

THE ROLE OF PLACE NAMES IN THE PRESERVATION OF PHILIPPINE CULTURAL HERITAGE

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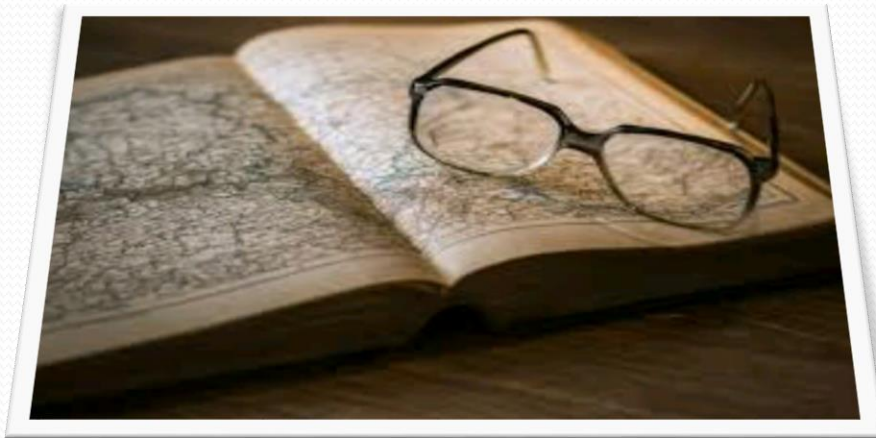
Toponymy is interested in the linguistic evolution (etymology) of place names and the reason behind the giving of a name to a place – whether the motive be cultural, historical or geographical in nature. Thus, it is interested in the ethnolinguistic features of a people living in a place, in the temporal phenomena associated with place name changes, and in the physical geographic import of place names.

Toponymy may be studied using certain methodological approaches, namely: taxonomic, epistemic, semiotic and ideological approaches.



Place names provide testimony to the political, economic, social and religious life of inhabitants – whether these be of the past or present. Toponymists play an active role in the preservation of a region’s culture through its toponymy. They remind a people of their glorious or grim past that respectively either bolsters their national pride or provide costly lessons for future endeavors. One important use of place names is that they provide insights into the cultural make-up of a place, i.e., the legacy of physical artifacts (cultural property) and intangible attributes of a group or society that are inherited from past generations, maintained in the present and bestowed for the benefit of future generations” (Wikipedia: Cultural Heritage 2013).

Section 13(d) of the Local Government Code (RA7160) provides that “... The name of a local government unit or a public place, street or structure that has a historical, cultural or ethnic significance shall not be changed, unless by a unanimous vote of the sanggunian concerned and in consultation with the PHC.”



In study by Gutierrez and Juanico (2012) on Philippine provincial place names, it was shown that of the 64 place names examined, only 22 or 34.0 percent were cultural in nature, while 42 or 66.0 percent were physical in nature.

Table 1. Taxonomy of Place Names of Philippine Provinces

Characteristics	N	N	%	%
Physical	42		66.0	
Shore/bay/coastal plain/coastal landform/wading on coastal waters/island		5		8.0
Tidal movement/ebbing tide/ocean current		3		5.0
Coastal trading town/strategic maritime trading location/anchorage or port town/far maritime location		4		6.0
River basin/river mouth/river delta/river course inland		9		14.0
Lake/lagoon/dried -up swamp		3		5.0
Natural resource/natural feature		13		20.0
Land/mountain topography/mountain peak		5		8.0
Cultural	22		34.0	
A person's name		7		11.0
Another place		4		6.0
Ethnolinguistic group		6		9.0
Cultural feature/cultural act		5		8.0
Total	64	64	100.0	100.0

With regard to cities, of the more than 120 urban centers in the Philippines in 2010, most of the etymologies are based on geographical features and most derive their names from the major languages where they are located. Most also use Spanish orthography and most of those names starting with the letter “S” are named after Catholic saints. **In the case of towns**, most of them also have etymologies based on the lithospheric, biotic and hydrospheric characteristics of the local areas. What can be made out of this smaller percentage of cultural place names? Perhaps it could be that these factors are more ideational, are less prominent in the landscape and are not as strong as the physical factors in arresting the senses of early settlers and founders of the place. It could also be that the influence of these cultural factors take a longer gestation period to be felt or noticed by the place name givers.

An overwhelming number of places in the Philippines have Spanish or Hispanic names as a result of more than three centuries of Spanish colonization. Many places have been named after those in Spain and Latin America. The names are usually those of Catholic saints and notable Spanish personages and places. The most popular or often-repeated names are religious in character, i.e., they include Saint Mary, Jesus' mother, and the more popular Catholic saints. It may be observed that Marian devotion is very strong among Filipinos, i.e., Mary, Jesus' mother, is the most popular place name among Filipinos. Even though the religious place names may not further the cause of spatialized politics, they are still desirable cultural nomenclature that represent avenues for maintaining the Filipinos' cultural religiosity or reminding them to lead morally upright lives based on Catholic religious tenets.

The Philippines has seen many changes in place names especially in 8 recent years. In Luzon, there have been 144 place name changes from 1571 to 1988. In the Visayas, there have been 49 changes between 1902 and 1988. In Mindanao, there have been 54 changes from 1868 to 2006. It is observed that the bulk of changes which occurred after the Philippines received its independence from the United States in 1946, have been **cultural** in nature. More specifically, of the total 247 place name changes, it may be observed that the new names are those of local and national influential leaders and notable personages, as in the use of national figures like Mabini, Rizal, Luna, Quezon , Roxas and Burgos. Some changes simply involved converting the Hispanized orthography of old names to the current orthography of Pilipino, the national language. Although seemingly innocuous, this trend actually reflects the “spatialized politics” toponymic trend especially in formerly colonized countries.

While it may be assumed that the majority of the place names of cities and municipalities are physical in character following the general distribution among the provinces, there appears to be a trend to shift place names to those local personages who have supposedly contributed to the improvement and development of their localities or who have contributed to the emancipation of their towns from foreign occupancy. However, in recent decades, I have noticed a rampant whimsical practice of changing historic names of streets and structures and putting in their stead names of **not-so-notable local politicians and businessmen**. For instance, in a recent list of 370 renamed streets in Metro Manila provided by Wikipedia, I conservatively counted more than 50 place names with heritage and historical value that have been whimsically renamed.

To go back to my thesis, how are we going to stress our cultural heritage and our nationalistic, ethnic and historical identities? How should we go about changing our place names without sacrificing our cultural heritage -- particularly in the case of place names of streets, structures and sites in the plaza complex CBDs of our cities and towns? How should we standardize our place names without losing our cultural and historical identities while at the same time creating a toponymic system that is not simply taxonomic and epistemic but also semiotic and ideological in nature in order to deal with the current need to deepen our nationalism and to stress our control and ownership over many of our contested spaces? What principles, theoretical basis and methodology should we use in formulating our own toponymic system?



THANK YOU