

**Twenty-fifth session  
Nairobi, 5 – 12 May 2009**

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**Item 17 of the provisional agenda**

**Activities relating to the Working Group on the Promotion of the Recording and Use of  
Indigenous, Minority and Regional Language Group Geographical Names**

**Symposium and Proceedings “Geographical Names  
as a Part of the Cultural Heritage” \***

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## **Abstract**

On behalf of the Dutch and German Speaking Division (DGSD) – continuing its tradition of GeoNames symposia – the Austrian Board on Geographical Names (AKO) organised a scientific symposium on the topic of “Geographical Names as a Part of the Cultural Heritage”, which took place in Vienna, 19-21 May 2008. 83 experts from 24 countries and 4 continents accepted the invitation and 31 papers from 21 countries were presented.

The proceedings of this symposium have been published in February 2009 and contain a selection of 27 contributions. Most of them focus on North, Central, East and Southeast European situations. The volume can be ordered at a price of € 25.- plus postage by e-mail ([regina.schneider@univie.ac.at](mailto:regina.schneider@univie.ac.at)).

Major topics of both the symposium and the proceedings are (1) place names as keys to older cultural layers, (2) place names in minority languages and the role of place names for national/ethnic minorities, (3) place names as political symbols and their use for political purposes (place name changes for political reasons), (4) the role of place names in space-related identity building, (5) functions of toponymic data files in place name preservation.

## **Symposium and proceedings “Geographical Names as a Part of the Cultural Heritage”**

*„What fossils are to biology, and sediments to geology, toponyms are to cultural history of a country because they reflect the various ethnic, economic, political and other changes in the past of the country.”*

This sentence of Petar ILIEVSKI, quoted by one of the contributors to the volume presented by this paper illustrates very well the meaning of geographical names, place names or toponyms as a part of cultural heritage. But this is only one of the relevant aspects. Another is the role of place names in space-related identity building of individuals and social groups.

That geographical names are important parts of cultural heritage is nothing new to linguists, geographers, cartographers, historians and practitioners of other disciplines. And as documented by Helen KERFOOT in this volume it has also been a long-regarded aspect of the international standardisation of geographical names. But in this context it has received significantly more attention only in recent years.

This “cultural turn” also has some consequences for the international standardisation of geographical names: for instance, it means that the documentation of non-standardised, historical names and names out of current use is to be encouraged and supported, if “only” for the purpose of research – a task facilitated by modern electronic data bases. It means too that names in minority languages and dialect names deserve special attention, even when the use of both such names, and their languages, are in decline. It also means that other variant names like exonyms – especially in their being expressions of traditional cultural relations – deserve adequate attention; to be standardised and supported in use in communication within a language community. And finally it means that attempts at renaming should be met with utmost reservation, since they interrupt identity ties, close a window to the cultural history of a place and frequently damage an interrelated system of place names.

At the 9th United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names (UNCSGN), 21-30 August 2007, geographical names as a part of cultural heritage evolved as one of the major topics. Madame H el ene-Marie GOSSELIN, UNESCO Representative to the United Nations and Director of the UNESCO New York Office, presented in a keynote speech the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, adopted in 2003 and entered into force on 20 April 2006, pointing at geographical names as an important element of linguistic heritage and traditions.

Since UN Conferences, due to their comprehensive tasks and strict schedule, leave little space for more profound scientific discussions on specific topics, the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN) Dutch and German Speaking Division (DGSD) – continuing its tradition of GeoNames symposia – organised a scientific symposium on this topic, which took place in Vienna, 19-21 May 2008. 83 experts from 24 countries and 4 continents accepted the invitation and 31 papers from 21 countries were presented. It was the goal of this symposium to elaborate on this general topic, to move forward in defining the research theme, its sub-themes and research fields more precisely, and to encourage further research.

Nine months after the Symposium the proceedings have been published as volume 18 of the book series “Wiener Schriften zur Geographie und Kartographie”. The book is available at a price of € 25.- or USD 32.27 plus postage and can be ordered via [regina.schneider@univie.ac.at](mailto:regina.schneider@univie.ac.at) or [peter.jordan@oeaw.ac.at](mailto:peter.jordan@oeaw.ac.at) For a survey over contents see further below.

## **Geographical Names as a Part of the Cultural Heritage**

edited by Peter JORDAN, Hubert BERGMANN, Catherine CHEETHAM and Isolde HAUSNER

196 pages with 79 figures and 11 tables

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