



United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names  
Romano-Hellenic Division

# **Geographical names as a means of expressing identification, location, possession, belonging, division and respect for peoples' cultures**

Edited by

Andrea Cantile and Helen Kerfoot



4<sup>th</sup> International Scientific Symposium  
Italian Geographical Society  
Villa Celimontana – Mattei Palace – Roma [Rome] – Italia  
11<sup>th</sup> - 13<sup>th</sup> September 2024

IGMI – Firenze 2026

## Contents

### **Welcome remarks**

|                                                                                              |    |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| CLAUDIO CERRETI, President of the Italian Geographical Society (Italia)                      | 9  |
| LUIGI POSTIGLIONE, General Commander of the Italian Geographic Military Institute (Italia)   | 10 |
| PIERRE JAILLARD, Chair, UNGEGN (France)                                                      | 11 |
| HELEN KERFOOT, Honorary Chair, UNGEGN (Canada)                                               | 12 |
| CARLA MASETTI, Roma Tre University, on behalf of the Italian Geographical Societies (Italia) | 13 |
| ANDREA CANTILE, Chair, UNGEGN's RHD (Italia)                                                 | 15 |

### **Introduction to the symposium**

|                                                                                                                                                            |    |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| <i>Identification, location, possession, belonging, division, and respect for peoples' cultures: many aspects to consider for a toponymic ethical code</i> | 17 |
| ANDREA CANTILE, Chair, UNGEGN's RHD (Italia)                                                                                                               |    |

### **First session chaired by Elena Dai Prà (Co-Chair of the ICA-IGU Joint Commission on Toponymy – University of Trento – Italia)**

|                                                                                                                               |    |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| <i>Exchanges of geographical names among lexical borrowings</i>                                                               | 27 |
| PIERRE JAILLARD, Chair, UNGEGN (France)                                                                                       |    |
| <i>Geographical names as a source of conflict – some initial thoughts</i>                                                     | 35 |
| HELEN KERFOOT, Honorary Chair, UNGEGN, and Former Emeritus Scientist, Natural Resources (Canada)                              |    |
| <i>“With feet on the ground”: toponymy as an object and research tool between geography and linguistics</i>                   | 48 |
| SIMONETTA CONTI AND DOMENICO PROIETTI, University of Campania “Luigi Vanvitelli” (Italia)                                     |    |
| <i>The renewed attention to toponymy by Italian scholars</i>                                                                  | 65 |
| COSIMO PALAGIANO, Emeritus Sapienza – University of Roma and Academy of Lincei (Italia)                                       |    |
| <i>In the name of peace. Toponymy between forms of violence and processes of peacemaking at different geographical scales</i> | 68 |
| GIUSEPPE MUTI, University of Insubria (Italia)                                                                                |    |

***Second session chaired by Catherine Cheetham (Head of the Permanent Committee on Geographical Names – United Kingdom)***

- The first version of the new Italian national toponymic database* 76  
ANDREA CANTILE, GABRIELE CIACCI AND CLAUDIO ROCCHINI,  
Commission for Italian official toponymy of IGMI (Italia)
- The Italian house numbers and street names' national registry* 82  
PAOLO BENETTON, FRANCESCO DI PEDE, AND GIANPIERO ZAFFI  
BORGETTI, Revenue Agency, Italian Institute for Statistics, and  
National Association of Italian Municipalities (Italia)
- The politics of naming between aesthetics of power and identity  
construction. The case-study of the Quartiere Africano in Rome* 96  
BRUNO DI STEFANO AND CAMILLA GIANTOMASSO, University of  
Roma Tre (Italia)
- The toponymy of the ancient Sicilian road system* 109  
LOMBARDO GIROLAMO, Former Director of the Operational  
Landscape Research Unit of the Sicilian Region (Italia)
- Central places and their changes in the history of cartography* 125  
COSIMO PALAGIANO AND DAVIDE PAVIA, Sapienza – University  
of Roma (Italia)
- Linguistic reflections on the definition of the northern border (1130-  
1168) of the Norman Kingdom of Sicily* 130  
DOMENICO PROIETTI, University of Campania "Luigi Vanvitelli"  
(Italia)
- Adriano Balbi and the Naming of the World. The relationship  
between geography and cartography in the construction of a  
scientific geographical lexicon (first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century)* 149  
ARTURO GALLIA AND MIRKO CASTALDI, Roma Tre University  
(Italia)
- The evolution of the mountain names in the West Java Province  
based on cartographic sources* 162  
TIKA DWI SAPUTRI, HARRY FERDIANSYAH AND YOHANES SEFFAN  
HANDANA, Geospatial Information Agency (Indonesia)
- Navigating a corpus-driven approach toward decoding village and  
town names of East and West Azerbaijan, Iran* 175  
MANDANA KOLAHDOUZ MOHAMMADI, Payam-e Noor University  
(Iran)

***Third session chaired by Andreas Hadjiraftis (President of the Permanent Committee for the Standardization of Geographical Names – Kipros)***

- Cloning a place name: the toponym 'Shanghai' in Italy* 187  
STEFANO PIASTRA, University of Bologna (Italia)
- From Italy to America: the Franciscan legacy in toponymy* 196  
ANNAMARIA BARTOLINI AND GIOVANNI DE SANTIS, University of Perugia (Italia)
- Toponymy and pre-colonial Algerian agrarian societies* 209  
BRAHIM ATOUI, Former Vice-Chair of UNGEGN (Al Jazā'ir)
- Regulatory processes and systematization of toponymy in Italian territories of Africa in the 1930s* 215  
JUNIO VALERIO TIRONE AND ILEANA SCHIAVELLI, University of Trento, Aeronautical Geo-topographic Information Centre (Italia)
- "The White gold of Prato" and the hydronyms of the gore (ancient artificial canal system)* 226  
SERENA LO MONACO AND EMANUELA ZAMMARCHI, Landscape architects (Italia)
- Toponymy in the United Kingdom* 242  
CATHERINE CHEETHAM, Permanent Committee on Geographical Names (United Kingdom)
- Enclaves without borders: the toponomastic case of Carrega Ligure (Piedmont, Italy)* 250  
REBEKKA DOSSCHE AND CARLA PAMPALONI, University of Genova (Italia)
- Journeying and naming from Earth to the Cosmos* 264  
ANNALISA D'ASCENZO, Roma Tre University (Italia)
- Naming the spaces, marking the places on outer worlds* 280  
GIANLUCA CASAGRANDE, European University of Roma (Italia)
- Toponymy in the Aosta Valley: protecting the linguistic minority and recovering vernacular terms* 290  
GUIDO LUCARNO, Catholic University of the Sacred Heart, Milano (Italia)

|                                                                                                                                                                    |     |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| <i>From place names to environmental resources: geohistorical sources and historical GIS in the analysis of 19<sup>th</sup> century alpine woodland toponyms</i>   | 298 |
| DINO BUFFONI, Autonomous Province of Trento, NICOLA GABELLIERI, FEDERICO GESTRI, University of Trento, AND ETTORE SARZOTTI, Autonomous Province of Trento (Italia) |     |
| <i>Conquering the names: the use of toponyms as a symbol of territorial control in a multiethnic region. The case of Eastern Trentino during the Great War</i>     | 314 |
| ELENA DAI PRÀ AND SEBASTIANO ROSSI, University of Trento (Italia)                                                                                                  |     |
| <i>When the map is a question of toponymy. Cartography and toponymy in the dynamics of dominion. The case of Alto Adige/Südtirol (1919-1945)</i>                   | 326 |
| ANDREA MASTURZO, Freelance researcher, PhD University of Bergamo (Italia)                                                                                          |     |
| <i>Multicultural identity building supported by place names. The example of the Val Canale in the northeast of Italy</i>                                           | 341 |
| PETER JORDAN, Austrian Academy of Sciences and University of the Free State [South Africa] (Austria)                                                               |     |
| <i>The importance of preserving the toponymic heritage of historical linguistic minorities in Friuli-Venezia Giulia</i>                                            | 360 |
| GERARDO TOLENTINO, GORAN FLORIDAN AND LAURA SGUBIN, Autonomous Region Friuli-Venezia Giulia (Italia)                                                               |     |
| <i>Italian geographical names in Slovenia</i>                                                                                                                      | 368 |
| MATJAŽ GERŠIČ, Scientific Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Anton Melik Geographical Institute (Slovenija)                            |     |
| <i>Toponymy policies in alloglot towns of Calabria: case studies of Guardia Piemontese, San Demetrio Corone, Bova, and Bova Marina</i>                             | 383 |
| VALENTINA CAMPESI, Freelance researcher (Italia)                                                                                                                   |     |
| <i>Geotoponymy, historical cartography and artificial intelligence: an integrated approach to the study of the historical landscape of the Aragonese era</i>       | 400 |
| SILVIA SINISCALCHI, PIERLUIGI DE FELICE AND EMIRO HERNÁN RODRÍGUEZ-VARGAS, University of Salerno (Italia)                                                          |     |



# Identification, location, possession, belonging, division, and respect for peoples' cultures: many aspects to consider for a toponymic ethical code

ANDREA CANTILE\*

## **Abstract**

*Toponyms have the primary functions of identification and localization eliminating any ambiguity in indicating a specific part of the Earth, and they have the power to transform a space into a place. More precisely, place names start the transformation of a space into a place, lived in and/or frequented by one or more groups of people.*

*This transformation imbues the place with increasing meaning as knowledge grows and experiences accumulate. In such places, individuals develop a sense of belonging, establish emotional connections, and build what we call "identity".*

*Although this term is sometimes overused today, there is no doubt that there is a relationship between places and individuals in the formation of self-awareness, personal history, distinctive traits, and a sense of belonging to both a social group and the place itself.*

*However, the term "identity" can be problematic when it implies belonging and possession. This can lead to extreme nostalgic feelings among native people, sometimes resulting in the irrational glorification of the vaguely known past. It can also lead to the spread of clichés that gratuitously attribute identity characteristics to places and entire social groups based solely on banal preconceived stereotypes. Additionally, the use of names linked to colonialism, slavery, or those that express derogatory, belittling, contemptuous, dishonourable, offensive, injurious, defamatory, or scurrilous adjectives can be harmful to the construction of peaceful coexistence between people belonging to different groups or nationalities.*

*The multifaceted nature of toponyms therefore also takes on a particular moral relevance. They can become agents of values and disvalues, precisely because they express identification, location, possession, belonging, division, and respect for people's cultures.*

*All this underscores the need to consider the power of place names and to develop a toponymic ethical code. This code should incorporate the recommendations of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names, as well as the experiences of countries that have already undertaken similar initiatives. The aim is to provide public institutions that exercise onomaturgical functions with general principles, based on respect for the environment, people and their cultures.*

**Keywords:** toponymic ethics; dishonouring, offensive, injurious toponyms.

\*Chair, UNGEGN-RHD (Italia).

## **Background**

This year's symposium has a lengthy title, chosen precisely to highlight the complexity of the toponymic phenomenon and its various social implications. Scholars of the subject are well aware that place names, beyond their primary function of identification and location, are also vehicles of values and disvalues. As the Italian glottologist Graziadio Isaia Ascoli stated as early as 1895, they "reflect political, religious, social, and economic events of every kind" (Ascoli I.G., 1895, pp. 101-102), and for this reason they are still studied today by linguists, geographers, historians, sociologists, anthropologists, urban planners, landscape architects, and cartographers.

## **Identification and location**

It is widely known that identification and localization primarily respond to the daily needs of social life, aiming to eliminate any form of ambiguity in the identification of a part of the earth's surface, and beyond, and in expressing the position of places, people, and things within a broader spatial context.

Toponymy has thus assumed an irreplaceable function over time due to the fact that it regulates the structuring of human space. Claude Lévi-Strauss, in fact, compared toponyms to personal names as means of distinguishing individuals within a group: "L'espace est une société de lieux dits, comme les personnes sont des points de repère au sein du groupe" [Space is a society of named places, just as people are points of reference within the group] (Lévi-Strauss, 1962, p. 222).

However, the identification of places, unlike that of people, is closely tied to semantics, both because of human beings' innate curiosity about the meanings of words they don't know or that somehow pique their curiosity, and because of the function these meanings play in strengthening the bond between people and places themselves.

For much of the toponymic heritage, it is no longer possible to reconstruct the original conceptual content because, as the German philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz had already understood in the 18<sup>th</sup> century,

*"Illud enim pro axioma habeo [...] quoties vocabulum fluminis, montis, sylvae, gentis, pagi, villae non intelligimus, intelligere debemus ab antiqua nos lingua secessisse"*

*["Indeed, I consider it an axiom that [...] every time we do not understand the name of a river, a mountain, a forest, a people, a village, a villa, we must understand that we have distanced ourselves from the ancient language"] (Leibniz, 1710, vol. I, p. 1).*

For these two essential reasons, the Ninth United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names, held in New York in 2007 (Resolution no. 7, "Dissemination of information concerning the origin and meaning of geographical names"), considered it appropriate to highlight their importance and to recommend that:

“[...] wherever possible, printed or web-based national gazetteers and databases should include information on the origin and meaning of geographical names, based on popular and/or scientific sources, along with the associated technical information” (UNGEKN, IX/7, 2007).

Leibniz's axiom, however, calls for avoiding the easy pitfalls of amateur etymology and for approaching the field with the tools of the linguist and historian of language to understand the divergences from the original idiom that had generated a place name in times sometimes very distant. However, specific knowledge in many other aspects of toponymic studies is also essential, with a plurality of perspectives, necessary to shed light on the onomaturgical dynamics of history and the reasons for the conflicts associated with them. This requires the contribution of the expertise of the geographer, historian, sociologist, botanist, ... precisely because they are an expression of the relationship between man and his territory over time.

### ***Identity, belonging, and possession***

Geographical onomaturgy does not only respond to the needs of identification and localization. As it is well known, toponymy has the power to transform a space into a place, as a synthesis of territorialization processes (Turco A., 1988, pp. 79-81). Or, better, we could say that the birth of a toponym marks the transformation of a space into a place, inhabited and/or frequented by one or more human groups, which becomes increasingly charged with meaning as experiences accumulate in the same place.

We know that, over time, people who live permanently in a given area learn to recognize its prominent characteristics; they give names to streets, squares, and buildings and grow in familiarity with them; they strengthen the links between the history of the place and personal, family, and group history. In other words, a relationship is established between the place and the people who inhabit or frequent it, generating feelings of security and protection, with consequent comforting effects. The foundation of this phenomenon obviously rests on the dichotomous relationship between the known and the unknown (or lesser known) places.

In the words of Botolv Helleland, we can say that “Place names contribute to the feeling of belonging to an area and to a social group within that particular area [...] they open up for a broader and more intimate knowledge of places” (Helleland B., 2012, p. 109).

We have a vast literature on the relationship that is established between people and the places where they were born, or live or would like to live, but among the many authors who have investigated this fascinating research topic, I think that the most synthetic and effective formulation of the concept of “sense of belonging” is due to the Latin poet Quintus Horatius Flaccus (1<sup>st</sup> century BC) who wrote: “Ille terrarum mihi praeter omnis angulus ridet [...]” (Orazio, *Le Odi*, II, 6, 13-14), which I would translate like this: *That corner of the Earth smiles at me more than*

any other [...], contrary to what proposed Prof. John Conington, who translated the word *angulus* as a “green recess”, “a remote, secluded or secret place”<sup>1</sup>.

In fact, Horace had given the metaphor of the *angulus* the meaning of a known, safe place, a place of protection from external dangers, from which the person establishes their familiarity with the space, develops a sense of belonging, and that feeling of love for the material environment, which Yi-Fu Tuan has defined as *topophilia* and which is “More permanent and less easy to express [...] toward a place because it is home, the locus of memories, and the means of gaining a livelihood” (1990, p. 93). The person establishes an emotional relationship with this *angulus* and, starting from it, constructs what we call “identity” (Conington J., 1863).

Regarding this last word, although it is sometimes overused today, we must certainly recognize the undoubted existence of an “affective” relationship between the individual and a given place, in the construction of self-awareness, of one’s own history, of one’s distinctive traits, of belonging to a social group and the land that hosts it. However, some pitfalls lurk behind the term “identity”, when it expresses belonging and possession. These pitfalls can be identified, as a first approximation, in extreme forms of nostalgic feelings on the part of native people, which sometimes result in an irrational exaltation of the past, and a contrast between groups and individuals, caused by the spread of clichés, gratuitously confused with identity traits based solely on banal preconceived stereotypes.

The former, that is, nostalgic feelings, are typical of the “*Senex laudator temporis acti se puero*” [*a person who holds up the past as a golden age, when he was a child*], as the Latin poet Horace wrote (Orazio, *Ars poetica*, 173). Or, even worse, they can be stimulated by recollections of a distant and often unknown time, but sweetened by narratives that stimulate the desire to return to a vague and indefinite time.

The sweetened image of times gone by, offered as a product that can easily be disguised to suit the recipient’s expectations, becomes as desirable and comforting as a retreat to an exotic and enchanting place: “If the past is a foreign country, nostalgia has made it ‘the foreign country with the healthiest tourist trade of all’ [...] Since ‘people love nostalgia and firmly believe that’ what is old ‘is necessarily good’ ” (Lowenthal D., 1985, p. 4).

The main subliminal agents of nostalgia and *topophilia*, in these cases, are testimonies of the past (from a significant archaeological find to an old wrought-iron gate), but also the rhetorical constructions of novels, poems, songs, and, unfortunately, the “sly reworkings” of historiography, the “embellishments with invented details, in the narrative, against an overall truthful backdrop” (Bloch, 1998, p. 75), which sometimes contribute to constructing the “representation of the world in which individuals and collective actors literally ‘conquer’ their identity status” (Turco, 2007).

---

<sup>1</sup> “what can match the green recess, / Whose honey not to Hybla yields, / Whose olives vie with those that bless Venafrum’s fields?” (*The Odes and Carmen Saeculare of Horace*, John Conington translation, London, 1863).

However, while a direct relationship between place and identity is certainly undeniable, it is also important to highlight the risk that can arise from an excessive exaltation of such identities, as a prerequisite for the spread of new, uncompromising orthodoxies, also in reaction to the homogenization and flattening of identities resulting from the dynamics of globalization (Krogseth O., 2012, p. 162). These, extended to the construction of ethnic or national identity profiles, could easily degenerate into agents of social opposition, especially given the sharpening of political contrast between people and the ease with which imitative phenomena can now be generated in large parts of society by exploiting the communicative potential of the media.

Another aspect, seemingly innocuous but not to be overlooked due to its subtle negative implications, concerns the use of place names in adjectival phrases. These are rarely used to express respect and admiration, and are often used ironically, if not with outright contempt, spreading crude, offensive, and erroneous attributes that can easily be exploited, again, by those with an interest in spreading divisive messages.

Indeed, it is hardly necessary to mention the banalities associated with certain clichés that label entire social groups, with extreme forms of generalization that negatively characterize entire populations. An example of some of the stereotypes that the world has for Italians, and Northern Italians have for Southern Italians can be found at the following link <https://www.quora.com/Is-it-true-that-the-stereotypes-that-the-world-has-for-Italians-the-Northern-Italians-have-for-Southern-Italians>.

Similar stereotypes are widespread throughout the world, and every community suffers their effects in some way, as is easy to see from the various websites that illustrate the phenomenon, with seriously offensive attributes that perpetuate and spread preconceptions and certainly do not help build harmony among peoples.

In reflecting on the identity-building potential expressed by a place name, it is important to highlight how the exaggeration of distinctions between “Us” and “Them”, the exaltation of certain identity traits, and the derogatory use of adjectival phrases based on toponyms can constitute an explosive mix. This has already borne disastrous fruit throughout human history and led to the development of a culture of presumed superiority, as the birth of the “Forschungsgemeinschaft Deutsches Ahnenerbe” [German Association for Research on Ancestral Heritage], founded in 1935 by Heinrich Himmler, and the atrocious consequences that arose from those insane theories are constant reminders.

A toponym, therefore, does not simply indicate a place to distinguish it from another. It carries meanings and qualities associated with that place, but which can change over time, just as language, culture, and traditions do.

Anyone who today wishes to draw on the toponymic evidence provided by the *Forma Urbis Romae* and derive from it generalizations of identity linking contemporary Italians to the ancient Romans would merely be laughable. It would also be equally ridiculous to exploit toponymy to revive the glories of the Austro-Hungarian, Persian, or Mongol empires, and so on. However, the contribution that toponyms and their cultural significance can offer to peaceful resolutions of territorial disputes is quite different.

Unfortunately, we know that disputes do not always end peacefully thanks to toponymy, but that this is often the source of conflict. History teaches us that radical transformations of place names are the consequence of dramatic political upheavals and changes.

The divisive potential that place names can express, as drivers of discord, is also evident through the use of names linked to colonialism, slavery, and racism, and when they are used with denigrating, belittling, contemptuous, dishonouring, offensive, insulting, and defamatory adjectives that negatively accentuate the distinction between “Us” and “Them”.

On Earth today, there are still many cases of conflict directly or indirectly linked to the use of place names. These are still tangible consequences, signs of ancient, unresolved disagreements that continue to fuel disputes between social groups and countries. Helen Kerfoot’s contribution to this volume offers a brief but significant overview of the main conflicts still linked to the use of place names today.

Here, perhaps, it is enough to draw attention to the historical dimension of this phenomenon, whose echoes still exist today as a tourist curiosity, but with a profound didactic meaning, as in the case of the unique road signs in Valdichiana, between Tuscany and Umbria, with the names of two medieval towers, called “Beccati questo” [Take this] and “Beccati quest’altro” [Take this other one], which recall the opposition and skirmishes between Siena and Perugia along the border between their respective territories.

Ultimately, if the construction of social identity is also nourished by the connection between people and places throughout history, producing that sense of belonging, succinctly expressed by toponymy – which can also have positive implications for the growth of an individual’s self-esteem – and if this connection remains free from fanaticism and intolerance, the sense of possession can be understood as an inverse relationship, without necessarily expressing an idea of material sovereignty, as can be seen in regions now occupied by linguistic minorities, peacefully coexisting with majorities.

The complexity of relationships and the international agreements laboriously reached after bloody conflicts that resulted in death, mutilation, and destruction have produced complex situations aimed at creating the conditions for reconciliation, albeit not always simple, between social groups belonging to different cultures and languages, even within the same state. It would be absurd today to ignore such sacrifices and reduce the material possession of a place to the sole form of the toponym that identifies it, as was instead the case at the dawn of civilization. Emblematic in this regard is the episode narrated by the Greek historian Agatharchides of Cnidus, who lived in Alexandria in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC, regarding the contribution that a simple toponym gave in 366 BC to the peaceful resolution of a territorial dispute between the Athenians and the Boeotians, reporting that:

“Epaminondas, defending the rights of the Boeotians, suddenly took a pomegranate, which he had kept hidden in his left hand, and, showing it, asked the Athenians what they called it. And when they answered *’rhoàn*’, he said: *’But we call it sidan’*. That place has many of these plants, from which the name is

derived. And so Epaminondas won the case” (Agatharchides, FGrHist 86, F 8: 159; Tufano S., 2023, p. 159).

The name of a pomegranate and the place where this fruit freely grew succeeded, in this case, in preventing the disagreement from degenerating into conflict due to the lack of agreements that could have regulated the rights of one party or the other.

### ***The need for a code of ethics with examples of good onomaturgical practices***

In light of the complexity that the title of this symposium has sought to highlight, it can be said that the need for a code of ethics for geographical onomaturgy is a desirable tool for reducing conflict and building active citizenship.

This assumption clearly emerges from the commitment that the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names, since 1967, has made to:

- Highlight the strong potential for enrichment arising from the encounter of different cultures and the non-divisive use of place names;
- Spread the need for inclusion and mutual respect, especially in multilingual areas;
- Stigmatize any form of conflict based on language, culture, age, gender, creed, religious confession, or orientation, protecting toponymy both as part of the cultural heritage of peoples and as a means for building a peaceful and sustainable world.

However, the efforts made to date “to discourage offensive, inappropriate, derogatory, discriminatory, and frivolous geographical names” (Gammeltoft P., 2021, p. 2) are still insufficient, partly due to the interests of those who derive various benefits from divisive actions. Clear evidence of this, unfortunately, has been the exploitative use of geographical names, on an almost global scale, which has preyed on many unaware people during the recent COVID-19 pandemic.

In various parts of the world, but especially in the United States, the spread of popular phrases – such as “Chinese Virus”, “Wuhan Flu”, “kung flu”, and “China plague” – has led to waves of racial discrimination against Chinese or Asian people in general, because they are considered potential agents of contagion, based solely on their possession of certain physical traits. The danger of the spread of COVID-19 has reawakened, “in the Name of Hate” (Iman M.N., 2021), the quiescent animalistic aggression, ready to reactivate at the first opportunity. Furthermore, as Nick M. Iman herself clearly highlights, the improper use of geographical names has contributed to making the management of the pandemic emergency even more problematic, despite the fact that the World Health Organization (WHO) had already released, in 2015, a document that firmly urged scientists, public authorities and the media to adopt measures

“best practices for the naming of new human diseases, with the aim to minimize unnecessary negative impact of disease names on trade, travel, tourism or animal welfare, and avoid causing offence to any cultural, social, national, regional, professional or ethnic groups” (World Health Organization, 2015).

Furthermore, the erroneous association between the disease and the geographic origin of the first person recognized as having it led to an irrational distrust of all people in some way connected to the same geographic area, and an equally irrational trust in all others, who could instead be potential vectors for spreading the disease.

Despite this, some television news, websites, and newspapers have sometime completely ignored the WHO recommendations and continued to use the same erroneous terms, justifying their use with greater simplicity and communicative effectiveness than the nomenclature adopted by scientists. However, the doubt arises that the denial of such best practices could have been driven much more simply by various interests, regardless of the potential negative social effects it could have generated.

Given all this, the development of a toponymy code of ethics can play a fundamental role in this direction, especially if accompanied by a list of best practices, which consider precisely that toponyms are a means of expressing identification, location, possession, belonging, division, and respect for peoples' cultures.

Therefore, the purpose of such a code should be to disseminate the UN recommendations in this regard and indicate procedures that can help institutions exercising onomaturgical functions, at the three levels of public administration – local, territorial, and national – align every decision regarding the adoption of new toponyms and the possible modification of existing ones. This code can contribute to the preservation and enrichment of the country's cultural heritage, in a coherent and plural manner, avoiding ambiguity, conflicts, and inappropriate changes to pre-existing names, based on fundamental principles already translated into good practices by some countries such as Canada, France, and Sweden.

A toponymy code of ethics should also aim to define roles and functions in the production of geographical naming documents, to involve the scientific community, cultural associations, and citizens in decision-making processes related to place names, and to embrace the onomaturgical act not as a measure of authority to be passively endured, but as the outcome of a participatory process, through which the very sense of belonging can grow and strengthen.

For this reason, it is appropriate to increasingly broaden serious thoughts regarding the multifaceted semantic value of toponyms, involving the scientific community and institutions to work so that the contrasts generated by toponyms can be eliminated and respect for peoples' cultures can be affirmed to produce a toponymy ethics with examples of good onomaturgical practices.

Academia, schools, and cultural associations can play a leading role in making new generations understand the importance of peace and sustainability, in the present and future of peoples, through shared and respectful toponymy:

- Accepting diversity and rejecting any adaptation to dominant cultural models;
- Rejecting any attempt at cultural domination;
- Recognizing differences as sources of cultural enrichment;
- Recovering a sense of place from ancient names.

The fundamental requirement for achieving these goals must primarily take into account that every man and every woman is primarily a person, with

the dignity of a human being. The underlying objective is therefore to broaden and disseminate the concept highlighted in the epigraph quote of this volume (Montesquieu, 1991, no. 350, p. 285), regardless of gender, skin colour, language, religious belief, occupation, or membership in a particular social group. Only when every man and woman recognizes this fundamental condition in themselves and in all their fellow men and women will a universal ethic be truly shared, one in which toponymy can also contribute to reducing conflicts between social groups and between the peoples of the Earth.

Lars Huldén's words certainly apply to toponymy:

“The name is a key to memories and experiences. To be familiar with the same name is to know a little about each other. Names are social signals of solidarity. The more names one shares with others, the stronger the solidarity with them is” (Huldén L., 1994, p. 33, quoted by Helleland B., 2012, pp. 95–116).

Finally, I thank everyone for their kind attention, I extend my best wishes for a fruitful symposium and a pleasant stay in Rome to all those who came for the first time to the Eternal City, and I declare open the Fourth International Scientific Symposium of the Romano-Hellenic Division of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names.

### *Bibliographic references*

- ASCOLI GRAZIADIO ISAIA, *Supplementi periodici all'Archivio glottologico italiano, dedicati a indagini linguistiche estranee o non limitate al neolatino, e ordinati da G. I. Ascoli*, terza dispensa, 1895.
- BLOCH MARC, *Apologia della storia o Mestiere dello storico*, Torino, 1998 (French edition: *Apologie pour l'histoire ou Métier d'historien*, Paris, 1993).
- GAMMELTOFT PEDER, *Creating an Equal Society through Geographical Names*, United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names, Second session, New York, 3 – 7 May 2021, Item 16, GEGN.2/2021/CRP.135, p. 2.
- HELLELAND BOTOLV, “Place names and identities”, in HELLELAND BOTOLV, ORE CHRISTIAN-EMIL, AND WIKSTRØM SOLVEIG (Editors), *Names and Identities*, in “Oslo Studies in Language”, vol. 4 (2012), no. 2, pp. 95–116.
- HULDÉN LARS, *Ortnamnens upplevelsevärde [The value of experiencing placenames]*, in ULFSPARRE GÖRAN (Editor), *Ortnamn värda att värda. Föredrag från Riksantikvarieämbetets symposium Ortnamnskultur*, Stockholm 5–7 maj 1993, Stockholm, 1994, pp. 32–37.
- IMAN M. NICK, *In the Name of Hate: An Editorial Note on the Role Geographically Marked Names for COVID-19 Have Played in the Pandemic of Anti-Asian Violence*, in “Names - A Journal of Onomastics”, Vol. 69, Issue 2, 2021, <https://ans-names.pitt.edu/ans/article/view/2276>.
- KROGSETH OTTO, “Names and collective identity”, in HELLELAND BOTOLV, ORE CHRISTIAN-EMIL, AND WIKSTRØM SOLVEIG (Editors), *Names and Identities*, in “Oslo Studies in Language”, vol. 4 (2012), no. 2, pp. 161–166.

LEIBNIZ GOTTFRIED WILHELM VON, *Brevis designatio meditationum de Originibus Gentium, ductis potissimum ex indicio linguarum*, in “Miscellanea Berolinensia ad incrementum scientiarum, ex scriptis Societati Regiae Scientiarum exhibitis edita”, Berolinum, 1710, vol. I, pp. 1–16 (<http://www3.bbaw.de/bibliothek/digital/>).

LÉVI-STRAUSS CLAUDE, *La pensée sauvage*, Paris, 1962.

LOWENTHAL D., *The past is a foreign country*, New York, 1985.

ORAZIO, *Le Odi di Quinto Orazio Flacco tradotte da Cesare Pavese*, Giovanni Barbieri Squarotti (Editor), Firenze, 2013.

ORAZIO, *Epistolarium: liber secundus: ars poetica*, Milano, 1952.

MONTESQUIEU CHARLES-LOUIS DE SECONDAT, *Pensées: Le Spicilège*, Edition établie par Louis Degraives, Paris, 1991.

TUFANO SALVATORE, *Epaminonda di Tebe. Vite e sconfitte di un politico di successo*, Milano, 2023.

TURCO ANGELO, *Verso una teoria geografica della complessità*, Milano, 1988.

TURCO ANGELO, *Territorio e territorialità*, in *Enciclopedia Italiana*, VII Appendice, Roma 2007, [https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/territorio-e-territorialita\\_\(Enciclopedia-Italiana\)/](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/territorio-e-territorialita_(Enciclopedia-Italiana)/)

UNGEGN, *IX Conference, Recommendation no.7, “Dissemination of information concerning the origin and meaning of geographical names”*, New York, 2007.

TUAN YI-FU, *Topophilia: a study of environmental perception, attitudes, and values*, New York, 1990.

WHO, *World Health Organization best practices for the naming of new human infectious diseases*, 15 May 2015, <https://iris.who.int/handle/10665/163636>.



Supplement to “L'Universo”, Vol. 106 (2026), n. 4.  
ISSN: 0042-0409

Book layout by the Editorial staff of the Italian geographical journal “L'Universo”.  
Printed by the IGMI Lithography workshop.

© Copyright – Italian Geographic Military Institute  
Firenze [Florence] 2026

ISBN: 978-88-52391-32-3