Placenames play important roles in various areas of life: cartography, geography, history, the naming and defining of our world, economics, government and politics, delivery of services, and emergency services, and so on. One area I have not yet covered—but which I hinted at in ‘Toponymy 101 C: The power of placenames’—is the role placenames play in marking our identity. And they do this at the individual, social, and regional/national levels. Even though this function is perhaps psychologically most important and lies closest to our hearts, it is nevertheless often overlooked. Placenames trigger a mental relationship between the users of the name and the named places.

Some quite natural questions people ask about themselves and others are: Who are you? Where have you been? Where do you come from? Where do you belong? Where do your allegiances lie?

Why do these questions matter to us? Well, they help identify a person and define who they are. A person’s identity is defined by many things, but two of them are place (of origin, residence etc.) and language variety. Toponyms allow these two dimensions to be communicated.

They may also help communicate a person’s possible ethnicity, nationality and social class. Place of birth is also one of the most often-required pieces of personal information on official forms. The combination of someone’s name, date of birth, and place of birth is close to being a unique identifier of that person, and is linked with them all their lives.

Cultural identity

In many cultures, placenames are more important cultural and personal identifiers than in many western societies. In Australian Aboriginal cultures for instance, placenames are mnemonic devices that carry knowledge passed from generation to generation. They are the story maps that connect people to place and act as a guide to get from one place to another (song-lines). In such an oral society, the names chosen for geographical sites carry history, traditional environmental/ecological knowledge, navigational information, and teachings. Using these names keeps all of that information alive. Placenames also embody a sense of belonging to a place, coexistence with the natural world, and the longstanding relationship between a people and their place—they anchor the past to the present (Kostanski, 2016). The notion of ‘country’ and caring for country is one of the most significant parts of Aboriginal life, and connection to country is seen as an inseparable part of Aboriginal identity. Unfortunately, most Indigenous placenames were ignored and lost after colonisation, and their spiritual and cultural meanings were expunged (Furphy, 2001). Moreover, many indigenous placenames were displaced to regions not connected with them, thereby further alienating those names and meanings from their people. However, a growing trend of using Aboriginal placenames has begun to emerge. This will, to a small degree, help to preserve some Indigenous languages and act as a guide to the teaching of generations yet to come.

A similar close connection between people and placenames is found among the Indigenous peoples of Fiji and New Zealand. When I lived in Fiji, I noticed that one of the first things that unacquainted Fijians asked one another when introduced was what their native (paternal) village was (even though nowadays many have never set foot in it). The answer to this question lies at the heart of Fijian cultural identity. Where the mother is from is sometimes asked about, but it is of secondary importance. The name of one’s native (paternal) village is essential in determining that person’s clan, kinship, and allegiances.

Māori placenames were often coined as descriptions of geographic features, or from circumstances that influenced the naming process. These placenames convey particular cultural values to those who are familiar with them. The Māori placename, therefore, stands as a reminder not only of the history of who came there first, but of a bond of common ancestry between proximate peoples, allowing for extensions of trade and goodwill between them. The importance of Māori placenames

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Toponymy 101 H...
Placenames as Identity Markers

Personal identity

Many placenames are eponymous, meaning they were derived from people’s names (e.g. Darwin, Tasmania, Frenchs Forest, Bennelong Point, Leeman etc.); but the reverse also happens, where a placename may generate a personal or family name based or derived from a particular place. In various European countries many family names have what is termed a ‘nobiliary particle’ to signal the nobility of a family (or at least the semblance of it, because such names were often adopted by commoners as well). The particle is usually in the form of the preposition of (or van, von, de in Dutch, German and French respectively). Such names often designate an ancestor’s place of origin, for instance: Richard of Shrewsbury, Rembrandt van Rijn, Josef von Sternberg, Giscard d’Estaing, Simon de Montfort, etc. And of course the British royal family adopts toponymic names, not only in their titles, but as their family names, e.g. Windsor, Wales, and Cambridge. These sorts of names are termed ‘oikonymic’ (i.e. personal names associated with the names of inhabited places).

However, toponymic family names without a ‘nobiliary particle’ are also common: Holland, Kent, York, Ireland, Britain, Ainsley, Lincoln, Luxemburg, Aquino, etc. According to the Dutch Meertens Instituut my own family name is derived from De T enten (‘The Tents’), the name of a tiny hamlet near the village of Grootegast in the province of Groningen. My family has its roots in this very region. And in the Basque Country, the vast majority of surnames on that country’s Atlantic side are also oikonymic (Nieto 2007).

In some Aboriginal societies, a deceased person may be commonly referred to by their place of death, perhaps in the form of a suffix, as in Warlpiri with -wana ‘general locative’ (Myers, 1991:132). Exceptionally, on Rote Island in Indonesia (Pulau Rote) a person cannot be referred to or defined by reference to place. Then in yet other cultures, as Fox says, ‘places may take on the attributes of persons, and persons the attributes of a place. The interconnection is basic and thus place names can provide a useful starting point for the study of proper names.’ (Fox 2006: 89). Fox declares that it is often difficult to distinguish placenames from personal names, and that both cohere to form a combination of genealogy and topogeny.

These days, in Western societies, toponyms seem to be coming more popular in naming and are the inspiration for given names such as Indi, Madison, Dakota, Israel, Florence, Georgia, Virginia, and Orlando, to name but a few.

In a review of studies conducted on the effect of a person’s name and their identity, Dion (1983), reports that diverse research has shown a correlation between the two. And given that placenames are a common source of personal and family names, it follows that placenames will influence a person’s sense of identity too.

Regional and national identity

Placenames also contribute to the feeling of belonging to a social group in a particular area. Two important studies have been conducted that look at this phenomenon, Windsor (2013) and Kostanski (2009). Both their PhD theses deal in part with community ‘sense of place’ and with the notion of belonging to a regional community.

Country or region of origin is often a source of great pride and identity. The frequent practice of British colonists to name places in Australia and New Zealand after their own places of origin is testament not only to this, also but to Jacquetta Hawkes’ view (Hawkes (1951): ‘Place names are among the things that link men most intimately with their territory’.

Sporting teams often derive their names from the toponym of their location (locally, regionally, or nationally), e.g. Parramatta Eels, Cronulla Sharks, Collingwood Magpies, Adelaide Crows, West Coast Eagles, Central Coast Mariners, and Western Sydney Wanderers. Such names are rallying points or calls for team supporters who often fervently identify with a team and its name. In this way, placenames can be emblematic of tribalism.

Placenames are also fundamental to a nation’s identity. The choice of a nation’s name or decisions on the names for its major cities are potent and compelling signifiers of national identity. In my earlier article on ‘The power of placenames’, I outlined some of the politics and motivations of renaming places. Post-colonial and post-regime placename changing heralds new national
and political identity and image. National identity lies behind all these renamings, just as much as it does behind disputed names and regions.

Changing a placename (even the removal or addition of a letter) often displeases people who associate themselves with that name (Guyot & Seethal, 2007; Kostanski 2009). Placenames are indelible symbols, and as such are central attributes of national, territorial, and personal identity (Arseny, 2003). Undoubtedly one of the inherent properties of placenames is their ability to create a feeling of belonging to a certain community.

Endnotes
1 Examples include: Brindabella (NSW) to Brindabella (VIC), Warragamba (NSW) to Warragamba (VIC), and Toongabbie (NSW) to Toongabbie (VIC).
3 See for example: Droege (1955).
4 The Meeertens Instituut is part of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, which investigates diversity in language and culture in the Netherlands, see <http://www.meertens.nl/>.
5 A topogeny is an ordered succession of recited placenames, and is analogous to the recitation of a genealogy. Indeed, among Austronesian-speaking people, topogenies can be as common as genealogies.
6 Indi Mitchell, eldest daughter of Elyne Mitchell (author of the Silver Brumby series), was named after the Indi River. Indi named her Victorian rural property Brindabella after the Brindabella west of Canberra.

References

...Placenames as Identity Markers


Jan Tent

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