

Discussion

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*“What's in a name? That which we call a rose,
by any other name would smell as sweet”
William Shakespeare: Romeo and Juliet, Act II, Scene II*

Yes, What's in a name? This well-known and much-used Shakespeare quote – and also quoted here by Isolde Hausner – very aptly highlights the theme of this session - Geographical Names as Indicators of Cultural Heritage and History. This session has circled around the cultural and historical significance of geographical names. Generally speaking, a geographical name is a sign hardwiring space to place, into time and meaning – meaning of origin, meaning of usage. A geographical names effectively changes nothingness to something. It is thus a sign filled with powerful emotion to the user, embedded into the fabric of belonging and origin. At the same time it is also a tool for statehood and a symbol of power – the one who controls the name also ‘owns’ the place regardless of this being the case or not.

The three papers in this session by Mrs. Isolde Hausner, Mr. Young Choon Lee and Mr. Sang-Tae Lee, the focus is very much on the public, international and official use of geographical names. As Isolde Hausner has pointed out, a geographical name is not only a sign only imbued with meaning during its creation, it is very much also filled with meaning of its users today. One very good example of this is the name of Spandau, one of Berlin's districts. To local Berliners the name may well be associated with idyllic, almost village-like life in western Berlin. To others, like myself, the name is associated the New Romantics music movement of the early 1980's through the English band name Spandau Ballet. At the same time, some might associate the name of Spandau to WWII infamously like Albert Speer and Rudolf Hess, who spent their last living decades in the Spandau Prison. Again, those interested in military weapons would associated the name of Spandau with the MG42, a very efficient and deadly weapon developed in Germany for the WWII – and indirectly the origin of the band name Spandau Ballet, mentioned just before. And, finally, for a Dane like me, a Spandauer only means one thing – a round piece of pastry with custard cream or marmalade in the middle and icing

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– yummy!! You’ll see examples of this piece of Danish here at breakfast, too.



Figure1. A spread of Spandauers, a Danish favourite pastry
(Source: Max M. Rasmussen, www.kvalifood.com)

Through this excursion, there can be little doubt that the associative meaning of a geographical name is very dominant, and to the daily user more relevant than the name’s ultimate origin, I am sad to admit as a historical linguist. What is also clear is that the associations of one geographical name are multifaceted. One association may be seen as positive to one side, the same association – or another – may be the reason why the name is disliked or disapproved of by the other side. And associations die hard and are difficult to erase from the associations of a name or a place.

In addition to the associative significance of a geographical name, there is also a historical one – one which singles a place out as being of cultural and historical significance. Many names have more than one name form. Some live easily on in this state of being, serving two different language or culture groups, different social strata or the like. Others are seen as a prime examples of peaceful coexistence of minority groups among the majority and of the focus of the state as securing the well-being of all its peoples. Others become disputed – either because one form over the other must be chosen, or the association of the chosen name is too unacceptable. Another reason for dispute, but which has not been touched upon here, may be if the idea of the spelling of the name differs from user group to state-level standardized form.

Two of the papers, those by Young Choon Lee and Sang-Tae Lee take a critical look at the historical side of place and of name. Mr Young Choon Lee explores historical realities of the names of an area under naming dispute and shows us very aptly the complex nature of multi-name places and how more or less accidental name use by actors and standardizing bodies may change not only the namescape but also the associations of place for the people in and around it. Seeing history not only as a state of past, Mr. Sang-Tae Lee attempts to take the historical realities of the same area with name disputes not as a hinderance to change, but rather a way forward in finding a common aspect of the area for the disputing parties and use that for a way forward for future solution of the current dispute.

In rounding off, I would like to return to Shakespeare's quote 'What's in a name?', as the lesser known continuation of the quote is, to me, really the most important in the quote – and one which also ties well into Young Choon Lee's conclusion. The full quote goes as follows: 'What's in a name? That which we call a rose, by any other name would smell as sweet.'

Now, what does this mean? What is Shakespeare trying to tell us here? To me, Shakespeare is trying to tell us that however important a sign of an object is – in our case a geographical name to a location – it is merely an arbitrary sign. It can be changed at any time to anything as the need and, not least, the backing power arises. But in order to assign permanence to this sign it must also – to paraphrase Shakespeare – smell nicely to all involved parties.

It is easy to see the attraction in one's own favourite, but so will the counter-claimant – and we are at a status quo. In order to resolve a dispute peacefully, all involved parties have to bend to the compromise and accept that the smell may not be as sweet as hoped for, but quite agreeable anyway. In a world where progress is made, not by the sword, but through interaction and communication, peace can be achieved and disputes resolved without losing power and prestige – the new name would, in effect, have the same emotional potential for belonging and joint origin, and the beginning of a new, common story of the place.