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Place names as intangible cultural heritage

Edited by

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

The Romano-Hellenic Division is one of 24 linguistic/geographic divisions of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN).

UNGEGN is one of seven groups of experts of the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations. It provides a forum to encourage national and international geographical names standardization; to promote the international dissemination of nationally standardized geographical names information; and to recommend single romanization systems for the conversion of each non-Roman writing system to the Roman alphabet.

These tasks are undertaken by UNGEGN to follow up the resolutions of the United Nations Conference for the Standardization of Geographical Names held every five years.

The Romano-Hellenic Division was created during the second United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names, held in London, 10-31 May 1972, and so was one of the original 14 divisions of UNGEGN. At first it was referred to as the “Division of Romance Languages, other than Latin-America”, but later changed to its present name.

After the first years of activity, during the meeting held in Paris from 28th to 29th April 1994, the Division decided to create a “Bulletin de liaison” with the aim of informing all member countries that had not participated in the meetings about the actions and developments made in the standardization process of place names and to collect and disseminate information in this regard, within the Division. In the following years the diffusion of this bulletin was suspended and it was replaced by direct contacts between the experts of the Division.

At the 23rd Session of United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names, held in Vienna from 28th March to 4th April 2006, the membership of the Romano-Hellenic Division was extended, following the request of the Principality of Andorra to join the Division.

Today, the Division consists of the following sixteen countries: Andorra, Belgium, Canada, Cyprus, France, Greece, Holy See, Italy, Luxembourg, Monaco, Portugal, Republic of Moldova, Romania, Spain, Switzerland and Turkey.

The primary task of the Division is to support the achievement of general objectives assigned to UNGEGN and, in particular, to spread, among the member states, the importance of standardization of geographical names at the national and international level, to show its benefits and assist in the process of standardization of geographical names in countries where this process is found to be deficient. To this end, the Division facilitates discussion of the results of the national standardization process, encouraging the exchange of experiences and good practices for the standardization of geographical names.

The Division normally meets on the occasion of the UNGEGN Sessions and it yearly organizes preparatory meetings, symposia and conferences on issues related to national and international standardization of geographical names, as for example, the International scientific symposium “Place Names as Intangible Cultural Heritage” held in Italy in 2015.

The RHD is headed by a Chairperson, who is responsible for coordination of activities and representation of the Division.

From its inception the Division was chaired by:

- Mr. Jean Ramondou, from the National Geographic Institute of France, National Commission of Toponymy (1972 – 1990);
- M.me Sylvie Lejeune, from the National Geographic Institute of France, National Commission of Toponymy (1990 – 2000);
- Mr. Salvatore Arca, from the Italian Geographic Military Institute, Geodesy, Topography and Cartography High School (2000 – 2011);
- Mr. Gennaro Afeltra, from the Italian Geographic Military Institute, Department of Geographical Information (2011 – 2014);
- Mr. Andrea Cantile, from the Italian Geographic Military Institute, Directorate of Cultural heritage.

The Chairman of the RHD
(Andrea CANTILE)

Place names as intangible cultural heritage: potential and limits

ANDREA CANTILE*

In all ages people have used geographical names as a spatial grid, creating an efficient and immediate way for identifying and positioning places on the terrestrial surface without using the geographic coordinates or the complex geodetic calculations introduced in the modern era. Thanks to this spatial grid, Man has organized the world's places throughout history, transforming these places in areas of land under the jurisdiction of a ruler and, at the same time, generating mind maps of its spaces. These dynamics inspired the very structure of maps, giving to them sense and meaning, until we can say that a map is the representation of this grid and that a map without toponyms is a blank map because it shows an unrecognizable place or region. The diffusion of maps during the centuries increased the power of identification, positioning and organization of geographical names until we recognize undoubtedly that these are their main functions. But identification, positioning and organization of places in the terrestrial surface are not the only reasons for their importance.

Geographical names are also an intricate kaleidoscope of elements in which is written the story of mankind and so they are part of the cultural heritage of humankind. In these toponyms there are signs of the life and the actions of Man. There are signs of his languages, of the places where he lived, cultivated the soil for the growing of crops and the rearing of animals to provide food, wool, and other products, and exchanged these through buying and selling. There are again the signs of industrial activities, of the agreements, disagreements and conflicts between communities, of enjoyment and recreation, of perception, and of religious and symbolic activities. Shortly, we can state that, in addition to the identification and placement, they are just as important because they contain traces of the memory of the relationship between Man and Earth, though they change form, pronunciation and meaning over time, becoming opaque.

The opacity of a large part of contemporary place names is the consequence of a natural lack of memory and incredibly misspelled or mispronounced ancient toponyms inherited from the past. According to the Italian geographer Carlo Errera (1867-1936) we can state that we have inherited a large amount of place names, "unbelievably deformed from curial Latin by ignorant notaries and maintained ever after exactly the same; misrepresented names passed from mouth to mouth, or collected and processed by the barbarian languages by foreign dominators [...] perhaps collected for the first time in the tax registers by ignorant ministers of foreign governments; names also recently recognized on the site by surveyors ignorant of the dialect and sometimes even of the official language" [*"inverosimilmente storpiati nei latinizzamenti curiali di notai ignoranti, e mantenutisi tali e quali di poi; nomi svisati talora passando di bocca in bocca, o raccolti e trasformati da barbare loquale di dominatori stranieri ... raccolti forse per la prima volta ne' registri del fisco, da*

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ministri ignoranti facenti capo sovente a un governo straniero; nomi rilevati anche talora, nell'epoca più recente, sul luogo, da topografi ignoranti del dialetto e talvolta fors'anche della lingua] (Errera, 1894, p. 360).

The earliest traces of ancient European toponyms are in the radix of pre-Indo-European names of geographical features, as *al- (“flow”) *ar-, or their derivatives as *alp- (“height”) and *alb-, and *kar(r)- (“hard, stone”) (Santano Moreno, 2008, pp. 61-76). However in Italy there are toponyms with three millennia of historical layering (Nocentini, 2004, pp. 698-701), others that have been created in historical times from fifteen different cultures and languages and that survive beside the vast majority of Latin geographical names, still others that have been generated a few centuries ago, and the most recent ones that are born today. In each part of the Earth, geographical names “may change over time; they may appear, disappear and re-appear elsewhere” (Kerfoot, 2009).

The transformation process of place names has been different in time and rhythm over the centuries. In the past, the general permanence of the names was linked to the ancient agricultural practices, while in recent times we witness a significant acceleration in the generation of new place names due to the rapid transformation of the territory. The main agents of this intense onomastic activity may be identified in the expansion of industrial production, in the spread of tourism and in the new media. Among the causes of the loss of the previous names there are “the changes in cultivated areas, the passage from a migrant farming practice to a sedentary one, [...] the abandonment of mountain and hill areas, the evolution and expansion of the urban settlements, and the tourist-residential, demographic movement from the interior to the coastal areas, the reduction of the sparsely populated areas” [*le variazioni delle aree coltivate, il passaggio da un allevamento migrante a uno stanziale, [...] l'abbandono delle aree montane e collinari, l'evoluzione e l'espansione degli insediamenti urbani e di quelli turistico-residenziali, il movimento demografico dalle aree interne a quelle costiere, la flessione della popolazione sparsa*] (De Vecchis, 2004, p. 710).

Among the new names, for example, there are never generic terms such as ‘morass’ or ‘marsh’, due to the major changes that occurred after the large land reclamations (Arena, 2004, p. 702), while there are many new toponyms along the sea coasts, which “consist of both ex nihilo designations assigned to new objects and names given to new objects through recovery of existing designations, maybe with the addition of another lemma” [*costituiti sia da coniazioni ex nihilo assegnate ad oggetti nuovi, sia da nomi attribuiti ad oggetti nuovi tramite recupero di designazioni esistenti, magari con aggiunta di altro lemma*] (Cassi, 2004, pp. 726). But even if, for example, in a given place the generic Marsh of ... has been replaced by a newer Paradise of ..., this toponym continues to carry out its discrete function in recording the relationship between man and the land, incorporating in itself the historical reasons for the territorial transformation that has led to the change in place names.

For this reason the famous Italian linguist Graziadio Isaia Ascoli (1829-1907) wrote that place names are like “scientific furnishings that we can compare with those which in a physical world are comparable with various finds studied by the geologist” [*suppellettile scientifica che si può confrontare con quella che nell'ordine*

delle vicende fisiche è data dai diversi giacimenti che il geologo studia”] (Ascoli, 1895, p. 97), emphasizing the importance of toponyms as linguistic and historical layers, containing traces of the relationship between man and the land, even though place names are not tangible.

According to their historical relevance, geographical names could also become symbols and they could express identity, belonging, possession, ownership and property. “A place name represents a space-related concept filled with contents. The name conveys these contents to inhabitants of the place as well as to people from the outside insofar as the latter know these contents or have learned about them (as this is, e.g., the case with tourism marketing). In this function place names are very similar to flags or coats of arms” (Jordan, 2012). For this reason they are still related to economic and politic interests and sometimes they are sources of conflict at local and international levels. Mandatory provisions sometimes strictly regulate the use of geographical names which arose, even condemning and repressing as illegal the use of place names not legally recognized. By reflex, place names are sometimes exploited by certain political parties for populist operations, extolling nostalgic values for a past, sometimes even a distant one.

Furthermore, due to the extreme belief in this relationship, sometimes people sought in toponyms much more than was really there to find. And also some scholars paid “a particular attention to the toponyms, almost a fanatical respect of them, in conviction that in these there were the signs of an ethnic identity almost virginally recoverable, and in this way researches were accomplished with the mirage of connecting to their ‘radices’ almost with the determination of a physical law” [“un’attenzione particolare ai toponimi e a un loro rispetto quasi fanatico con la convinzione che essi potessero essere la spia di una identità etnica da recuperare quasi virginalmente; e ogni ricerca veniva compiuta con il miraggio del raggiungimento delle proprie ‘radici’ quasi con la determinazione di una legge fisica”] (Mastrelli, 2007, p. 72).

Every single geographical name preserves, in whole or in part, the reasons for its origin and its original meaning, but origin and meaning are permanently shrouded in the mystery for many toponyms, because sometimes the characters in which the toponym was written and the story of the name have an impenetrable form, as an encrypted code.

Nevertheless, very often we tend to attempt etymological reconstruction of a place name based only on simple similarities in roots or endings with other terms of known languages, without knowing the history of this particular name. This modus operandi, which mainly characterizes the approach of beginners, almost always leads us ‘not to see the forest for the trees’ and to totally erroneous inferences because etymological studies are “very complex and uncertain” (Pellegrini, 1990, p. VII).

However, the great complexity of the studies in this field and the absence of a certain guarantee of their results do not imply that we have to renounce them; quite the contrary, they help us to understand that place names studies need the contribution of various fields of knowledge. Only the study of documentary sources and the cooperation of several branches of knowledge (linguistic, historical, geographical, palaeographic, diplomatic, natural, geological, etc.) may provide an interpretative key to the original meaning of a name.

If we do not encourage efforts in the collection and study of place names, recognizing the importance of place names as cultural heritage, the risk will be to have in the future only dull geographical names, like the name “rose”, as Bernardino Morliacense (Benedictine monk from 12th century) wrote in his *De contemptu mundi*: “stat rosa pristina nomine, nomina nuda tenemus” (quoted in Eco, 1980, p. 503). In other words, like the “ancient rose remains by its name, and we only have naked names”, many toponyms will be destined to be permanently unexplained, concealing their original meanings, which will never be revealed and perhaps permanently lost.

Only with the systematic collection of all available documentary sources, integrated with direct memories of citizens who still remember place names that are not present on maps, can we possibly preserve cultural heritage at risk. Such sources made available to etymologists would better allow them to regenerate the transparency of the place names. Furthermore, in this way we could create the fundamental preconditions for knowledge acquisition, promotion of diversity as a source of cultural richness, standardization and mutual acceptance of place names between neighbouring communities or groups sharing the same territory.

The problem calls clearly into question that acts of denomination as well as the collection, standardization, management and enhancement of place names are actions of great social, cultural and economic significance that cannot be left to the decision of a single person, a limited group, a political party, an economic potentate, or an advertising agency.

For these and other reasons, the United Nations, through its Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN), highlights across the world the importance of the standardization of place names, recently recognized as “part of the intangible cultural heritage”, after the approval of the Convention for Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage by the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). The Convention states that: the “intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity” (UNESCO, 2003).

Considering that geographical names are tangible only when they are written or pronounced and that, for this reason, they are vulnerable and at risk of being lost, the Ninth UN Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names recognized “that toponyms are indeed part of the intangible cultural heritage” (Jaillard, 2007), and invited all UN Member States to plan, according to the UNESCO Convention, for their safeguard and preservation (United Nations – Economic and Social Council, 2007).

UNGEGN in this way established the cornerstone on which all Member States could standardize, protect and promote their place names as monuments by means of their National Names Authorities (NNA) or similar bodies. On the basis of the above, the Romano-Hellenic Division (RHD) addresses its efforts to the NNAs of each Member State because they play a determinant role in realizing these strategic goals.

Unfortunately not every Member State of the RHD has created an NNA and Italy constitutes a unique case in the world in this field.

It was one of the first countries in the world to understand the importance of toponyms on its official maps and coherently it created its national names authority in 1911 (Reale Commissione per la revisione toponomastica della Carta d'Italia).

At the beginning of the Republican period it renewed this NNA in 1949 with the creation of the "Permanent commission responsible for directing the toponymic revision of the Italian Map" (Law 8th June 1949 n. 605).

In 2007, Italy adopted the UNESCO Convention with the Law n. 167, dated 27th September 2007 and titled "Ratifying and implementing the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, adopted in Paris on 17 October 2003 by the XXXII session of the General Conference of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization" (Official journal of the Italian Republic n. 238 in date 12th October 2007).

In 2008, after the approval of the so-called "Decree cuts-laws" (Decree-Law 25th June 2008 n. 112, modified with amendments by Law 6th August 2008 n. 133), the Italian Parliament repealed the law with which the Permanent Commission was established in 1949.

This recent decision also created a vacuum in the cartographic field, and the Italian Geographic Military Institute (IGMI) has made efforts to replace the functions of the repealed Commission through another similar institution by creating in 2011 (one hundred years after the first Italian NNA) the "IGMI Commission for the Italian Official Toponymy", that unfortunately operates without the support of a specific law, and only serves the cartographic needs of the Italian National Mapping Agency.

This particular condition substantially limits the actions of the IGMI's Commission to make place names consistent, and to respect local, national and international uses and rules, to create conditions for preserving toponyms as cultural heritage, and to stimulate studies for divulging their importance in the history of Man (Cantile, 2007).

The general recognition of the importance of geographical names as intangible cultural heritage is ultimately achievable only if people share the sense of their preservation, without distinction between place names, and with reference to an institutional body that will coordinate the process in the long term.

Our hope is that, at the end of this symposium, the Italian Government and the Regional authorities (those that have not already done so) recognize the importance of these issues and approve the establishment of new national and regional geographical names authorities, with the participation of linguists, geographers, historians and cartographers.

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