On Etymologizing Indian Place-Names

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THERE IS A WIDE-SPREAD and a popular interest in what is called the origin of "the meaning" of place-names. Evidence of such interest is not hard to find: historical works, and guide-books, frequently afford us, with no reservations, the confident statement: "this name, in the X language, means such-and-such." Such statements are commonly made despite the absence of any adequate grammar or dictionary of the language from which the name in question is supposed to be derived. And even when such descriptions are available (which is rarely enough), no mention is ordinarily made of the fact that the "meaning" of place names is – as often as not – quite unknown to the speakers of the language involved, that the word in question is "only a name."

To those who have concerned themselves with the study of place-names in western Europe, where the documentation is extensive and the history a long one, it is a matter of common knowledge that names of places frequently preserve words and constructions which have otherwise disappeared from the language; the names survive only as names. It would be simple to cite numerous instances of this sort of thing in the field of English place-names. The apparent confidence, therefore, with which the statement is made that 'Chicago' or 'Kentucky', or 'Wisconsin' means such-and-such, ought to arouse our suspicions. One has the impression that compilers of place-name lexica, themselves without knowledge of the languages involved, offer us, without a word of caution, "meanings" which have no basis other than that of popular tradition.

Sins of this nature are especially common in North America, where an interest is found among the present occupiers of the land for the names of the country they live in which derive from the Indian languages. Many of these Indian languages have become

extinct; and among those which are still spoken there are few indeed which are in any sense adequately described. The scholars who have produced these – few – good descriptions have for the most part not been interested in the study of toponymy; thus a prime source of sound knowledge has remained untapped by onomatologists. However, we need not only as sound a knowledge of the native tongues as we can get; we also need – something we have lacked until now – a comprehensive study of Indian name-giving, which would include not only those relatively few native names which survive as a result of borrowing, but the whole corpus of native toponyms (to the extent that these are now still recoverable). Such a study would have the value of making explicit the patterns of native naming, and would thus be a contribution to the book that will one day be written about place naming throughout the world; it would also make it possible for us to be more critical about newly suggested etymologies.

So far the preliminary remarks. I would like to illustrate some of the problems encountered by the American onomatologist in his work on place-names of Indian origin with a consideration of one well-known name from the coast of southern California: *Malibu*, the designation of a canyon and of a strip of beach not far north and west of Los Angeles. For some years I have been studying, from the only known informant, the language, hitherto as good as untreated, of the Chumash Indians, who once occupied that part of the coast which runs from just north of Los Angeles to a point an indeterminate distance above the city of San Luis Obispo. Many names of native origin have survived, e. g. (among many) Pismo (Beach), Lompoc (a town), Nipomo (a town), Saticoy (a town), (Point) Mugu, (Port) Hueneme, Castaic (a town), Camulos (a town), Anapamu (a street in Santa Barbara). The spelling *Malibu* of our name became fixed only in the 1880's; among the earlier variants there occur the following: *Umalibo*, la cierra de *Maligo*, *Malago*, *Malico*, *Malaga*.[1] Evidence collected in 1884 by Henshaw[2] establishes the fact that there was, before white contact, a Chumash village with a name something like this near the beach at the mouth of

[1] Erwin G. Gudde, *California Place Names*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1949. s. v. *Malibu*.

[2] *The Mission Indian Vocabularies of H. W. Henshaw*, R. F. Heizer ed., Anthropological Records 15:2, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1955. pp. 194–195.

the canyon; and the name has survived because it was appropriated as the designation of a land grant made by the Mexican government in the 1840's. We must assume that the native name had a phonetic shape which, when borrowed by speakers of American Spanish, could plausibly yield these variants. The initial *u-* in the first of these forms – lacking in the others – may be equated with a morpheme *hu-* which appears prefixed to nouns and verbs and carries the meaning 'over there, distant from the speaker,' and which may be lacking. My informant, whose speech belongs to a dialect notably different from that of the area in question, remembers a place-name – which we must *assume* to be identical with the name we are studying, since she is unable to specify its location – the pronunciation of which may be represented as [maliwu]. So far as I am aware, there is no reason for supposing that an intervocalic *-w-* might not have been variously spelled by Spanish speakers with the letters *-b-* (and so equated with the Spanish bilabial voiced fricative) or *-g-* (cf. 'agua' = [awa]. The present English pronunciation, ['mælIbuw], is of course based on that Spanish spelling which was adopted as standard. The informant, when asked if this name meant anything, responded: "It's only a name."

The suggestion which is now made consists of an analysis of this word into two segments, *mal-* and *iwu*; and an equation of each of these with morphemes identified elsewhere. *mal-* has been found as a bound morpheme occurring – rarely – as the prior member of compounds with the meaning 'constant(ly), steady(ly), permanent(ly); and with *iwu* is associated the sense of "noise", frequently loud (and sometimes disagreeable). The whole *-(hu-) maliwu-*, with a meaning '(it makes a) loud noise all the time (over there)', is a possible construction in the language (the reference, presumably, might have been to the surf, for this village lay on an open and unprotected coast). I wish to make it perfectly clear that I do not claim this to be the source; it is a guess, nothing more; and should it be entered in some future dictionary of California place-names, it would have to be accompanied by at least one question mark.

Does a name with this meaning fit into the patterns, as we know them, of the giving of place-names by the California natives? This is a difficult question, to which a positive answer is impossible.

A preliminary classification by meaning types might be made into three groups: 1) those names incorporating directional terms – north, south, west, etc.; 2) those names containing a reference to some creature or being significant in the local mythology or religion (Ojai, Umunhum); and 3) those names which in some way describe the locality so designated. In this third class we can easily distinguish three well-represented sub-groups: 3a) those names consisting of, or containing, words for edible plants or other natural products economically important to the Indians, products which presumably were found in abundance in the places so designated; 3b) those names containing the terms for parts of the body, used metaphorically in the same fashion that we find in such English language place-names as Turnagain Arm (Alaska), Portland Head Light (Maine), Anthony's Nose (New York) or in expressions like 'the *mouth* of a river' and 'the *foot* of the mountain' [examples from the Chumash region, hitherto unpublished, are *snoXs* 'The Nose', the name of a bluff near Santa Barbara, and Nipomo, a town in San Luis Obispo Co., which may possibly be considered to consist of the local term for 'finger' *-nipu-* and a locative affix *-mu*]; and 3c) simple descriptive expressions, such as 'lake', 'water' (*Hel ʔo* ? 'The Water', the name of a native village not far from Santa Barbara), 'hill', etc. Strikingly missing from this list are place names taken from the names of persons, a trait which, remarkably enough, is also characteristic of the names bestowed by the Spaniards during the period ca. 1770–1845. Perhaps, now we might include *(hu-)maliwu*, *if* it once meant 'Where (the surf) is always beating', under this last rubric; but I know of no close parallel to a name of this kind within the native Californian inventory.

The method followed in the study of this toponym, and the tentative nature of the results achieved, are similar to those one may observe in the investigation of the ancient place-names of Europe – with this difference: there we frequently either cannot surely identify the language from which names like *Sardinia*, *Rome*, or the *Alps* came, or if we can, we commonly have only an incomplete knowledge of it, as the case of such Illyrian(?) [or Ligurian?] names as *Zürich* or *Genua* (*Geneva*); here, on the other hand, we are in the position of being able to study at firsthand the source language (in most cases, for most of the aboriginal tongues are

still spoken). But in both fields all we can claim for a large proportion of the names investigated, is a certain measure of probability. In Europe place-names are frequently relics of long extinct languages once spoken in the regions in which they survive; whether the same is true of the native toponyms of America is a question which has scarcely been asked; and one for the answer to which a much more detailed knowledge of the Indian idioms is required than we now have. Could our name *malíwu*, i. e., be not originally Chumash at all (and thus our efforts to find an etymology in terms of that language vain), but rather a survival from a pre-existing lingiustic stratum?

The study of American place-names of Indian origin on a more solid basis will become increasingly feasible as our knowledge of the native languages grows, as it is steadily doing. Such names, however, were only a minute fraction of those once used by the aborigines; those persons among them who still have some knowledge of pre-European nomenclature are becoming fewer and fewer, but a concerted effort even at this late date would reap a rich harvest. Here is a field peculiarly American, with problems, methods, and the possibility of results distinct from those of our European predecessors.

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