

Guest Editorial

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American Name Society

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On 21 October 2016, the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted Resolution A/c.3/71/L.17 on the “Rights of Indigenous Peoples”. One of the primary objectives of this legislation was to reaffirm UNESCO’s resolve to support efforts to recognize “the importance of indigenous peoples revitalizing, using, developing and transmitting their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literature to future generations” (UNESCO 2016, 3). With that goal in mind, the UN officially designated 2019 the “International Year of Indigenous Languages”. UNESCO’s decision to place such an emphasis on the preservation of native peoples’ languages is not simply to safeguard the world’s threatened linguistic diversity.

As the organization itself explains, this commitment also reflects the UN’s recognition that indigenous languages are essential to “building inclusive knowledge societies, where all people have the capabilities to acquire information, transform it into knowledge, understanding and meaningful goals” (UNESCO 2017, para. 3). Part of the basis for this governmental policy is the growing body of scientific research that demonstrates the fact that “geographical names, i.e. toponyms, or more commonly known in English as place names, represent a complex body of knowledge people have accumulated over long periods of being part of specific environments and ecosystems” (Müller-Wille 2000, 146). As global modern toponymic research has repeatedly shown, indigenous place names may be effectively understood as ethnolinguistic repositories of traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) (Basso 1996; Boillat et al. 2013; Bölcskei 2014; Castonguay 1979; O’Connor and Kroefges 2008; Si and Agnihotri 2014; Thornton 2008).

The recognition of the power of toponyms to transmit TEK formed the impetus for the initiation of an innovative project with the Tl’azt’en Nation, the Dakelh-speaking people of central British Columbia, Canada. Called “Partnering for Sustainable Resource Development” (Heikkilä and Fondahl 2010), this project explored the pedagogical utility of integrating the instruction of Dakelh toponyms to enhance Tl’azt’en students’ retention rates and achievement scores in science education. After reviewing the results of the pedagogical intervention, the researchers concluded that toponyms had indeed proven to be effective tools in teaching key concepts in language, geography, history, and ecology as well as environmental awareness, use, and conservation.

As the success of this pedagogical project and many other toponymic investigations demonstrated, place names not only serve multiple purposes beyond the mere identification and demarcation of topographical space (Semken 2005; Thornton 1997; Rose-Redwood, Alderman, and Azaryahu 2009). They also serve as powerful resources for the encoding of collective memory; celebrating sacred belief-systems; (dis)honoring significant personages and/or events; indicating areas of ownership and belonging; and transmitting information about land-use. Moreover, topographical areas successively or simultaneously used by different groups are often given multiple names serving different functions. Even in those instances when differing peoples bestow one and the same topographical space with toponyms that serve the same function, it is not unusual to find that the narratives told by these place names are radically different or even diametrically opposed. Consequently, the systematic investigation of toponyms can provide key insights into differing linguistic, ecological, historical, geographical, political, sociocultural, and theological facets of differing name-giving peoples. In this special issue, specific attention is given to comparing and contrasting the toponyms given by indigenous and non-indigenous peoples.

With this goal in mind, in February 2017, a special call for research papers was placed. The call specifically sought contributions that would provide detailed analyses of indigenous toponyms found in the former European colonies in Africa, the Americas, Asia, the Pacific, and the Antipodes. In response to that call for papers, a broad selection of submissions was received and then submitted to scientific review by an international team of toponymic scholars. The collective results of the team's qualitative and quantitative assessments were used as the basis for not only assembling a special panel on indigenous toponymy for the 2018 ANS annual conference in Salt Lake City Utah, but also for selecting five final articles to appear in this special issue. Taken as a set, these contributions focus on differing functional facets as well as geographical foci of (non) indigenous place naming.

The first contribution comes from Peter E. Raper, Professor Extraordinaire and Research Fellow at the University of Free State in Bloemfontein, South Africa. This investigation focuses on the linguistic features of toponyms used in the African sub-continent. More specifically, Raper's work provides a detailed examination of the semantic and phonological adaptive processes evident in toponyms used by peoples with Bantu and European heritage.

The geographical attention of this issue then shifts from the African to the Australian continent in the second contribution. Written by Jan Tent, the former Director of the Australian National Placenames Survey and Honorary Senior Lecturer at the Australian National University, this article presents both the distinct and common patterns of indigenous toponymic borrowings into the Englishes of Australia, New Zealand, and the Fiji Islands. From this tri-national comparison, readers are then offered an in-depth case study of a single locality Down Under.

Concentrating the scientific focus on Victoria, Ian Clark of Australia's Federation University examines re-naming processes during the 1870s. Using illustrative data gathered from nineteenth-century newspaper articles and official governmental reports, this article presents some of the leading arguments expressed in the public arena about these toponymic changes. This historical discursive evidence provides a vivid view of an as yet unmatched period of top-down driven replacements of colonial toponyms with indigenous place names.

The fourth article in this special issue also examines the effects of government-sponsored toponymic changes but in the opposite direction (i.e. from non-indigenous to indigenous) and a different continent, North America. In this piece, ANS President Iman Nick investigates the US Board on Geographical Names' removal and replacement of official US toponyms deemed potentially offensive to indigenous peoples. This examination reveals not only recurrent patterns in toponymic replacement strategies, but also underlying tensions in contemporary US society.

The fifth and final article moves from modern-day to ancient place-naming patterning. In a painstaking comparative analysis, Paul Geraghty of the University of the South Pacific in Suva, Fiji provides a historical phonological study of place-naming practices exercised by the early inhabitants of the Central Pacific. In particular, Geraghty's article details the nominalization function of leading types of toponymic derivation evidenced in Fiji, Rotuma, and Polynesia some 3000 years ago.

Taken together, the articles presented in this special issue reflect the breadth and depth of modern toponymic research. Furthermore, the inherently interdisciplinary nature of this research underscores the potential significance of analyzing places names and place naming for a wide variety of allied scientific fields of inquiry. From history, sociology, anthropology, and politics to ecology, geography, cartography, and linguistics, toponyms are a rich source of scientific data. Finally, the systematic analysis of (non)indigenous place names and place naming can offer invaluable insights into contrasting yet universal relationships between languages, peoples, and places.

The guest editors would like to express their congratulations to each of the authors featured in this special issue for their excellent scholarly contributions. In addition, we would like to extend our thanks to the team of blind reviewers who graciously shared their professional expertise during the evaluation and selection process. Our gratitude also goes to *Names* Editor-in-Chief, Frank Nuessel, for his invaluable assistance in putting this special issue together.

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Notes on contributors

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Jan Tent is a retired academic having taught linguistics at the University of Sydney, the University of the South Pacific (Suva, Fiji), and Macquarie University (Sydney). He is the current Director of the Australian National Placenames Survey, as well as an Honorary Senior Lecturer at the Australian National University, Canberra. Jan's onomastic research has mainly concentrated on early European place-naming practices in Australasia, as well as the toponymy of Australia in general.

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