

Item 19 of the provisional agenda

Other toponymic issues

**Spirit of Place and the Act of Naming
Restoring the Fascination of Geography***

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SPIRIT OF PLACE AND THE ACT OF NAMING RESTORING THE FASCINATION OF GEOGRAPHY

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Abstract

This paper studies the relationship between the spirit of place and the act of naming. The Greek and Roman literature refer to many places related to and under the protection of divinities. With the rise of Christianity the presence of the pagan supernatural in place names are replaced by the memory (for example, recollection of an event, of God, of saints) which continue to have meaning for users, even if the meaning, the signifier or even both may evolve over time. Moreover, certain practices threaten the integrity of the memory within place names. Nowadays, because of the increasing need for naming unnamed places and the challenge to create interesting toponyms with current an insufficient inventory of toponymic resources, two options are available to us: use toponyms which relate to the physical or cultural aspect of the environment, or put the user in a dynamic of desire with a high potential for imageability.

Note. This paper draws from one prepared for the symposium organized by ICOMOS *Finding the spirit of the place* held in Québec from September 29 to October 4, 2008. [translation] ‘‘*The Spirit of the place and toponymy: the gods, the memory and the invitation to travel.*’’

Texts from Greek and Roman antiquity refer to the existence and importance of the spirit of place. This notion is a core element of polytheism: in ancient times, natural geographic features, roads, homes and human actions were under the protection of a host of divinities. The geography of the Mediterranean bore the imprint of the gods: the places they protected, the places dedicated to them, the sites of their deeds and of the exploits of the heroes.

Rivers and mountains are one example. According to Hesiod, there were 3,000 rivers, the offspring of Oceanus and Tethys. It was difficult for a mortal man to name them all, but people living on their shores knew their names (Hesiod). As for mountains, [translation] “They were regarded almost everywhere as sacred places, often even worshipped as divinities....In Greece, the entire Pindus mountain range was dedicated to Mars and Apollo.” (Commelin 1976) Each city had its guardian divinity. (Macrobius) Macrobius and Pliny the Elder also report that the city of Rome had a secret name; speaking it was forbidden on pain of death, as it was also the name of its secret guardian divinity. Had the enemies of Rome learned it, they could have used magic to cast the divinity that was shielding Rome from the city. (Macrobius and Pliny) These examples illustrate the extent to which place names linked the worlds of the mortals and the immortals.

During the 4th century, polytheism ceased to drive the vision of the world in the Roman Empire, giving way to Judeo-Christian thinking based on the Old and New Testaments. The Book of Genesis already related how, in the Garden of Eden, God led each of the animals to Adam to be named, recognition that the act of naming was human work. This vision would not change. As scientific disciplines developed around language, the names of places, people, trademarks and so forth acquired an elaborate explanatory mechanism founded on their cultural nature.

At least in the West, a place name is no longer considered to embody a divine presence that can be invoked and swayed by incorporating the toponym into a prayer or magic formula. While the spirit of place, which made sense of the world by linking men to the gods at every point of the universe, no longer informs our understanding of reality, place continues to be imbued with meaning to this day. However, the meaning now derives from a “presence in the place” of another type: the presence of human endeavour in all its forms, in every place, through **memory** in the form of personal recollections (intact, inaccurate, embellished, distorted or recovered) or of facts related by profane or sacred history, local history or simple anecdotes told by individuals and families.

For our purposes, the spirit of place shall be defined on the basis of the **memory of place**, which is to say the perceptions, emotions and individual and collective experiences specific to the place. The elements that are most likely to be transmitted between contemporaries and then between generations are the remembered fragments most frequently repeated. These are handed down through oral tradition, books, maps, education and so forth. The community that uses the name generally partakes in the memory to which it refers, regardless of whether the object of this memory is fact or a non-historical episode. What is important is that memory shapes identity. These compelling episodes, be they happy, distressing, threatening or galvanizing, form what may be called a **plot embedded in memory, the title of which is the toponym of the place**. This is what we understand by the spirit of place.

The toponym of a place is therefore a linguistic flag that represents usually quite disparate concrete, abstract or fictional information attached to a geographic feature. This body of memory, which is highly complex but is, paradoxically, often expressed in a single word, may be compared to such a multidimensional figure as a hypercube, which cannot be grasped in its totality. Those who believe they see it or understand it actually perceive or know only a part.

When old toponyms were assigned to the places they designate, the signifier and signified of these names were bound in the act of naming as much as in the toponymic outcome. Over time, the referents that inspired the names disappeared, if they were persons or events. Meanwhile, the signifiers and signifieds of the toponyms became detached from each other, when the signified was not simply forgotten. Does this mean that these place names lost their meaning, that they mean less than they originally did, that they no longer express the spirit of place? Certainly not. Rather, it means that the spirit of place evolves with history, that it generally grows richer, and that the place name's signifier guides this evolution, sometimes changing itself. The spirit of place and the place name belong to the flow of history. Neither has a fixed local image.

Threat to the memorial content of toponymy

The standards recommended by the United Nations Conferences on the Standardization of Geographical Names are designed to keep alive the geographic memory of the human experience. Threats of various types call for constant vigilance. Memory can be particularly vulnerable under the following conditions.

Disregard for traditional names

When current information sources, including teaching manuals, no longer contain a community's traditional names, these risk disappearing, since the need for orientation continues to exist and will inevitably spawn new names if the original names are lost or relegated to works known only to specialists.

Fragility of oral tradition

There are entire traditional nomenclatures that have yet to be recorded and are preserved only in the oral tradition known to a handful of elders. This memory, unknown beyond a narrow circle, is most vulnerable.

Modern misdirection

Thousands of place names in rural areas come under threat when authorities fail to understand that cultural identities must be respected when changes are made in work methods, transportation and habitat. The notion that attaining a higher standard of living means renouncing the legacy left by previous generations must be fought.

Subordination of toponymy to politics

The use of government authority to replace names in common use, often for commemorative purposes or to geographically reflect political agendas, impoverishes the memory of the human experience.

Naming the unnamed with meaningful names

The focus thus far has been on spirit of place in relation to named places. However, the need to name anonymous geographic sites persists in sparsely populated and unpopulated areas, such as forested lands, the ocean depths, the Arctic and Antarctic, and the deserts and remote regions increasingly travelled by ecotourists. When we seek to give meaning to the unnamed, how can we establish a toponymic connection with a place?

Names can be created by tapping into local sources of geographic, historical, ethnological, linguistic and other information. Such names are highly integrated into the local community's toponymy: they play a part in the expression of ambient memory and extend its reach. Some naming processes help educe the already existing spirit of the place:

- Borrowing a specific element of a place name to form the toponym of a nearby geographic feature belonging to a different category (Mount X, based on River X);
- Adding a qualifier (Little, Great, New, Old, Second, etc.) to the toponym of a nearby place;
- Commemorating people or events linked to the place being named; and/or
- Using information (geographical, historical, ethnological, linguistic or other) specific to the locality where the place being named is found.

These approaches yield new toponyms that convey an image that is consistent with, if not familiar to, the local community.

Naming the unnamed with names that intrigue

Rather than relying on ambient memory to name the unnamed, the alternative may be to draw attention, to provoke surprise, interest and curiosity, by sparking a **dynamic of desire**—desire to decode, desire to interpret—through the creation of open works with a high potential for imageability.

The concepts of **open works** and **imageability**, derived from Umberto Eco and Kevin Lynch, can be applied to the act of naming places. Lynch defines imageability as “that quality in a physical object which gives it a high probability of evoking a strong image in any given observer. It is that shape, colour or arrangement which facilitates the making of vividly identified, powerfully structured highly useful, mental images of the environment.” (Lynch 1960)

In the creation of an open work, “[t]he important thing is to prevent a single sense from imposing itself at the very outset of the reception process” (Eco 1989). Eco approvingly quotes the famous line from the French poet Mallarmé: “Nommer un objet c’est supprimer les trois quarts de la jouissance du poème, qui est fait du bonheur de deviner peu à peu : le suggérer... Voilà le rêve. (To name an object is to suppress three-fourths of the enjoyment of the poem, which is composed of the pleasure of guessing little by little: to suggest...there is the dream.)” (Eco 1989) Of course, the effect of the suggestion does not depend on the author alone: “**An artistic work that suggests is also one that can be performed with the full emotional and imaginative resources of the interpreter.**” (Eco 1989, emphasis added) In our context, the interpreter is the reader or user of the name.

To achieve openness in a work, the choice of words that make up the signifier and their arrangement must be such as to produce a message that bears a touch of mystery and ambiguity,

that lends itself to multiple interpretations, evokes many images—in short, a message without a set meaning. The ambiguity and the mystery arise from the **open logic of signifiers**. (Eco 1972) The meaning of a name that is an open work stems not from its “memorial content,” but from the content the user attributes to the name, based on his or her own references. The spirit of place exists, but it does so essentially in the call or invitation of the place as perceived by the user of its name, and in the user’s response.

Restoring the fascination of geography

Names that exist in harmony with their locality, that express physical or cultural facts to which the community subscribes, are powerful toponyms for celebrating collective identity. These names may be very ancient, or they may be of much more recent or even contemporary origin if they were created precisely for the purpose of reflecting or celebrating that identity.

On the other hand, toponyms that are open works emanating ambiguity and mystery have the power to propel individual reflection well beyond the limits of collective identity. **Bringing fascination back to geography through the continuous quest for meaning:** this is the great power of these open toponymic works. Creating such works is encouraged to prevent an excessive number of commemorative names in toponymy with little capacity to spark the desire to decode or interpret in light of their deliberately and wholly explicit nature.

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