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Toponymy in languages of native peoples in Brazil

Submitted by Brazil **

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Invented Tradition and Native Names

Different from Paraguay, a country which still preserves the *Guarani* as an official or second language, and other countries wherein the languages of native peoples were preserved, in Brazil, outside special areas, native languages only appear in a reduced number of words from the vocabulary of everyday use by the population, though bear strong presence among toponyms and antroponyms. Ethnolinguistic studies conducted under the scope of the research of *Atlas Toponímico do Brasil* at the University of São Paulo (Dick, 1990) have already shown that around 20 percent of city names of the São Paulo State have native origin or etymology. However, the frequency of Amerindian etymology among toponyms of the whole country does not necessarily reflect the direct influence of native peoples in the naming processes, since time immemorial, as it may seem. It has already been demonstrated that the "native origin" appears to have often had only the role of adding native color to an "invented tradition", as Hobsbawn & Ranger (1984) described it. In fact, all one can assure is that the name is of native etymology, unless more data on the naming process is available.

It was shown before (Bustamante, 2005) that the preference for providing administrative territorial units with names of native origin was stimulated during Getúlio Vargas' dictatorship, when a broad toponymic change was promoted due to the so-called Geographical Law of Estado Novo (New State). Aiming at the systemic ordering of the Brazilian administrative and territorial division, the federal government approved the Decree-Law n. 311, 1938, regulated by Resolution n. 61, dated 24th July 1939, approved by the General Assembly of National Geographical Councils, which, besides prohibiting the repetition of names of towns and districts, recommended "the preference to adopt regional names of the regional native language or related to historical facts of the region in case of replacement of toponyms" (IBGE, 1943, p. 436). The safeguard "in case of replacement of toponyms" may be intended to suggest that the impact would be reduced, but the publication that lists cities and villages shows a high percentage of those that had their names altered (cf. IBGE, 1951). Late reactions to the great toponymic change are still shown in statements such as Milton Santos' (2001) who, after spending his childhood in Itapira (Minas Gerais State – MG) since 1926, had to change the name of the town of his memories to Ubaitaba (MG) from the 1940's on. The respected Brazilian geographer still points out that the two names have the same meaning, which may suggest that promoters of the Tupi language created the second one in the lawmakers' offices, as it happened in other cases.

More recently, we still find this tendency alive in a recommendation included in the laws of the National System of Nature Conservation Unit (Law n. 9.985, dated 18th July 2000 and Decree n. 4.340, dated 22nd August 2002) to give preference to names of native ancestors in the choice for the designation of federal conservation units. According to article 3, "the denomination of each conservation unit should be based, preferably, on its most significant natural feature, or on its oldest denomination, giving priority, in this case, to the designations of the native ancestors" (2004, p.37).

Thus, in the extremely varied set of Brazilian toponymy, it would be clarifying to distinguish (systematically, for inclusion in the database and further retrieval for analysis) the different forms of incorporation of toponymy of native etymology, with the help of the classification suggested by Houaiss (in Cunha, 1999). This classification provides for the separation of cases such as the ones registered between 1938 and 1943 – in which the names were created in the governmental offices and inserted in an effort to organize the territorial subdivisions – from the ones fixed by native peoples and portrayed in the official cartography.

Participation in the Naming Processes and in the Collection of Names

At the same time, aiming at observing the patterns of the social practice of naming in each time and place, other classification is pointed out. Under Resolution 4 of the 3rd Conference on Standardization of Geographical Names, approved in 1977 (2004), the countries assembled at the UN showed their concern with the reliability of toponymic information by approving the recommendation to provide

the most information about the source of the geographical name and indicate, for example, whether they are (1) collected in field, (2) collected in documents or (3) specially granted (United Nations, 2004, p. 30). The distinction is important, and in the case of this paper, the interest lies particularly on the toponyms of the first type, due to the degree of participation of local society in the naming and collecting processes, and of the third type, for the low level of civil participation in the naming and in the collection, which is almost always conducted by official bodies, and/or in laws and legal records. Laws are official documents but they do not necessarily reflect legitimate decisions, as in the case of authoritarian government periods.

Antonio Houaiss suggested to look at the Brazilian toponyms as layers in the "Preface-study" included in the *Historical Dictionary of Portuguese Words Originated from* Tupi. Taking the model proposed by Houaiss, one can assume that the first European visitors or conquerors in most cases collected the oldest layer of indigenous toponymy directly from the native peoples. However, they certainly somewhat altered it when they wrote this toponymy because the inhabitants of the Brazilian coast at that time did not use the written form of the name, as they did not use paper, maps, or other documents. Accurate or not, many times only the name survives to portray a place at a certain time, in a map or in a field report. In the first Brazilian maps and censuses, there were already native toponyms together with the names of the Catholic calendar and other kind of European names, including Portuguese toponyms.

Many toponyms were fixed when, in the occupied areas in the coast, variations of Tupi were generally spoken both by the original inhabitants and by the first Portuguese settlers. This was true for the first two centuries of the exploration of the Brazilian colony by Portugal. The so-called *língua geral* was a derivation of *Tupi* normalized by the Portuguese Jesuits who used it in religious education. The use of the *língua geral* by the first explorers contributed to fix native language toponyms, especially in the regions where the first expeditions, or *bandeiras*, entered the land. In some cases, the Jesuit´s *Tupi* toponym substituted terms used by native peoples, as it might have happened with the present Tietê River, in São Paulo (Sampaio, 1928). According to this author, native people called it "Anhembi" but the explorers preferred to name it "Tietê", a word which, according to the author, means "real river" in *língua geral* (the statement is questioned by Cardoso – 1961 – who does not agree with the proposed meaning or the *Tupi* origin of the word "Tietê"). As to Sampaio (1928), the name would then have served as a transmitter of necessary knowledge to other explorers and formed an information network. The author points out, however, that the *bandeirantes* explorers, who spread the power of the Portuguese crown to the interior of Brazil in the first two centuries of colonization, did not spread the language which only later was introduced with the progress of the settling.

Priest Vieira writes, in his *Obras várias*, I, in 1694: "the language spoken in such families [the Portuguese and native people living in São Paulo] is the indigenous language, and the boys will learn the Portuguese language later, at school" (*in* Sampaio, 1928, p.52). In 1697, it is known that the bishop of Olinda requested an interpreter to talk to Domingos Jorge Velho. In the record of the meeting with the winner of Palmares and explorer of Piauí, the bishop showed his lack of understanding of the phenomenon by writing that Jorge Velho "could not even speak". Two centuries after the first expedition of Columbus, the inhabitants of the New World have their mother tongue, unknown to the European people, mistaken as grumbling. There are reports saying that until the 18th century, when the local languages were banned, there were three *Tupi* speakers for each Portuguese speaker in Brazil. Long after that, however, *Tupi* still predominated in regions in the present states of São Paulo, Amazonas, and Pará. In Rio Grande do Sul, until the middle of the 19th century, *Tupi* was spoken in various regions, particularly in the west (Sampaio, 1928).

Thus, in the study of native names, the researcher must consider distinctly the regions reached by the *bandeirantes* explorers who predominantly spoke *Tupi* and fixed this second layer (or information network) of native toponyms. The terms of native toponymy, including *Tupi*, continue to evolve nowadays and, even when they are not created by lawmakers or governmental offices, new toponyms keep on appearing, both in the naming of natural features and in names fixed by public faith and/or documents of unquestioned value before the law. It is hoped that researchers are updating Teodoro

Sampaio's proposals and discussing his valuable contributions nowadays, but records that could be included in the current comments were not found.

On the other hand, a lot of new toponyms long fixed by the communities themselves in the North region of Brazil may have been successful in finding their way to the name collector and cartographers, and therefore are published in official maps, but most are probably being ignored or translated into Portuguese before appearing in maps. Only if we dedicate some effort it may be possible to understand, on one hand, the strong psycho-sociological mechanisms involved in naming places, and on the other hand, the great responsibility involved in the activity of collecting toponymic data. In many contexts, local support can represent a leap of quality in the reliability of the data, but for this enhancement to occur it is necessary to recognize the value of the involvement of the community in the whole process of naming and of collecting names, and also recognize that local identity is a main component of these processes.

Possible Contributions to the Design of the Geographical Names Data Base

Thus, we can find different moments and "origins" of native toponymy in the Brazilian territorial division. Many times, native toponyms result from a translation made in an office – as it is the case of Itapira, currently Ubaitaba, which according to Milton Santos (2001) are morphologically different, but have the same meaning – and imposed without consultation onto the local population. The opposite also happens, and it will deserve a specific study, when an originally native toponymy is translated into Portuguese before introduced in maps, as in the examples listed by Cardoso (1961): the indigenous name Tucátucá-tepê was translated to Serra do Castanhal (p.99) in the map, and Capói-tepê, Serra da Lua (p.100).

Knowing that native peoples of great linguistic diversity live in Brazil now and certainly are fixing new toponyms, it is recommended that a careful evaluation be done of the adequacy of the approach suggested above in order to have the classification included in the toponymic data base. The Brazilian native toponymy, as it was seen, has many faces and it is a field in permanent change, requiring that toponymic collection be made with utmost agility, but respecting the identity and the traditions associated with the places and the peoples.

In conclusion, it is suggested that the adoption of the classification recommended by Houaiss for the sources is highly recommended as far as placenames of indigenous etymology are concerned in order to assist in the decision about their standardized spelling. In addition, it is desirable to develop methods of collecting toponymic information which consider the degree of local involvement in the naming processes and which also give special value to the involvement of local organizations of legitimate representation in the process of collecting names, regardless of naming and/or renaming processes, according to each case. This is one of the reasons why the building of a strong network to support decisions on standard spelling by the national authority on geographical names is being recommended in Brazil.

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