

Wherein lies the heritage value of place names?

Přemysl Mácha*

Institute of Ethnology of the Czech Academy of Sciences, Department of Memory Studies, Czech Republic

To cite this article: Mácha, Přemysl. 2023. Wherein lies the heritage value of place names? *Onoma* 58, 19–35. DOI: 10.34158/ONOMA.58/2023/2

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.34158/ONOMA.58/2023/2>

© *Onoma* and the author.

Article history

Received on 18 June 2023.

Final form accepted on 8 December 2023.

Published online on 12 December 2023.

Wherein lies the heritage value of place names?

Abstract: There is a growing academic consensus that place names represent a valuable form of intangible cultural heritage of humanity and therefore they deserve systematic recognition and protection. However, when we attempt to put this idea into practice, we run into many problems. First, we have to define the heritage value of place names and establish the object of protection efforts. Second, we have to weigh political, moral, and practical implications of specific choices, set protection priorities and select from alternative courses of action each of which has its advantages and disadvantages. Finally, we have to reflect self-critically on our protection efforts in order to honour the dynamic nature of toponymic systems and allow people to choose or coin place names for the places which are important to them. The paper discusses the most important dilemmas we face in place-name recognition and protection and suggests possible solutions to some of them.

Keywords: Place names, intangible cultural heritage, heritage conservation.

* Contact: Institute of Ethnology of the Czech Academy of Sciences, Department of Memory Studies, CZ-602 00 Brno, Veverří 97, Czechia; e-mail: macha@eu.cas.cz.

Quelle est la valeur patrimoniale des toponymes?

Résumé : Il existe un consensus académique croissant sur le fait que les noms de lieux représentent une forme précieuse du patrimoine culturel immatériel de l'humanité et qu'ils méritent donc une reconnaissance et une protection systématiques. Cependant, lorsque nous tentons de mettre cette idée en pratique, nous nous heurtons à de nombreux problèmes. Premièrement, nous devons définir la valeur patrimoniale des toponymes et établir l'objet des efforts de protection. Ensuite, nous devons peser les implications politiques, morales et pratiques de certains choix, établir des priorités de protection et choisir parmi plusieurs plans d'action, chacun ayant ses avantages et ses inconvénients. Enfin, nous devons réfléchir de manière autocritique à nos efforts de protection afin de respecter la nature dynamique des systèmes toponymiques et de permettre aux gens de choisir ou de créer des toponymes pour les lieux qui sont importants pour eux. Ce document examine les principaux dilemmes auxquels nous sommes confrontés en matière de reconnaissance et de protection des noms de lieux et propose des solutions possibles à certains d'entre eux.

Mots-clés : Noms de lieux, patrimoine culturel immatériel, conservation du patrimoine.

Worin besteht der Wert von geographischen Namen als kulturelles Erbe?

Zusammenfassung: Es besteht ein wachsender wissenschaftlicher Konsens darüber, dass geographische Namen eine wertvolle Form des immateriellen Kulturerbes der Menschheit darstellen und daher systematische Anerkennung und Schutz verdienen. Wenn wir jedoch versuchen, diese Idee in die Praxis umzusetzen, stoßen wir auf viele Probleme. Erstens müssen wir den Wert von geographischen Namen als Kulturerbe definieren und den Gegenstand der Schutzbemühungen festlegen. Zweitens müssen wir die politischen, moralischen und praktischen Auswirkungen bestimmter Entscheidungen abwägen, Schutzprioritäten festlegen und aus alternativen Vorgehensweisen auswählen, die jeweils ihre Vor- und Nachteile haben. Schließlich müssen wir selbstkritisch über unsere Schutzbemühungen nachdenken, um die Dynamik toponymischer Systeme zu berücksichtigen und den Menschen die Möglichkeit zu geben, Namen für die Orte zu wählen oder zu prägen, die ihnen wichtig sind. Der Beitrag erörtert die wichtigsten Dilemmata, mit denen wir bei der Anerkennung und dem Schutz von geographischen Namen konfrontiert sind, und schlägt mögliche Lösungen für einige von ihnen vor.

Schlüsselbegriffe: Geographische Namen, immaterielles Kulturerbe, Erhaltung des Kulturerbes.

1. Introduction¹

There is a growing international recognition of place names as a valuable component of the intangible cultural heritage of humanity (Jordan et al. 2009; UNGEGN 2015; Cantile & Kerfoot 2016). 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 place names recall greatness and contribute to unity, others bring up memories of tragedy, oppression and genocide, constituting thus what Tunbridge & 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 (Jordan 2009).

However persuasive the aforementioned arguments may appear, when we attempt to translate the recognition of the heritage value of place names into heritage conservation practice, we immediately encounter a number of tough political, moral, and practical dilemmas which often make it extremely difficult to determine the best course of action and implement at least some conservation policies. In this article, we therefore discuss the most important of these dilemmas and suggest possible solutions to some of them. While this discussion is based predominantly on the Czech toponymic material, we also include examples from other countries to account better for the full complexity of the issue. Further debate of academics and practitioners from different toponymic contexts should follow.

2. What do we mean by cultural heritage?

Although the concept of cultural heritage may seem intuitively clear, it does not have a simple definition (Lowenthal 2005; Gillman 2010; Vecco 2010). From the point of view of history, cultural heritage can be perceived as a specific legacy of historical experience, which is present in objects, knowledge, practices, and memories (Ankersmit 2015: 193). Any cultural heritage object can thus be considered a legacy of history, which is not only a told story of the

¹ 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) and with the support of the program “City as a Laboratory of Change; Construction, Historical Heritage and Place for Safe and Quality Life” financed by the Strategy 21 of the Czech Academy of Sciences.

past, but its connection with place is also one of the ways to perceive history in a specific environment (Christie 2015: 10). In other words, we may see heritage as “the contemporary uses of the past. The interpretation of the past in history, the surviving relict buildings and artefacts and collective and individual memories are all harnessed in response to current needs which include the identification of individuals with social, ethnic and territorial entities and the provision of economic resources for commodification within heritage industries, of which tourism is the most apparent” (Ashworth & Tunbridge 1999: 105).

At first glance, it might seem that cultural heritage focuses on the past and its conservation is motivated by genuine and politically neutral interest in history (which it often is). In reality, however, it is firmly grounded in the present and its orientation is towards the future – the future of the entire community or particular groups within it. This is because, most fundamentally, cultural heritage defines the boundaries of communities and emphasizes their presumed core values, favouring one community narrative over alternative voices. On the other hand, cultural heritage may also be our guide towards environmental sustainability and social resilience (Barthel-Bouchier 2016; Holtorf & Högberg 2020).

The political salience of cultural heritage stems from its close relationship to community and landscape identity. By selectively making some monuments of the past more visible at the expense of others, each community constructs the idea of itself in the landscape (see, e.g., studies in Graham & Howard 2008). However, the relationship between cultural heritage and identity is not straightforward. All cultural heritage can be seen as the heritage of a specific small community and/or of all humanity, and therefore it can both unite and divide (Uerpmann-Witzack 2018). In some cases, the interpretation of particular heritage monuments is so contradictory (“dissonant”) that it generates conflict and significantly complicates their eventual protection (Tunbridge & Ashworth 1996). Even in the case of seemingly apolitical heritage objects, it is always necessary to proceed sensitively so that eventual protection does not cause greater social damage than if we left the objects to their fate. This is especially important to keep in mind in places with a turbulent history and in multicultural situations, but also when instead of individual monuments we protect entire landscapes with a multiplicity of actors, owners, and users who may hold contradictory ideas about how the shared space should be managed (Lozny 2006).

In spite of the aforementioned difficulties, cultural heritage – including place names – is the subject of international and national legislation, which gradually evolves over time and differs from place to place (Blake 2000, 2015; Lagrange et al. 2018). For our purposes, the most relevant international document is the *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* (UNESCO 2003) reflected in some national legislations, and the UNESCO World Heritage List mirrored in national and regional lists. Furthermore, several resolutions of the United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names emphasized the heritage value of

place names. The most explicit of them was the [Resolution IX/4 Place Names as Intangible Cultural Heritage \(UNEGN 2007\)](#) which called on official authorities to identify valuable place names and implement their protection in accordance with the aforementioned [UNESCO Convention](#).

At the European level, the [European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages \(1992, Art. 10, Sec. 2 g\)](#) encourages “the use or adoption, if necessary, in conjunction with the name in the official language(s), of traditional and correct forms of place-names in regional or minority languages.” Specific national legislation on place names as cultural heritage has also been passed in several countries, either in exclusive laws such as the Estonian Place Name Act (Kohanimeseadus 2003), as part of more general heritage conservation laws such as the Swedish Historic Environment Act (Kulturmiljölag 1988) which provides explicit protection for traditional place names, or in the form of laws or legal provisions protecting minority toponyms in multi-lingual/multi-ethnic situations such as the Czech Municipal Law ([Zákon o obcích 2000](#)). Nevertheless, this legislation is still only developing, many formulations remain vague, and political controversies limit their application. It is therefore important to lay out some of these problems and look for compromises and solutions.

Alongside the legislation, the scientific approach to cultural heritage is changing, too. Although much attention is still understandably paid to objects of protection as such (i.e., the protection of cultural heritage as a technical problem), cultural heritage today is considered much more often in the context of broader social, economic, political, and landscape relations (i.e., cultural heritage as a social phenomenon). For example, the link between cultural heritage, tourism, and local and regional development appears to be very important ([McIntosh & Prentice 1999](#); [Timothy 2011](#); [Licciardi & Amirtahmasebi 2012](#)).

Overall, we may conclude that identifying, interpreting, promoting, and conserving cultural heritage is a challenging issue. Rarely is there a consensus on what constitutes cultural heritage and how it should be managed. And even if consensus is locally achieved, seldom is it permanent. The recent wave of decolonization of the public spaces in Western Europe and North America shows how fragile such a seeming consensus may be. We should therefore view cultural heritage as a complex social process whereby societies seek to (re-)define their identities and futures by selective historical, cultural, and natural references in a never-ending search for social peace, economic progress, and environmental sustainability.

3. The artefact perspective and the community perspective

Given the aforementioned, when we say that place names are a form of cultural heritage, what do we exactly mean by that? What constitutes the

heritage value of place names? Do all place names possess equal value? If not, how do we prioritize and who do we consult? And is it the place names themselves that hold this value or rather the cultural processes and practices which generate them? These are not banal questions, and they have profound implications for thinking about practical place-name conservation.

There are at least two basic perspectives on place names that we can define in the context of heritage recognition and conservation. We may see place names either as artefacts with unique histories very much akin to archaeological findings or as expressions of living, present-day communities and cultural practices. Each perspective leads to a specific approach to the identification and appreciation of the heritage value of place names. While the artefact perspective emphasizes the historical value of place names irrespective of their appreciation by present-day people, the contemporary cultural phenomenon perspective points to the value that place names carry for present-day communities irrespective of the place names' objective antiquity. This differentiation makes it clear that in many cases the two perspectives are inevitably bound to clash. Let us, therefore, examine the merits of each perspective and see if a reconciliation is possible.

If we approach place names as artefacts, in most places we will find a rich stratigraphy of place names of varying age, resulting from different ethnic and linguistic origins, located in specific socio-spatial and toponymic contexts, appearing in a diversity of linguistic forms, and undergoing complex transformations through what archaeologists call post-depositional processes. The concept of the land(scape) as a palimpsest (Corboz 1983) can thus be fruitfully applied to place names, as well.

The artefact approach makes the analysis of the heritage value of place names simpler in the sense that this value can be ascertained, to a large extent, "objectively." In other words, experts – historians, geographers, linguists, and ethnologists – can develop and apply a systematic set of criteria to determine the historical value of a place name in a given landscape context. This context can be local, regional, national or international and the criteria may include, for example, the place name's antiquity, uniqueness (i.e., presence of similar names in the chosen spatial context), explanatory power for interpreting landscape, social, and linguistic history, or the degree of endangerment (i.e., how quickly it is falling into disuse). We developed methodical guidelines for place name conservation which included precisely such a set of criteria applied to the Czech toponymic material (David & Mácha 2017). In a similar vein, the Swedish Good Place-Name Practice guidelines were designed, arguing that in the consideration of "long usage," spelling, and name value, the national public interest must take precedence over local and private preferences (Nyström et al. 2016).

Even with the artefact perspective, however, we still encounter a number of problems. Should the object of attention be a single name with a special

value as the aforementioned Resolution IX/4 would seem to suggest? If so, heritage place-name recognition would probably be rare and only names with generally agreed-upon unique values would be honoured. Place names with truly (inter-)national significance such as *Auschwitz/Oświęcim*, *Austerlitz/Slavkov* or *Кремль/Kremlin* are a few examples from Central and Eastern Europe that immediately come to mind.

But is it necessarily so? Or can the place name itself be fairly ordinary but still hold heritage value by virtue of being part of a whole set of names? Examples of such cases include toponyms associated with the so-called Wallachian colonization in the Carpathians (e.g., *Kyčera*, *Gigula*, *Beskyd*, *Magura* or *Grúň*) or the Slovenian house names in Carinthia which were recognized in the Austrian National Inventory of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (Piko-Rustia 2020). Or what if it is neither the place name nor a set of place names but a unique name element as is the case with regionally specific name elements in Vietnam (Tam 2015)?

Expert etymology can help uncover the antiquity of place names and thus contribute to the assessment of the place name's heritage value. Let us take as an example the river name *Metuje* in north-eastern Bohemia [Čechy] which appears to be pre-Celtic, early Indo-European (Lutterer & Šrámek 2004: 169–170). It probably is one of the oldest known names in Czechia with an estimated minimum age of 3000 years. It is likely that *Labe/Elbe* is similarly old (Bichlmeier & Blažek 2014). Given the turbulent migration history of the region, such antiquity is a miracle of sorts.

Expert etymology may also hint at historic ethnic associations which in the present context appear unique and valuable. The river Jizera in northern Bohemia recalls the Celtic period while tying the region to other European locations with river names of the same ethnic and etymological origin – *Isère* in France, *Isar* in Bavaria [Bayern], *Ijzer* in The Netherlands or *Aire* in England (Lutterer & Šrámek 2004: 119). The villages Bulhary and Charvátská Nová Ves recall the Bulgarian and Croatian settlement in southern Moravia [Morava] while names such as *Na Pruském* or *Švédské šance* remind us of the presence of Prussian and Swedish armies in different parts of Czechia.

However, when assessing the heritage value of place names, folk etymology and stories associated with names should also be taken into account. In many cases, the expert etymology is banal and hardly noteworthy, yet the place name may be associated with intricate folk etymologies and rich stories which imbue it with a special meaning. As Baker (1972) pointed out a long time ago, folk etymologies and place-name stories are crucial in understanding people's relationship to place and their worldview. Many researchers have also pointed out the constitutive role of place names in the formation of cultural landscapes in indigenous and traditional societies (e.g., Basso 1996; Prosper 2007; Oliveira 2009; Koch & Hercus 2009; Heikkilä 2014; Cogos et al. 2017). It would therefore be prudent to consider folk etymologies and place name

stories as one of the key sources of the heritage value of names.

Another important issue is the unique regional/dialectal rendering of place names which differentiates them from other, etymologically identical place names and potentially gives them a special heritage value. If this is so, how do we reconcile it with the international and national standardization recommendations and policies? The Swedish Good Place-Name Practice guidelines are rather strict in this respect: “place-names are to follow generally accepted rules of linguistic correctness, i.e., in terms of orthography be in line with the Swedish language in general, as codified in the most recent edition of the Swedish Academy Glossary (Svenska Akademiens ordlista), unless long usage justifies otherwise” (Nystrom et al. 2016: 17). But is this really a good practice? Take the word *Biňotky*, the local dialectal rendering of *Benátky* (the standardized Czech exonym for Venice [Venezia], Italy) used as a metaphor for a frequently flooded area in the village of Raškovice, Czechia. No one from the village ever says *Benátky* but that is what appears on the official state map and in the cadastre. There are many places designated as *Benátky* in Czechia but only one called *Biňotky*. Even worse, in many cases standardization changes the meaning of the name itself as is the case with the dialectal name *Na Břýžkach* (‘at the slope side’) in the village of Bystrice standardized into *Na Břízkách* (‘by the birch trees’) or *Myšace* (probably derived from the word *míšaníci* referring to past shepherding activities) in the village of Morávka standardized into *Míšáci* (‘little bears’). Should good place-name practice advocate for the priority of dialectal/regional variants regardless of how they conform to the standard language? Is dialectal diversity in toponymy (even if the dialect itself is no longer used) not a form of cultural heritage?

It is true that the Swedish Good Place-Name Practice guidelines refer mainly to the standardization of orthography, not of grammar and form, but even orthography may be also problematic in cases when dialectal names contain sounds which cannot be correctly transcribed using the standard alphabet. For example, the dialectal version of the place name *Návsí* (pronounced as *na:fsi:* in the IPA) could be written as *Nowsi* (pronounced as *nɔfɛi*) in the dialect but cannot be transcribed into standard Czech because the national alphabet does not have a character for the sound *ɛ*, while the dialect does not have a standardized alphabet. Attempts to write it as *Novší* (pronounced as *nɔffí*) in the standardized text using the character *š* to approximate the sound *ɛ* have been met with criticism and resistance from locals because the meaning of the name changes from “In the village” in the dialect to “By the lice” in the standard transcription. Flexibility is called for in cases like these to recognize the heritage value of place names present in their dialectal and regional written and spoken forms. As Kearns & Berg (2002) pointed out some time ago, name’s auditory quality is as important to its meaning and acceptance as its written form.

Standardization efforts bring yet another challenge when considering the heritage value of names. Many places often have several parallel/alternative

names either today or at different points in history (e.g., *Byzantium/Constantinople/Istanbul*). Can this toponymic plurality be also seen as a component of the heritage value of place names? And if so, how do we recognize it in view of the prevailing standardization policy of “one name for one object”? Toponymic plurality readily occurs in contact zones and boundaries (neighbouring villages/languages/ethnic groups) or in multicultural/multilingual communities (e.g., the case of *Acre/Akko/Akka* described in [Shoval 2013](#)). For example, the mountain peak known as *Tanečnica* in Nový Hrozenkov is called *Troják* in Valašská Bystřice. In Karolinka, two alternative names are commonly used for the same mountain peak – *Malý Javorník* and *Chotárňa*. In this we strongly support Jordan’s plea for a greater flexibility in place name standardization ([Jordan 2016](#)).

Overall, these cases challenge our thinking about heritage. An object is usually designated as a heritage monument because of its uniqueness – “one of a kind”. The emphasis on uniqueness in toponymy, however, is rather problematic in that it ignores the value of toponymic group occurrence, name plurality, and spoken and written diversity. “One of a kind” in toponymy may mean a unique name, a unique rendering of this name, a unique morphological composition of this name, a unique grouping of names or a unique plurality of names for a single object, to name but a few common possibilities. [Table 1](#) summarizes the most important sources of a place name’s unique value while [Table 2](#) provides an overview of the possible objects of toponymic heritage recognition and protection.

Table 1: Potential sources of the heritage value of names

| | |
|---------------------------------|---------------------|
| unique occurrence | toponymic plurality |
| characteristic group occurrence | expert etymology |
| name element | folk etymology |
| spoken quality | folk stories |
| written quality | landscape referents |
| ethnic association | cultural processes |

Table 2: Potential objects of heritage recognition

| | |
|------------------------------|------------------|
| individual name | set of names |
| name element | folk etymology |
| dialectal/regional rendering | folk story |
| landscape referent | cultural process |

By far the most fundamental problem with the artefact perspective, however, is the dissociation of place names from objects they denote and the communities which use them. At this moment, it is useful to recall the definition of the intangible cultural heritage formulated in the [UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage \(Art. 2,](#)

Sec. 1, emphasis mine): “The ‘intangible cultural heritage’ means the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – **as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith** – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is **constantly recreated by communities and groups** in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity.”

This definition makes it clear that intangible cultural heritage cannot be separated from its material and human dimension. Unlike tangible heritage, intangible heritage cannot be easily extracted from its original location and moved into a museum where it would be well protected. Intangible heritage is a living tradition maintained by specific communities in particular landscape settings and with the use of rich material paraphernalia. If we approach place names from the Convention perspective, instead of place names we see culturally grounded place-naming practices and traditions and instead of toponymic artefacts we see toponymic communities. The object of heritage recognition and potential protection immediately becomes blurred and complex.

The landscape and paraphernalia dimension challenges us to see place names in the real world – referring to real objects, appearing on signs and maps, and accompanied by public rituals. [Fuchs \(2015: 11\)](#) calls this the toponymic-material approach and argues that: “toponyms and material features together (re)create commemorative landscapes and foster local and/or ethnocultural heritage by continuous efforts and performances of promotion, celebration, (re)naming, and (re)construction.” A name cannot be easily separated from its referent without the loss of its meaning and imaginative power. Furthermore, the material manifestation of a name such a street sign is often the source of conflict over names, rather than the name itself ([Jordan et al. 2021](#)), which attests to the importance of the material dimension of names.

Should we, then, protect the referent, as well? If, for example, a place name refers to a wet meadow, as in *Bařiny* or *Sihla*, should we prevent the draining of the meadow? While this example may seem far-fetched, in other cases the link between the name and the physical environment may be more consequential and intimate. The transformation of the environment renders the landscape wisdom conserved in names irrelevant and the rich toponymic heritage becomes void, dead, as it may, for example, begin to occur more often in regions dramatically affected by climate change ([Krupnik et al. 2010](#)).

On the other hand, an overemphasis on the link between place names and objects may lead to absurd proposals. In the Czech national mythology, *Čech* (‘Czech’), the leader of the Slavic groups migrating to the present-day territory of Czechia, climbed the mountain *Ríp* in north-central Bohemia, looked around and concluded that their journey ended there, because this was the promised

land, the land of milk and honey. The name *Říp* is known by everyone in Czechia although few Czechs have ever climbed the mountain. The mountain itself, however, has always been privately owned (by aristocratic families) and it is so today. However, some members of the Czech government including the prime minister at the time called for the nationalization of the mountain (Oppelt 2021). Should public funds be set aside to buy up a mountain because of the association of its name with mythical events?

In addition to the material dimension, Fuchs (2015) also emphasizes the fact that the toponymic landscape is being continuously recreated by the community in a never-ending process of the community's re-adjustment to its natural and social environment and redefinition of its identity. This fully corresponds to the definition of intangible cultural heritage in the UNESCO Convention. From this perspective, then, we should see place names as expressions of unique creative place-naming traditions. Yes, place names are artefacts, but the object of recognition should be the creative cultural process behind them. This heritage is not imperilled as long as the process is allowed to continue freely. As academics we should study these traditions and point out their unique characteristics and qualities. Interestingly, this perspective would also call for the creation of new names rather than the conservation of old ones (perhaps with the exception of those communities which no longer exist and whose toponymic artefacts are the only testimony of their creative spirit). Counterintuitive as it may seem, it is only by allowing the replacement of old names by new ones that we can nurture the unique place-naming traditions we find around the world.

Finally, probably the most serious weakness of the artefact approach is its disregard for place-name ownership and the identity dimension of place names. Place-name ownership and the role of the name-giving/name-using community in name selection, however, is crucial. After all, place names only exist as expressions of people's linguistic and conceptual relationship with their natural and social environment. To separate place names from their authors and users could be seen as a form of expropriation. The Swedish Good Place-Name Practice (Nyström et al. 2016: 16) even explicitly states that "place names are no one's private property. Whatever our relationship may be to a place name, we do not own it. Names are part of language and belong to us all." This is a very bold statement. Even in totalitarian and authoritarian societies there is a local/regional/community-based sense of place-name ownership, to say nothing about democracies and multiethnic/multilingual situations.

The example of the city of Havířov ('miners' town') in eastern Czechia is a case in point. The city was built in the early 1950s from scratch as a model Socialist town. It was designed in the style of Socialist realism (Sorela) as a compact urban whole. Because it has been well preserved architecturally and urbanistically, it is now recognized as architectural heritage, and it is protected by the state. When the city was first designed, street names were an integral

part of the urban project. They honoured Communist leaders, leftist intellectuals, artists, workers, and WWII heroes while creating a spirit of hope in building the new Socialist society. However we may judge this motivation in retrospect, archival records reveal a strong popular support for the project as well as wide appreciation of the newly built city by its working-class population. After the Velvet Revolution in 1989, attempts emerged in the entire country to purge urban toponymy of Communist references and replace them with names celebrating democracy. The same initiative appeared in Havířov, and names of several prominent streets were changed. The rest remained intact due to popular resistance motivated partly by political preferences and partly by simple unwillingness to undergo the change of address in all documents and databases (David 2012). Now, should the urbanistic heritage of Havířov have been recognized and conserved including its original toponymic text against the wishes of those who see the Communist regime as oppressive? What is the role of the community in determining which names should be recognized as heritage and which should be discarded? And how should we recognize “dark heritage” (Roberts & Stone 2014; Thomas et al. 2019)? Should we?

A more straight-forward case of name ownership is the example of Kit Carson Park in Taos, New Mexico. Kit Carson is a legendary figure of the American West, glorified by European settlers. However, from the point of view of the local Native Americans, he was a war criminal, responsible for the genocide of the Navajo, Apache, Ute and Comanche people. Because of this, several Native American activists proposed to rename the town’s largest park to *Red Willow Park*. “Red Willow” is the direct translation of the original Tiwa name of the Pueblo of Taos in whose proximity the town of Taos was established by Spanish settlers. The new name was intended as a compliment and recognition of local Native American heritage. However, Taos Pueblo elders protested against this name change and argued that the name was the exclusive property of the Pueblo and should not be used by anyone else without their consent. The town council therefore rescinded the name change back to *Kit Carson Park* which is its current name (Jacobs 2018).

4. Wherein lies the heritage value of place names?

As the aforementioned examples show, determining the heritage value of place names is not an easy task. Two opposing principles vie for priority and an independent observer sees the merits and perils of both. The artefact perspective allows for an expert apolitical evaluation of place-name heritage value, abstracted from rapidly changing momentary social preferences and weighing this value against the larger historical and linguistic context. One cannot deny that ignorance and neglect have led to the loss of a large part of our cultural heritage in the past and were it not for the experts who discovered

it and fought to protect it, much of it would have disappeared entirely and irreparably.

On the other hand, the community perspective points out the importance of the intimate link between people, place names, and places. This link makes it possible for us to identify with a place as home. But if we are to feel at home in this place, we have to have a sense of control over how this place is structured. Place names form a crucial component of this structure, and we must have the ability to name places as we see fit. As [Jordan \(2016: 33–34\)](#) has emphasized, place names are important for individuals and communities for several crucial reasons: “(1) place names reflect characteristics of features and commemorate persons and events important for a certain community; (2) place names mark the territory of a community; (3) place names structure territory mentally; (4) place names support emotional ties between people and place and promote in this way space-related identity building.”

Focusing on place names and ignoring their social context therefore runs the risk of dispossessing and alienating the bearers of the toponymic tradition which we seek to protect. Is it possible to reconcile the artefact and the community perspectives, then? We believe so. But we must search for the solution with humility, sensitivity, and respect. *Humility* for accepting the fact that many names will inevitably disappear. *Sensitivity* to the multivocality of place and to alternative voices, stories and needs. *Respect* for the people who (do not) use the names and on whose behalf (and against whom) we are claiming to protect them.

Working from the grassroots, with the people, is essential in any heritage conservation effort ([Hollowell & Nicholas 2009](#)). It is doubly true in the appreciation and conservation of toponymic heritage. It should be clear by now that if any heritage is to be conserved, it has to be seen by those affected by the conservation effort as “ours.” In other words, heritage is implicitly tied with identity. Any heritage conservation effort which fails to understand this basic fact is inevitably destined to fail. The heritage scale is an important factor in this understanding. That is, the delimitation of the relevant community depends on whether the heritage is seen as having local, regional, national or international significance. The “we” follows.

If we are serious about recognizing the heritage value of names, we have to listen to what people have to say about it, educate them about the importance of place names as such and inform them about the uniqueness of their particular toponymic traditions on the basis of state-of-the-art linguistic, geographical, archival, and anthropological research. All we can ultimately do, however, is to hope that our educational effort is successful and that the democratic process within the relevant community delivers a result which will be favourable for the recognition, protection and fostering of concerned heritage. The artefact approach can prepare all the necessary factual material for an informed decision, but the decision itself has to be made by those who will be directly

affected by it. In this sense, the two approaches can be reconciled easily but only if experts heed the democratic process, and the community listens to expert advice. Let us hope this mutual respect will prevail.

References

- Ankersmit, Frank. 2015. Representation in Retrospect. In Christie, Ian et al., *Where is history today? New ways of representing the past*, 183–198. Olomouc: Palackého univerzita v Olomouci.
- Ashworth, Gregory J. & Tunbridge, John E. 1999. Old cities, new pasts: Heritage planning in selected cities of Central Europe. *GeoJournal* 49(1), 105–116.
- Baker, Ronald L. 1972. The role of folk legends in place-name research. *The Journal of American Folklore* 85(338), 367–373.
- Barthel-Bouchier, Diane. 2016. *Cultural heritage and the challenge of sustainability*. Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press.
- Basso, Keith H. 1996. *Wisdom sits in places. Landscape and language among the Western Apache*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.
- Bichlmeier, Harald & Blažek, Václav. 2014. Labe – k pramenům hydronyma [Elbe – To the source of the hydronym]. *Linguistica Brunensia* 62(2), 17–28.
- Blake, Janet. 2000. On defining the cultural heritage. *The International and Comparative Law Quarterly* 49(1), 61–85.
- Blake, Janet. 2015. *International cultural heritage law*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Cantile, Andrea & Kerfoot, Helen (eds.). 2016. *Place names as intangible cultural heritage*. Firenze: IGMI.
- Christie, Ian. 2015. What we talk about when we talk about history. In Arbeit, Marcel & Christie, Ian (eds.), *Where is history today? New ways of representing the past*, 9–12. Olomouc: Palackého univerzita v Olomouci.
- Cogos, Sarah & Roué, Marie & Roturier, Samuel. 2017. Sami place names and maps: transmitting knowledge of a cultural landscape in contemporary contexts. *Arctic, Antarctic, and Alpine Research* 49(1), 43–51.
- Corboz, André. 1983. The land as palimpsest. *Diogenes* 31(121), 12–34.
- Council of Europe. 1992. European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. (<https://www.coe.int/en/web/european-charter-regional-or-minority-languages>) (Accessed 2022-07-26.)
- David, Jaroslav. 2012. *Paměť města – názvy míst: HAVÍŘOV* [The memory of the city – Place names: Havířov]. Ostrava: Ostravská univerzita.
- David, Jaroslav & Mácha, Přemysl. 2017. *Certifikovaná metodika: Ochrana místních a pomístních jmen a urbanonym jak zdroje lokální, regionální a národní identity a kulturního dědictví* [Certified methodical guidelines: The conservation of geographical names as a source of local, regional

- and national identity and cultural heritage]. Ostrava: Ostravská univerzita.
- Fuchs, Stephan. 2015. History and heritage of two Midwestern towns: A toponymic-material approach. *Journal of Historical Geography* 48, 11–25.
- Gillman, Derek. 2010. *The idea of cultural heritage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Graham, Brian J. & Howard, Peter (eds.). 2008. *The Ashgate research companion to heritage and identity*. Burlington: Ashgate Publishing.
- Heikkilä, Karen. 2014. ‘The forest is our inheritance’: An introduction to Semai Orang Asli place-naming and belonging in the Bukit Tapah Forest Reserve. *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 35(3), 362–381.
- Hollowell, Julie & Nicholas, George. 2009. Using ethnographic methods to articulate community-based conceptions of cultural heritage management. *Public Archaeology* 8(2–3), 141–160.
- Holtorf, Cornelius & Högberg, Anders (eds.). 2021. *Cultural heritage and the future*. New York: Routledge.
- Jacobs, Alex. 2018. Kit Carson Park name change overturned; back to Kit Carson, for now. *Indian Country*, September 13, 2018. (<https://indiancountrytoday.com/archive/kit-carson-park-name-changed-overturned-back-to-kit-carson-for-now>) (Accessed 2021-01-12.)
- Jordan, Peter. 2009. Place names as ingredients of space-related identity. In Jordan, Peter & Bergmann, Hubert & Cheetham, Catherine & Hausner, Isolde (eds.), *Geographical names as a part of the cultural heritage*, 33–39. Wien: Institut für Geographie und Regionalforschung der Universität Wien.
- Jordan, Peter. 2016. Geographical names as part of the cultural heritage: Some general thoughts. In Cantile, Andrea & Kerfoot, Helen (eds.), *Place names as intangible cultural heritage*, 33–36. Firenze: IGMI.
- Jordan, Peter & Bergmann, Hubert & Cheetham, Catherine & Hausner, Isolde (eds.). 2009. *Geographical names as a part of the cultural heritage*. Wien: Institut für Geographie und Regionalforschung der Universität Wien.
- Jordan, Peter & Mácha, Přemysl & Balode, Marika & Krtička, Luděk & Obrusnik, Uršula & Pilch, Pavel & Sancho Reinoso, Alexis. 2021. *Place-name politics in multilingual areas: A comparative study of Southern Carinthia (Austria) and the Těšín/Cieszyn Area (Czechia)*. Cham: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Kearns, Robin A. & Berg, Lawrence D. 2002. Proclaiming place: Towards a geography of place name pronunciation. *Social and Cultural Geography* 3(3), 283–302.
- Koch, Harold & Hercus, Luise (eds.). 2009. *Aboriginal place names: Naming and re-naming the Australian landscape*. Canberra: The Australian National University. E Press.
- Krupnik, Igor & Aporta, Claudio & Gearheard, Shari & Laidler, Gita J. & Holm, L. Kielsen. 2010. *SIKU: Knowing our ice*. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Lagrange, Evelyne & Oeter, Stefan & Uerpmann-Wittzack, Robert (eds.). 2018. *Cultural heritage and international law: Objects, means and ends*

- of international protection*. Cham: Springer.
- Licciardi, Guido & Amirtahmasebi, Rana (eds.). 2012. *The economics of uniqueness: Investing in historic city cores and cultural heritage assets for sustainable development*. Washington: The World Bank.
- Lowenthal, David. 2005. Natural and cultural heritage. *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 11(1), 81–92.
- Lozny, Ludomir R. (ed.). 2006. *Landscapes under pressure: Theory and practice of cultural heritage research and preservation*. New York: Springer Science & Business Media.
- Lutterer, Ivan & Šrámek, Rudolf. 2004. *Zeměpisná jména v Čechách, na Moravě a ve Slezsku* [Geographical names in Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia], second edition. Havlíčkův Brod: Tobiáš.
- McIntosh, Alison J. & Prentice, Richard C. 1999. Affirming authenticity: Consuming cultural heritage. *Annals of Tourism Research* 26, 589–612.
- Nyström, Staffan & Nilsson, Leif O. & Torensjö, Annette C. 2016. *Good Place-Name Practice: The Swedish Place-Names Advisory Board's Guide to the Standardisation and Preservation of Place-Names*. Gävle: Swedish Place-Names Advisory Board.
- Oliveira, Katrina-Ann R. Kapā'AnaokalāOkeola NāKoa. 2009. Wahi a kahiko: Place names as vehicles of ancestral memory. *AlterNative* 5(2), 101–115.
- Oppelt, Robert. 2021. Vykoupit horu Říp? Jeden z českých symbolů státu nikdy nepatřil [Buy out the mountain Říp? One of the Czech symbols never belonged to the state]. *iDnes*, November 25, 2021. (https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/domaci/rip-lobkowiczove-usa-praha-roudnice-nad-labem-spd-cesko-babis.A211124_164831_domaci_vapo) (Accessed 2022-01-22.)
- Piko-Rustia, Martina. 2020. Evaluation by means of appreciation. Geographical names as (intangible) cultural heritage. *Onomastica* 6, 163–189.
- Prosper, Lisa. 2007. Wherein lies the heritage value? Rethinking the heritage value of cultural landscapes from an Aboriginal perspective. *The George Wright Forum* 24(2), 117–124.
- Roberts, Catherine & Stone, Philip. 2014. Dark tourism and dark heritage: Emergent themes, issues and consequences. In Convery, Ian & Corsane, Gerard & Davis, Peter (eds.) *Displaced heritage: Responses to disaster, trauma, and loss*, 9–18. Woodbridge: The Boydell Press.
- Shoval, Noam. 2013. Street-naming, tourism development and cultural conflict: The case of the Old City of Acre/Akko/Akka. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 38(4), 612–626.
- Tam, Le Minh. 2015. Preserving and promoting the historical-cultural value of geographical names from the perspective of geographical name standardization in Viet Nam. *Information Bulletin of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names* 48, 17–19.

- Thomas, Suzanne E. & Herva, Vesa-Pekka & Seitsonen, Oula & Koskinen-Koivisto, Eerika. 2019. Dark heritage. In Smith, Claire (ed.), *Encyclopedia of global archaeology*. Cham: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-51726-1_3197-1
- Timothy, Dallen J. 2011. *Cultural heritage and tourism: An introduction*. Bristol: Channel View Publications.
- Tunbridge, John E. & Ashworth, Gregory John. 1996. *Dissonant heritage: The management of the past as a resource in conflict*. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons.
- Uerpmann-Witzack, Robert. 2018. Introduction: Cultural heritage law and the quest for human identities. In Lagrange, Evelyne & Oeter, Stefan & Uerpmann-Witzack, Robert (eds.), *Cultural heritage and international law: Objects, means and ends of international protection*, 1–11. Cham: Springer.
- UNESCO. 2003. Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. (<https://ich.unesco.org/en/convention>) (Accessed 2022-08-10.)
- United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN). 2007. Resolution IX/4 – Geographical Names as Intangible Cultural Heritage. (<https://unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo/ungegn/docs/26th-gegn-docs/GEGN/gegn-26-9e.pdf>) (Accessed 2022-07-25.)
- United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN). 2015. Geographical Names as Cultural Heritage. *Information Bulletin* 48. Special Issue.
- Vecco, Marilena. 2010. A definition of cultural heritage: From the tangible to the intangible. *Journal of Cultural Heritage* 11(3), 321–324.
- Zákon č. 128/2000 Sb. o obcích (obecní zřízení) [Municipal law no. 128/2000]. (<https://www.zakonyprolidi.cz/cs/2000-128#>) (Accessed 2022-07-25.)