We recently completed our series *Toponymy 101*, but one extremely important topic that we didn’t cover was that of indigenous placenames and place-naming. It is an important topic in any country or region that has undergone foreign occupation and settlement with the resulting imposition of new toponyms and replacement of the indigenous ones.

Territories colonised by Europeans generally had indigenous populations with long-established toponymic systems. The overall toponymic systems of former European colonies are thus best classified under two broad systems—the ‘Indigenous’ and the ‘Introduced’—each of which may be further divided into names bestowed before and after European occupation (Tent and Blair 2009, 2011).

Even within our Introduced system of placenames, we use Indigenous-based toponyms on a daily basis but, in general, we are not aware of their meanings or origins. These names have, in one form or other, survived the onslaught of British colonisation and the annihilation of Indigenous languages and cultures that accompanied it. They are, in many cases, the sole survivors of the Indigenous languages, and are an essential ingredient of Aboriginal cultural heritage which represents the connection with the land and Country. They are constant reminders of the 50-60,000 year tenure Australia’s original inhabitants had of the land.

In this first part of *Indigenous toponymy*, we look at the Aboriginal toponymic system. Before we begin however, it is important to note two points.

1. Hercus (2002: 63) aptly observes: ‘There are few topics as challenging as the study of Australian [indigenous] placenames. Their formation varies from region to region, they may be analysable or not, they may refer to the actions of Ancestors, they may be descriptive, or “indirectly” descriptive: an Ancestor is said to have noticed some particular feature and named the place accordingly. […] We can also never be sure we are right about a placename unless there is clear evidence stemming from people who have traditional information on the topic. In the absence of such evidence we have to admit we are only guessing.’ Sadly, the latter is too often the case.

2. Aboriginal placenaming practices, like cultures, are not homogenous and so exhibit much variation, subject to the particular language/clan or environment. It is therefore difficult to generalise about Aboriginal placenaming practices, and it is impossible to do justice to this topic in a series of short articles. However, I have drawn upon some general principles of placenaming gleaned from various sources in the hope that they may illustrate to some degree how different European and Aboriginal naming practices really are. And in doing so, I trust the reader will gain some insight into and appreciation of the complexity and beauty of indigenous place-naming. So the next time you see or hear an Aboriginal placename, I hope you will bear these dynamics in mind.

### The Indigenous Australian toponymic system

There are numerous ways in which Aboriginal placenaming practices differ from European ones.¹

1. Indigenous placenames do not normally have topographic descriptors or generics (e.g. creek, river, hill etc.). So toponyms such as *Eucumbene River, Mount Jagungal* and *Yarrangobilly Caves* form part of the Introduced system, and should not be considered as unequivocally or true indigenous names.

2. Although all languages and cultures possess placenames, their structures and grammars differ from one language to another. (a) Some cultures derive placenames from a particular group of proper names in their languages in which each placename has only the function of designating a place. In other words, they are singular definite referring expressions, and only have a denotational function (i.e. a naming or identifying function). (b) Other cultures create placenames from the general stock of words and grammatical structures in their languages and customise the name specifically to the place designated. Such names may have a strong connotational function.² European languages tend more towards method (a)—e.g. *Adelaide, Perth, Bathurst*—whilst the indigenous cultures of Australia prefer constructing placenames through method (b).

3. Each Aboriginal clan has its own network of placenames and has diverse methods for constructing them. Further, these networks are often in close geographic proximity to those of neighbouring clans, so that a place or feature may have more than one name.
4. Unlike Introduced placenames, Indigenous placenames and networks are ‘owned’, in the sense that one family or clan may have sole rights to pass on information about specific places, including their names. Some placenames may carry special powers and may be sacred and secret, not for dissemination. The documentation of placenames from areas where indigenous placenaming is still exercised (e.g. Cape York, NT, WA and SA) is being conducted by anthropologists and linguists. In these areas, the transmission of placenames is unbroken because the owners of those placenames have been able to retain their language and their habitation on or near their lands. The names are, however, rarely published, for cultural, practical and legal reasons which include unresolved issues of indigenous intellectual property. The documented placenames are kept in offices of land councils as well as State and Territory government departments, and often have restricted access.

5. Indigenous placenames denote significant geographic features (waterholes, food sources, etc.) and feature in Songlines for the purpose of finding them again.

6. Aboriginal placenames rarely make reference to places of habitation because no, or few, such places really existed. Therefore, names of towns and cities that bear a so-called indigenous name (e.g. Tallangatta, Woolloomooloo, Canberra) form part of the Introduced placename system.

7. There is often no direct correspondence between the geographic features named by Europeans, and those named by Aboriginal peoples. For example, under Indigenous systems there may not be a single name that applies to a whole geographic feature such as a river, creek, hill or mountain: it may be that portions of such a feature which are considered significant are named. A typical example comes from the Kaurna language (SA): Nurlungga ‘Bend place’ (on the Onkaparinga River) and Ngangkiparingga ‘Woman river place’ (on the Onkaparinga River, and whence the river’s name derives). Thus, the two systems have substantial differences in what counts as a significant feature deserving to be named.

8. Aboriginal placenames are part of the Law assigned to specific places by Ancestor beings during the Dreaming. As such, all placenames have a meaning which relates directly to the account of the totemic Ancestors that created the place and the actions they executed there. Consequently, ordinary people cannot transfer those names to other places. In other words, traditional placenames are not arbitrarily associated with the places they designate, as European placenames often are. Instead, the names belong to specific places in perpetuity, and people who interfere with this Law are seen to exhibit great arrogance.

9. European names often commemorate people, other entities (e.g. ships), and incidents (e.g. battles, dates, festivals). Apart from some Aboriginal placenames commemorating mythical events, Aboriginal placenames rarely do.

10. The Aboriginal placenames of Australia are in many different languages, whereas our Introduced system is part of the national language, English; names in this system are therefore words of Australian English, even though some are derived from other languages.

11. Indigenous placenames reflect Aboriginal views on life and are an integral part of their storytelling. Placenames form systems of mnemonics (Songlines) for identifying places, and are fundamental to a clan’s knowledge of its history, culture, rights and responsibilities for their land. Put in another way, placenames strongly represent people’s relationships with the land.

12. Although all cultures’ conceptualisations of place(names) involve some kind of relation among them, Aboriginal people comprehend places as entities in a network of meaning in a much stronger fashion than in European (and therefore in Australian English) semantic systems.

On this last point, Burenhult and Levinson (2008: 139) note that ‘[t]he intrinsic connection of places to other places, in a network forming a mental map, is precisely what is missing from traditional onomastics’ and suggest that questions as to why ‘some places get named, others not, why some cultures have dense systems of place names and others not, and whether the specific form of names reflects differing cognitive import’ should be asked and investigated so that we may fully understand the diverse...
placenaming practices across different cultures. In other words, in order to appreciate what underpins Aboriginal placenaming, we need to recognise the striking cultural difference between the way it views relations with and connections to the environment and the approach of the European tradition.

In our next instalment of this topic, we shall take a look at Indigenous names within the Introduced system. In the third part, we’ll look at some of the issues involved in the reinstatement of Aboriginal placenames. In the meantime, if you would like to know more about Aboriginal placenames, I thoroughly recommend the following three volumes that form a series (and are free to download) from the ANU Press website:


Jan Tent

Indigenous toponymy - Part 1

Endnotes

1 Many of these listed differences are gleaned from Hercus, Hodges and Simpson (2002: 1-23). My list does not claim to be comprehensive.
2 Denotation refers to the literal meaning of a word, the ‘dictionary definition’. Connotation refers to the associations that are connected to a certain word, or the emotional suggestions related to that word. The connotative meanings of a word are concurrent with the denotive meanings.
5 There are numerous publications (both in print and online) cataloguing indigenous words and placenames. These usually make no effort to distinguish between one Aboriginal language and another. Rather, they classify all words and placenames as ‘Aboriginal’, as if to say there is only one Aboriginal language. This is not only wrong, but disrespectful. It is akin to listing Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Philippine, Vietnamese, Cambodian etc. words and placenames in one catalogue and labelling them as belonging to the ‘Asian language’.

References


A university course in toponymy

Have you been enjoying Jan Tent’s series ‘Toponymy 101’ in Placenames Australia? Would you like to extend your knowledge? ANPS is planning to offer an online unit in toponymy next year, through Open Universities Australia and with the cooperation of Macquarie University.

Placenames in the Modern World

This short course will be the equivalent of an undergraduate unit and will not require any previous university study. It is designed to cater both for those who wish to increase their general knowledge of placenames and for those who need professional development in toponymy. There will be a practical component that will involve some data collection and the analysis of that data to help answer the five standard questions—the what, the where, the who, the when and the why of the placename.

If you’re interested in the possibility, we’d like to hear from you! Email Jan Tent <director@anps.org.au> or Helen Slatyer <secretary@anps.org.au>, and we’ll keep you informed about our plans for the unit.