

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

Item 14 of the provisional agenda

Activities relating to the Working Group on Publicity and Funding

**Place-Names Activities in 2009:
The Year of Cultural Inheritance in Norway ***

* Prepared by Botolv Helleland (Norway), State Place-Name Consultant, University of Oslo.

Place-Names Activities in 2009 – The Year of Cultural Inheritance in Norway

Summary

Norway has designated the year 2009 as the “Year of Cultural Inheritance” and declared its intention to activate, cultivate, and preserve the cultural heritage in a number of fields, including place-names. The Research Group of Onomastics at the University of Oslo in cooperation with the Norwegian Names Association suggests a number of activities relating to place-names (geographical names). The purpose of the agenda below is to inform and stimulate individuals as well as public and private organizations responsible in various fields of cultural activities to include place-names in their programs. Place-names make part of the intangible cultural inheritance and represent important values in a society, not only as indispensable addresses or labels attached to the surroundings, but also as historical texts and identity markers. Academics and other trained personnel are encouraged to give lectures on place-names and organize courses in collection and standardization of local place-names. It is also recommended to establish cultural paths where the place-names are used for revitalizing the past.

1. Awareness of the intangible heritage

During the Year of Cultural Inheritance the Norwegian authorities and the relevant public and private organizations intend to focus on the complexity and variety of the nation’s cultural inheritance, thus making its population more aware of cultural values and at the same time reminding of the joint responsibility for safeguarding inherited objects of cultural importance.

The cultural inheritance of a nation does not only include tangible objects like buildings, historical sites, tools, carvings, but also intangible manifestations like folklore, stories, languages and place-names. In Norway the tangible cultural inheritance is protected by law, which is not the case with the intangible part of the cultural inheritance. It is true that the Norwegian law on place-names contains a general paragraph claiming that place-names should be protected as cultural heritage, but in practice it does not fully apply. Norway is one of the countries that have signed the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage and is committed to follow up the aims of the Convention.

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2. Place-Names Act

The Norwegian Place-Names Act of 1990 with amendments of 2005 gives a general protection for place-names as part of the intangible cultural heritage. The first paragraph of the act says that “the intention of this act is to preserve place-names as cultural inheritance”. However, in practice its effect is limited. There are two aspects in the law which apply to place-name preservation. The first is that a place-name must be used according to its local tradition. For instance, a place-name should not be moved to a place where it does not belong originally. Sometimes this rule is

broken by housing companies because a particular name may “sell” better. The municipal authorities are encouraged to prevent such breaches.

The second aspect in the law which relates to the protection of place-names is the rule that place-names should be standardized on the basis of the inherited local pronunciation. The reason is that the inherited local pronunciation is looked upon as the primary one as it is handed over from generation to generation. However, in some cases locals have reacted against officially standardized names. This applies particularly to families that have an alternative form of the name in question as surname, for instance *Schee* for the standardized form *Skeie* and *Wiig* for the standardized form *Vik*. Such protests encouraged some parliamentarians to suggest an amendment to the Place-Name Act and it is possible that the Act will be modified on this point at a later stage. Seen in the light of the requirements for the preservation of the intangible cultural heritage this initiative seems a step backwards. Still it is correct to say that most Norwegian place-names will be safeguarded in compliance with the existing paragraphs of the Act.

3. Local place-names

In daily life we do not look upon place-names as something particular. They exist as a matter of course. We use them when we need them without asking questions about them. But if the question is asked: How did the place-names come into existence, why, and what do they mean? then many people would start wondering. It is possible to imagine a map without names, and even a landscape without names, but most people would then say that something is missing. Place-names function as a mean of finding one’s way to places, to institutions, to friends. Place-names are in fact indispensable for organizing one’s surroundings. At the same time they make part of the identity of the people of a certain area and function as social signals of solidarity. Every local community, small or large, disposes a great number of place-names. One of the goals of the Year of Cultural Inheritance is to make people aware of the manifold values of place-names.

4. Place-names and local history

Place-names are not only addresses and identities, they are also living stories which have come into existence at different periods of the local people’s past. They are compressed texts that tell us something about the places to which they have been attached, and about those who gave the names. So every place-name is a message which the present generations should preserve and learn to read. The place-name material of a local community comprises an incredible amount of details, both transparent stories like *Kvalvika* ‘the whale’s bay’, *Lindås* ‘the linden tree hill’, *Kuvadet* ‘the cow ford’, *Trædet* ‘the enclosure’ as well as more puzzling names like *Bømlø* ‘the swollen one’ *Lofoten* ‘the foot of the lynx’, *Troms* ‘the currant’.

5. Age and typology of place-names

It is difficult and in most cases impossible to tell exactly when a place-name was coined. What we do know, and what the place-names testify, is that somebody, or rather a group of people, have experienced a situation where it was necessary to identify a particular quality or characteristic of a place and refer to it by means of a linguistic term which gradually was adopted as a name in the community. The above mentioned name *Lindås* is testified in 1315 and it must be at least that old. There are approximately 50.000 old farm names in Norway. According to the established chronology we know that names ending in Old Norse *-vin* (e.g. *Sende*, *Skøyen*) and names in *-(h)eim* (e.g. *Søreim*, *Sem*) date from before the Viking period

whereas names in *-stad* (e.g. *Harstad*) *-bø/-by* (e.g. *Bø, Nordby*) *-set* (e.g. *Tynset*), and *-tveit* (e.g. *Ulltveit*) were mainly coined in the Viking period. Names in *-rud, -rød* (e.g. *Manglerud, Rød*), date mainly from the Medieval Ages or later. Still the greater number of the Norwegian place-names, including Saami and Kven place-names, date from the centuries after the Reformation.

6. Finding one' favourite name

If you step into the exciting world of place-names it may be a good start to ask yourself about your favourite place-name(s). Most persons have one or several place-names to which they have a special relationship. Try to find out why a certain place-name means more to you than other place-names do. And if you have a negative feeling about a name, why is that so? Do you agree with the assertion that place-names are pegs on which to hang descriptions, feelings and stories?

7. Travel on a map

Every individual disposes a larger or smaller number of place-names, but if you want to get a more systematic understanding of the distribution of place-names it may be a good idea to study a map. By combining the place-names with the topographic information on the map it is possible to "read" the landscape in detail. In fact, travelling on the map is a fascinating activity. If you want to extend the study you may for instance write down various groups of names and classify them according to features type. If you are familiar with the local dialect you may also compare the written forms with spoken forms.

8. What does a place-name mean?

In daily language a place-name "means" the place it is used about or refers to. Thus *Bergen* "means" 'the biggest city in Western Norway', including various connotations which the name users bear in mind. However, when it is question of the *meaning* of a place-name one rather thinks of the historical or etymological meaning of the name. From this point of view *Bergen* means 'meadow at a mountain'. Its older form is *Bjørgvin*, composed by *bjørg* 'mountain' and *vin* 'medaow'.

Many if not most Norwegian place-names are coined by use of well known words and are easy to understand. However, a great number of names are less transparent and one needs to search for their meaning in dictionaries. All place-names in the country are by far not yet explained. The best tool for studying Norwegian place-names is the Internet based 19 volumes work *Norske Gaardnavne*, see http://www.dokpro.uio.no/rygh_ng/rygh_felt.html and further http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Norske_Gaardnavne

9. Collection of place-names

The Year of Cultural Inheritance 2009 is a good occasion for increasing the collection of local place-names, especially micro-toponyms. Before starting it is advisable to check if there has already been undertaken any collection of place-names in the area concerned. In order to make a systematic collection of place-names in a parish or a neighbourhood the work should be well planned. If a group of interested people, for instance members of a local historical society, are working together they should agree upon which area each individual should be responsible for. Each name should be written on a list (questionnaire) with columns for the spoken form, standardized form, what the name refers to and other information about the name and the named place. Then the names should be marked on maps in a suitable scale, for instance 1:5000. The informants should be elderly locals who know the area and the dialect well. When the collection

project is completed the material should be entered into a database and made available for everybody on the Internet.

Place-name collection may also be done individually by any interested person, just by interviewing elderly locals and writing down the information. This may be an enjoyable activity which brings the interviewer and the interviewed person(s) closer to the past – and it is a fine way of spending some hours without tv.

10. Teaching school classes

Place-names is an exciting topic which is well suited for teaching in school classes at different levels. If the teacher has some experience in name research he may give an elementary course by focussing on place-names in the local surroundings. By grouping the names according to grammatical properties like compound/non-compound, definiteness, singular/plural and semantic categories like topography, flora, fauna, agricultural activities, human conditions etc. it is possible to sort out a lot of interesting and surprising information. Studying place-names in a local area is also a way of experiencing the landscape and its history.

11. Cultural paths

A way of opening up the cultural landscape for everybody is to establish cultural paths. There may be old foot paths in an area that lead through objects of cultural interest, such as building, sites, woodland barns, bridges, ruins, rock carvings, mills, saws, enclosures etc. By producing brochures, signs and posters it is possible to revitalize the past in its original context. The names of the features along the path should have a sign with the name on it and a short explanation of the meaning and the background of the name. Cultural paths should be discussed and created together with the local people who also cooperate in collecting the data.

12. Lectures and courses

Promoting name research on a professional level requires academic background, and one goal during the Year of Cultural Inheritance 2009 is to encourage persons who are trained in name research to offer lectures and courses around the country. This may be done in cooperation with local associations and schools. And at last, but no least, it is important to release press bulletins and disseminate information on place-names activities.

Botolv Helleland,
Namnegransking
Institutt for lingvistiske og nordiske studium
Universitetet i Oslo
botolv.helleland@iln.uio.no