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Harmonising toponymic heritage: balancing standardisation
and local diversity

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Hosted by the [Department of South African Sign Language and Deaf Studies](#) at the University of the Free State (RSA), in partnership with the [Joint ICA/IGU Commission on Toponymy](#) as well as the [ICOS Working Group on Toponymy](#).

ABSTRACT: Inclusion In Practical Terms

Space is intricately linked to human identities such as individual, ethnic, racial, clan, local and national identities etc. This nexus brings into space the politics that pervade human identities. The contestations are even robust on space because the persons live on the land, they own it and it owns them. Naming space has been identified as a mark of ownership and in this way; person-self identities play out on space. People recreate themselves on their spaces through toponyms and when other toponyms encroach into their spaces, human beings heighten their in-group particularism and become combative and devise strategies to exclude the non-self toponyms from their space. The problem however is on how human identities are expressed and demarcated on space. The other problem is which human identities and markers of identity should access space and mark it as part of their selves? Human identities are created along different self and non-self-dichotomies such as gender, nationality, political persuasion, locality, race, language etc. In Africa, contestations to naming space are compounded by pre-colonial, colonial and de-colonial discourses and other hegemonies. This paper engages with the intricacies that pervade African toponymy and how the self is created on space by employing strategies that create and prevent the non-self toponyms. It characterizes self and non-self-topo-namers and toponyms and the identity quagmire that is created by human selves and non selves on space. The paper utilizes the bodily image of immunity as a model to characterize how various selves deal with the envisaged non-selves. It engages with cross domain mappings between toponymy and the biological science domains of micro-biology and immunology. A healthy toponymscape is one that reflects the identity markers of its owners. Foreign toponyms are treated as disease causing political, social, spatial and heritage bacteria hence the strategies to arm the spatial immunity to deal with the non-self-intruders. The paper uses Zimbabwe as a case in point to explore how some toponyms are treated as non-self-pathogens that cause various political, social, and economic sicknesses to the land and its people. It further problematizes multiculturalism and multilingualism in the fight for self toponyms. Various hegemonies create problems of the self and non-self in African toponymy. The aim is to analyse the heightened particularism in toponymy and characterize the contestations and perhaps foreground further engagements on the topic with the aim to get scholarship and policy talking to each other on the topic and politics of toponyms in Africa. The hope being that this will eventually culminate in an identity rights-based model for space naming in Africa.



Biography

I was born in Paisley, Scotland in 1953, then lived in Southend, England from 1960 to 1964, following which my family, comprising parents and seven children, migrated to Adelaide, South Australia, where I lived since then apart from a 3 1/2 year period of studying in Melbourne at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology RMIT).

I commenced a career in as a cadet in Survey and Mapping area in the Department of Lands in South Australia in 1972, choosing to focus on Cartography, which led to the study at RMIT.

My work in mapping lead to my involvement in places names in South Australia, commencing in 1984, and I have stayed involved with this work in various capacities until I retired in 2022.

Place naming in Australia is a State / Territory responsibility, but there is a coordinating committee comprising representatives from all naming authorities and other related parties. My involvement with place names in South Australia resulted in my membership of this committee from 1986 to 2022, chairing the committee from 2010-2014 and 2016 to 2018.

This led to my association with the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN) from 2002 to 2019. I served as rapporteur from 2007 to 2012, convener of the Working Group on the Promotion of Indigenous, Minority and Regional Language Group (later renamed as Working Group on Geographical Names as Cultural Heritage) from its creation in 2002 to 2012, and as chair of UNGEGN between 2012 and 2019.

I retired from work in 2022, but have retained my involvement with place names work by my membership with Place Names Australia and as a subject matter expert with the Surveyor General's Office.