

Place Names in Cultural Heritage

Conservation Practice

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Introduction - There is a growing international recognition of place names as part of intangible cultural heritage (Jordan et al. 2009; Cantile – Kerfoot 2015). Place names conserve the cultural memory of communities and peoples as well as the memory of natural processes and events. They tell stories of migration, colonization, and settlement, landscape character and use, ownership, wars and conquests, religious and utopian projects, political revolutions, dreams and disappointments, and everyday life. Some names recall greatness and contribute to unity, others bring up memories of tragedy, oppression and genocide, constituting thus what Tunbridge and Ashworth (1996) referred to as *dissonant heritage*. A special relevance is attributed to the heritage value of names in multilingual and multi-ethnic contexts where place names acquire a significant dimension as identity markers and bearers of the cultural memory of a people.

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⁷ The text was written with the support for the systematic long-term development of the Institute of Ethnology of the Czech Academy of Sciences (RVO: 68378076).

Defining toponymic heritage - Much as the heritage value of place names may be recognized, when we think about them in terms of conservation, we immediately face a number of dilemmas. These partly stem from the fact that toponymic heritage, as any other heritage, is closely tied with the politics of memory, selective representation of history, and the reproduction of group identity (Graham – Howard 2008). First, how do we define the toponymic heritage objects themselves? Are they individual names, their sets, their particular linguistic forms, the stories associated with them, the landscape elements they refer to, or even the natural and cultural processes which generated them in the first place? The UNESCO *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* explicitly refers to the protectopm of “instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith” (Article 2, Section 1). Second, what do we mean by conservation? Are written records, public remembrances and education sufficient or do we need special formal (legal) recognition and protection? Third, should we protect them actively – by mandates, ordinances, conservation funds, etc.? If so, are we ready to set aside public funding and defend its use for toponymic heritage conservation before the public? Fourth, from whom do we defend the toponymic heritage? From the people, its presumed users and despite their resistance? Fifth, with whom do we protect it? Only in partnership with people who bear the heritage can any protection be thinkable. Ironically, they are the same people who endanger its conservation in the first place. And finally, for whom do we protect it? Many names may be the heritage of small communities with only local relevance. Some of them, however, may be considered the intellectual property of a cultural group, not to be divulged publicly. Others may refer to features, processes, and events with global impact, exemplifying the cultural heritage of the whole humanity.

Which of all these options will take precedence when a name choice has to be made?

Toponymic heritage in conservation practice - Although the aforementioned dilemmas present many challenges, they are not to discourage us from seeking ways to safeguard and promote the heritage value of names. The fundamental preconditions for success in this effort, however, are humility, sensitivity, and respect. *Humility* for accepting the fact that we can never “save” all names and that some (and perhaps even most) will disappear. *Sensitivity* to the multivocality of place, especially in minority and politically delicate situations. And *respect* for the speakers of a language who coin names, use them, and sometimes choose to replace them. We should cherish the heritage of our ancestors but we should also not forbid ourselves to leave our heritage to posterity.

References

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