pristine toponymy” as a theoretical tool in toponymy. The discussion will center on, although not be restricted to, pristine toponymy on islands. It will also consider and introduce the concept of “island toponymy.” This is because the majority of research into pristine toponymy has analyzed the island setting and its effect on an island’s toponyms, particularly on small islands uninhabited prior to European colonization. Islands are also often manageable in size and scale.

It is necessary to reconsider Ross’s (1958: 333) definition of a “pristine toponym”: a toponym is pristine “if, and only if, we are cognisant of the actual act of its creation.” Although Ross’s research is not widely known in linguistics or toponymy, it is the first mention of the concept “pristine toponymy” or “pristine place-naming” in the literature. Ross’s claim is expanded on and its effectiveness as a theoretical tool and as a mode of understanding the significance of pristine toponymies is outlined. In order to do so, it is important to be explicit about terminology.

Here “pristine toponymy” is defined as the study of a system of toponyms where toponymic knowledge is retrievable through oral history in the locations where the

placenames exist. Any toponym found in such a system may be regarded as a pristine toponym whether or not it fits the Ross (1958: 333) requirement of transparency, that is, “if, and only if, we are cognisant of the actual act of its creation.” In other words, all toponyms in pristine toponymies are regarded as pristine, whether they are transparent in their origin or opaque.

Within such pristine toponymies, it is useful to distinguish embedded from unembedded toponyms. For example, in the Australian and Pacific context, there are many placenames introduced into the pristine environment from outside as part of the colonizing process, to sit alongside those which are generated within the colony and which have a closer connection to the place and its new culture. Unembedded toponyms can be made a part of the toponymic lexicon of a specific location, language, and people through custom, tradition, and knowledge transmission (see Hunn’s 1994 reflection on the transmission of Sahaptin toponyms on the Columbia Plateau across generations). For example, a colonial name in Australia like Sydney may have replaced the indigenous placename for the same place, and thus be transparent because its history and colonial connection is known. However, it is still an introduced name. On the other hand, embedded toponyms are toponyms that are not only transparent but have not been imposed on the toponymic history of an environment from outside; they have been named by people who know the environment and have bestowed their own colloquial, relatively unknown and commonly undocumented and unofficial placenames on their landscape. These names are often unofficial and esoteric names, which commemorate local events and people. It is this contrast between embedded toponyms, retrievable through fieldwork with the people who know and remember these names, and unembedded toponyms which gives a more refined and precise delineation than Ross’s definitions of “pristine toponym” and “pristine toponymy.”

Berleant-Schiller (1991: 92–93) emphasizes the importance of conducting toponymic field research with informants:

Long-term field research in toponymy is by nature slow, but it is far from unrewarding. It allows the researcher not only to gather primary data, in this case place names, but to observe the culture in which they are embedded and their relationship to changes in land use and landscape. The researcher can experience the place and its people, incorporate local language and speech into the study, and elicit the contributions of native speakers. Far from being misinformed, local residents are the only sources of local speech, oral tradition, and place names that are not on maps or that differ from those maps. They are also the only providers of information that leads to an understanding of indigenous systems of knowledge and ways of ordering and classifying the world.

This method of collecting toponymic data enables the collection of both pristine unembedded and embedded toponyms. While Berleant-Schiller does not specifically label her “primary data” “pristine toponyms” or these “indigenous systems of knowledge” “pristine toponymies,” there are several parallels in her method to what is claimed here is a feasible method of not only collecting pristine toponymic data but also making conclusions about the significance of pristine toponymies to toponymic theory. This approach may also extend previous toponym typologies and research into understanding placenaming motivation (e.g. Tent and Blair, 2011).

## Pristineness

“Pristine” commonly means untouched or spotless. Zettersten (1969: 138) claims that the concept of pristine placenames is a “universal of island languages,” especially of the Pacific and the South Atlantic such as those of Pitcairn Island and Tristan da Cunha, placenames of islands which Ross and Moverley (1964: 170–188) and Zettersten analyzed respectively. In a critique of Zettersten’s claim of universality, Cassidy (1974: 177) comments, “these traits are so broad and general as to give the word ‘universals’ no real significance. Nor are they limited to island languages.” In addition to a discussion of island universals and pristine toponymy, Zettersten (1969: 125) argues that on islands the evolution of “the names of incidents,” or what can be considered “unofficial toponyms,” which are more embedded culturally and ecologically in the place where they came about, are useful in describing relationships between (British) colonial forces and placenaming behavior:

A close comparison between names on Tristan and those on other islands explored by the British reveals that the system of forming natural descriptive names is entirely the same, while the names of incidents stand out as more imaginative on Tristan da Cunha and Pitcairn Island than on other islands which are or have been British.

Pitcairn Island, Tristan da Cunha, and Norfolk Island, islands which were “toponymically uninhabited” prior to European colonization, that is, they had no recorded toponymic history, are the islands which have received the most attention in pristine toponymy. Norfolk is the island case study where the author has maintained a longitudinal engagement with the community and documented the island’s toponymy (see Nash, 2011 for details). This research was conducted in accordance with Berleant-Schiller’s (1991) methodological mandate for engaging in long-term toponymic research and furthered this by considering the “pristine nature” and “indigenous systems of knowledge” related to toponyms. This was achieved through direct engagement with native speakers of a language and custodians of toponymic knowledge. As stated above, unlike Ross, it is not argued here that being perfectly “cognizant” of all toponym histories is a necessity for claiming pristine status of a toponymic system. Most of the world’s toponyms are opaque and not pristine or transparent because people do not know and cannot remember how they came into being and who named them. While Ross’s research looked at the toponyms of Pitcairn Island (South Pacific), Zettersten applied this same pristine principle to the toponymy of Tristan da Cunha (1967; 1969; 1989a) and St Helena (1989b), both small volcanic islands in the South Atlantic Ocean. Because both of these island groups were uninhabited prior to European contact, their toponymic histories are very similar to Pitcairn and other such islands in the South Pacific such as Norfolk.

Ekwall (2003) presents a list of twenty-four toponym categories for Tristan da Cunha, including “bays, beaches, caves” and “points, headlands, capes.” These toponym categories show a large amount of unofficial and insider toponyms, for example, *The Gulch-came-down-the-west-side-of-the-Ridge-where-the-goat-jump-off*, *The Hill-with-a-cone-in-it-on-the-east-side-of-the-gulch-come-down-by-the-Ridge-where-the-goat-jump-off*, and *Shirt-tail Gutter*, a place which remembers a gulch where a gentleman’s shirt-tail once caught fire. Ross and Moverley (1964: 170–188)

list the Pitcairn toponyms *Bang-on-Iron*, *Bitey Bitey*, *Break Im Hip*, *John Catch a Cow*, *Where Reynolds Cut The Firewood*, and *Oh Dear*. These names are not only idiosyncratic; they are almost absurd. They could possibly break records for the world's longest or most peculiar placenames; their structures not being typical of toponyms, especially when they contain verbal forms. These unofficial names cling to landscape and reveal the shaky grip language and knowledge have on spaces and how humans strive against to describe and work the environments they inhabit. Such toponyms may also be reasonably common in various indigenous and pre-literate toponymies in Australia and elsewhere, but these are generally not recorded. While these toponymies may also be pristine, island situations like Norfolk are particularly effective. This is because pristine toponyms can be accessed and documented through fieldwork with people who remember the histories of these names.

Because few esoteric names are rarely mapped or published, especially in low information and insular societies common on small islands, and because the vast majority of embedded toponyms are not known outside of select social groups, the most practical way to access this information is through oral history. While it is often difficult to assess the relative reliability and validity of (pristine) toponym histories obtained through long-term field research, the profound absence of any other documentation for these unmapped names means that reliability checks across informants are the most reliable means for the validation of placename histories. My experience on Norfolk is that this is a feasible and manageable system; people are willing to share their knowledge and generally want their linguistic and cultural history mapped in as accurate a manner as possible. There is no reason to believe that these folk etymologies of toponyms are any more or less frequent in pristine toponymic environments — it is just that because of the commonly undocumented nature of these folk toponyms, the folk etymologies of these toponyms are novel and without equal.

Like Berleant-Schiller (1991), Ross (1958: 337) also claims that, by undertaking fieldwork in pristine toponymy, much progress can be made towards discovering the history of toponyms and their application to linguistics:

What is the value, if any, of Pitcairnese [pristine] toponymy to other toponymies? I think that these pristine names have a very definite value. The nature of this value may well be appreciated by a toponymist imagining himself trying to solve these Pitcairnese place-names *ab initio*, without any of the local information so carefully gathered by Moverley. It is not to be supposed that he would make much progress. But it must be remembered that we are, in fact, trying to solve many — perhaps most — toponymies in just this kind of way.

Ross never travelled to Pitcairn, but he published the toponymic data in Ross and Moverley (1964: 170–188) of his late colleague, A.W. Moverley, who did do fieldwork on Pitcairn. Since this time little research has been conducted in pristine toponymy. Apart from Zettersten's secondary research and Mühlhäusler's (2002) preliminary primary analysis outlining the efficacy of the pristine aspect of Norfolk placenaming to pristine toponymy based in primary data collected during fieldwork, Nash (2011) is the first fieldwork based study to analyze large amounts of primary data (and secondary, map based data) on pristine toponymy.<sup>1</sup>

## Pristine toponymy and island toponymy

Research in pristine toponymy and the process of (particularly) unofficial placenaming demonstrates that isolated (island) environments, which have not had previous toponymic inhabitation, are ideal case studies for observing processes of pristine toponymy. The study of Norfolk Island toponymy is significant to pristine toponymy because people remember large amounts of placename history. A theoretical tool, which considers the “pristine status” of a toponym, can be used to distinguish between opaque and transparent placename histories.

Ross’s (1958) definition of pristine toponyms focuses on their transparent quality. This claim is extended by maintaining that the transparency of names and their ability to be remembered in the minds of the people and in the landscape where they are remembered is significantly affected by time. There are several toponyms on Norfolk containing Tahitian lexemes. This is attributable to the influence of Tahitian in the language which developed after the Mutiny on the *Bounty* in Tahiti and the arrival of the *Bounty* mutineers and their Tahitian counterparts on Pitcairn Island in 1790 and subsequent move of their descendants to Norfolk in 1856 (see Laycock, 1989 for further details of the historical and social status of Pitkern-Norf’k, the language of the descendants of the *Bounty* mutineers). When considering a name that appears as a pure Tahitian toponym on Norfolk Island, it is worth remembering Ross’s (1958: 337) statement about the influence of Tahitian on pristine Pitcairn toponyms:

Very few of the names are Polynesian; so we must imagine that the English were the chief name-givers, as perhaps one might expect.

Because Tahitian speakers never made it to Norfolk, the possible influence of Tahitian on the linguistic and toponymic landscape of Norfolk from 1856 onwards would have been much less than Pitcairn post-1790. There are, however, several toponyms on Norfolk, which express a strong Tahitian influence and are powerfully representative of a strong link to the rest of the Pacific, rather than to colonial Britain or Australia, through toponymy. Three of the most obvious examples are *Fata Fata* (*fatafata* < Tahitian: to flatten out), *Parloo Park* (English: *Masturbation Park*), and *Gudda Bridge* (English: *Fuck Bridge*). What is of interest to pristine toponymy is the theoretical significance of analyzing pristine toponyms and pristine toponymies. This may be because these quite impenetrable cultural and linguistic artifacts exist within confined geographic and insular cultural spaces such as islands. The nature of such esoteric names that evolve in these situations tend to be historically relevant to a select few, and they are liable to be linked and embedded directly to or in activity, family, and work related uses.

Just because a toponym is transparent does not necessarily mean it is pristine. Conversely, just because a name is pristine does not necessarily imply that it is transparent. This consideration and refinement of Ross’s (1958) initial definition and Zettersten’s (1967; 1969; 1989a; 1989b) secondary treatment of pristine toponymy has identified the usefulness of pristine toponyms to toponymy and linguistics. It also illustrates the need to conduct primary field research to access the histories and meanings of pristine toponyms.

The field method employed in Nash (2011) builds on Berleant-Schiller’s (1991) methodological directive and also emphasizes the value of conducting toponymic

fieldwork in island environments with recent human histories where informants who have large amounts of toponymic knowledge can be accessed. Different sizes, histories, and topographies will highlight similar and different processes of toponymy and will result in different toponymic inventories across different social and natural ecologies. The value has been put forward for considering islands for (pristine) toponymic and linguistic analysis, and the relevance of (pristine) toponyms to the study of islands.

## Conclusion

Further work in pristine toponymy should also consider not only transparent placename histories in “pristine” island toponymic locations and what they illustrate, but also consider the role of opaque linguistic and cultural knowledge associated with toponymies. Mühlhäusler’s (2002: 89) claims that islands and particularly islands with short human histories with multiple occupations are an “ideal test case” for students of toponymy. In addition, island toponymies may also play a role in helping to tease out principles of “islandness” and island languages (see Zettersten’s 1969 “universals of island languages”). It seems that pristine toponymy as a theoretical tool can be applied to data in order to assess the influence of individuals and other ecological and historical factors on a particular place’s toponymy. Further studies in pristine toponymy could consider the role individuals play in creating “microtoponymies” (small-scale toponymies) and the role of humor and social identity creation through participation in larger and smaller scale processes of place creation and ecological linking of language through toponymy.

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## Note

<sup>1</sup> This paper makes no attempt to summarize this study. The interested reader is referred to this document and its findings.

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## Notes on contributor

Joshua Nash is a research associate in linguistics at the University of Adelaide, Australia. His research synthesizes ecological approaches to the study of language with Indian perspectives on spirituality, ecology, and ethnography. He has conducted linguistic fieldwork on Norfolk Island since 2007 and environmental fieldwork in India since 1998.

Correspondence to: Dr Joshua Nash, Research Associate, Discipline of Linguistics, University of Adelaide SA 5005, Australia. Email: [joshua.nash@adelaide.edu.au](mailto:joshua.nash@adelaide.edu.au).