Brittnee Leysen

✉ brittnee.leysen@glasgow.ac.uk

ⓘD https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6859-6291

⌂ University of Glasgow

🌐 Glasgow, Scotland

Cultural Contact: An Anthropological Perspective on Toponyms in Aotearoa New Zealand's Otago Region

Abstract

Socio-onomastics is a growing field of research which began as a sub-discipline in onomastics, where we consider the social, cultural, and situational field in which names are used (Ainiala, 2016). Although the methodology of socio-onomastics often overlaps with well-known methods in anthropology, such as the use of ethnography for qualitative data, it is important to recognise other methods and theories that anthropology can offer onomastic studies. A discussion of the use of trans-cultural diffusion versus anthropo-geographic points of view from the anthropological perspective can provide deeper insight into the cultural impact of toponyms, for example. In this paper, I will seek to engage with the work of founding anthropology scholars, such as Franz Boas, Bronislaw Malinowski, and Claude Levi-Strauss, whose methodology and theories will be evaluated for their value in toponymic study. Specifically, this paper will focus on the Otago region of New Zealand's South Island to demonstrate anthropological perspective in the study of toponyms. Using anthropological methodology, including anthropo-geographic methods, this paper is concerned with what new information we can glean from the Otago namescape about toponym formation. On a larger scale, what can a combined approach of anthropology and onomastics offer us in the way of new theories to evaluate, classify, and interpret toponyms, particularly in a multicultural setting? By engaging with these concerns, we aim to better understand how the anthropological perspective can enhance our understanding of toponyms, and of Pākehā-Māori cultural contact, in colonial New Zealand.

1. Introduction and positionality

Place-name research often transcends the boundaries of onomastics studies, often intersecting with disciplines such as geography, sociology, and linguistics, of course. However, I believe there is an untapped need for more place-name research within anthropological studies, as it seems there is a natural linkage which I shall explore further throughout this paper. I will highlight place-name research in Aotearoa New Zealand I have undertaken which focused on Pākehā, or European origin, place names in the Clutha and Central Otago Districts, with a view of highlighting the anthropological-onomastic methodology I used throughout my PhD thesis (Leysen, 2023).

It is essential to note in any research study the ethical considerations that have gone into it, my positionality, as well as to acknowledge the attempts made towards cultural relativism by the researcher. Cultural relativism of course being the theory that, "beliefs, customs, and morality exist in relation to the particular culture from which they originate and are not absolute" (Oxford University Press, n.d.). Attempts at the highest level of objectivity have been maintained throughout my research; however, it is of course prudent to be conscious of my own background and positionality as coming from Western non-Indigenous society. Although comparative examples are utilised throughout this paper between Aotearoa New Zealand and other parts of the world, I have strived for cultural relativism through analysing the namescape of the Otago region within its own cultural context.

When analysing a period of colonisation in a colonised country, context is crucial. This research has been undertaken with a view of looking through the lens of the name-giving period, rather than from the present. This can be a challenge in a colonial context where there are interactions between cultural systems that have, as anthropologist Michael Brown (2008) would say, "complex, far-reaching effects, especially when relations are characterized by significant inequalities of power" (p. 372). Therefore, it is essential to be sensitive to the ways intercultural interaction took place during the colonial era in the Otago region. Documentary evidence has been the clearest way to ensure that the cultural systems during the time of name-giving have been considered, but even within that we must acknowledge most of these documentary sources come from a colonial viewpoint. Language is embedded

in our cultural experiences, and therefore names provide context for under-standing culture. With this view, place names are snapshots of cultural con-text at the time of their formation.

2. Anthropology and place: Geographical determinism

Anthropologists have long been preoccupied with the sense of place when undertaking their research. No ethnographic study would be complete without identifying the location of the study. Regardless if an anthropological study is primarily reliant on individual narratives, demographic data, or archival resources, it must still engage with the concept of place even if in very loose terms. Influences, such as the work of the father of American anthropology himself, Franz Boas (1858–1942), have inspired my application of anthropolog-ical theories and methods to place-naming. Anthropologists are particularly interested in the connections between the social construct of property and natural resources. As Boas writes in 1928, "except in the rare cases of truly nomadic peoples, the tribe is attached to a definite geographical area which is its property in so far as foreigners who would try to use it are considered as intruders" (Boas, 1928/1986, p. 237). When looking at the concept of prop-erty and belonging in relation to the natural environment, we have to look to place names and ask some key questions of the name informants. What do the informants think of the location? Are there any deeper meanings associated?

This leads us to look at possible instances of geographical determinism, which, according to Boas, means that the "geographical environment controls the development of culture" which is indeed evident in the Otago region (Boas, 1928/1986, pp. 239–240). In the Central Otago district, for example, geograph-ical determinism is particularly evident, as the settlement of the region was motivated by the gold rush of the 1860s. The physical environment here, and elsewhere in Otago, attracted human settlement, and therefore inspired the creation of names reflecting the motivation for utilising those spaces: Coal Creek (45.215S 169.011E), Fruitlands (45.343S 169.301E), and Gold Burn (44.862S 168.802E) being good examples of this. Central Otago was not a convenient landscape to settle in; with rough winters and the driest region in Aotearoa

New Zealand, it was not particularly appealing for new settlers. The attraction of settlement came from the mineral bounty that could be mined in the landscape, also evident in the namescape, which naturally inspired a generation of mining communities and a mining culture to settle in the region.

Although the environment and people's attachment to it have been on the minds of anthropologists since the field's conception, deeper consideration of the naming of the environment has not always been questioned. Indeed, Keith Basso (1996) would argue "anthropologists have paid scant attention to one of the most basic dimensions of human experience, (...) *sense of place*" (p. 54). Perhaps this is why to date it has been relatively difficult to find anthropologists concerned with anything deeper than a base acknowledgement of 'place', or setting, in their research. However, as we know, anthropology is not the only field in which place and naming are concerns. Onomastics is rife with theories around toponymic naming, branching out into socio-onomastics in which elements commonly associated with social anthropology, such as ethnographic studies, are utilised.

There is great value in all studies utilising interdisciplinary methods to approach research from a new point of view, so utilising concepts traditionally seen in anthropology is perhaps unusual, but it yields a different set of results than typically seen in an onomastic survey.

3. Place names as a lens for anthropological analysis

One of the ways my research could be characterised is as a postcolonial anthropological study of European settlement in the Otago region of Aotearoa New Zealand through the lens of place names. Place names can give insight or hints of human connections, and as a field of research focused on humans, anthropology has a lot to offer in the way of theories and methods to engage with toponyms. Franz Boas (1934) believed toponyms benefitted the study of culture, commenting on how "geographical names, being an expression of the mental character of each people and each period, reflect their cultural life and the line of development belonging to each cultural area" (p. 9). Social Anthropology pioneer, Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942) coined the term

anthropo-geographic, meaning a study on the consideration of culture within its natural surroundings (Malinowski, 1944, p. 17) in which place-name evaluation would undoubtedly be a useful tool. Beyond this, according to Helleland (2012), anthropologists have used place names to understand "references to and symbols of acts and experiences" within societies (p. 96). This can be seen in examples such as how the representation of ideological values throughout Israel, and the communities that support those ideologies, are different in geographical areas depending on whether Hebrew or Arab place names are utilised (Cohen & Kliot, 1992, p. 655).

Although there is some recognition for the value of "place" to the study of anthropology, it is often in a descriptive context, particularly within ethnographic studies, without much depth or problematisation (Low & Lawrence-Zúñiga, 2003, p. 16). There have been a few instances of anthropologists calling out for more attention to the meaning and impact of place, for instance, in 1992 Margaret C. Rodman published an article acknowledging the work being done by anthropologists on the concept of "voice", but very little consideration of "place", entitled "Empowering Place: Multilocality and Multivocality". In the article, Rodman advocates a change to the traditional anthropological approach to place as setting, arguing instead for a "more critical usage of place than is common in contemporary anthropology and takes seriously the attendant dimensions of power" while also raising questions "about how the anthropological study of place relates to experiences of living in places" (Rodman, 1992, p. 641). However, over a decade later Rodman is still beseeching anthropologists to consider "place" in their studies, this time correlating the approach anthropologists should take to the example set by geographers, yet again stating how "insufficient attention has been paid to conceptualising place in anthropology as something other than a physical setting or a passive target for primordial sentiments of attachment that flow from life's 'assumed givens'" (Rodman, 2003, p. 204). The sense of frustration Rodman has with the discipline's lack of growth in dealing with place names is palpable, with key concepts regularly understood in onomastics such as "places produce meaning and that meaning can be grounded in place" (Rodman, 2003, p. 207) being repeated and reinforced over the course of a decade. When analysing the value of an anthropological perspective on other aspects of the human experience, it is clear that anthropologists have much to offer to expand the study of toponyms, particularly when considering methods common in social anthropology.

4. Place names as symbols or vehicles of ancestral authority

Social anthropology as a discipline dates to the 1930's, when the term was first introduced by French sociologist Marcel Mauss (1872–1950) (Levi-Strauss, 1967, p. 10). Social anthropology can be defined as "an inductive science which, like other sciences of this type, observes facts, formulates hypotheses, and submits these to experimental control, in order to discover general laws of nature and society" (Levi-Strauss, 1967, p. 20). In short, social anthropology is concerned with how humans interact with the world, often through methods of participant observation, to answer questions on how to improve or alter the human experience. The study and criticism of symbolism, not just physical symbols, within societies fall under the discipline of social anthropology, and with it concerns of symbolic representation, meaning, and intention or lack thereof.

For example, an anthropologist surveying human connection to art might find "if a lake in a painting evokes stillness, it is not because it symbolises stillness or even 'represents' it: stillness is *there*, immanent in the image of the lake" (Wiseman & Groves, 2014, p. 71). Likewise, place names do not necessarily need to symbolise nor represent anything; their very existence evokes a sense of emotion or connectivity between humans and the land. Through looking at what Levi-Strauss considered "objectively very remote and subjectively very concrete" explanations for the natural world (Levi-Strauss, 1967, p. 17) we can question themes such as the symbolic nature of place names.

Some anthropologists, such as Keith Basso (1940–2013), quoted by Low & Lawrence-Zúñiga (2003), prefer to focus on place names as "the vehicles of ancestral authority" (p. 17). In Aotearoa New Zealand, anthropologist Michele Dominy (1995) describes the debate on Pākehā claims to Crown pastoral lease properties as coming from a place of struggling for "authenticity and legitimacy in a 'dynamic discursive field of contested meanings'" versus the Maori spiritual attachment "through intimate knowledge of stewardship of the landscape" (Low & Lawrence-Zúñiga, 2003, p. 24). Whilst place names can indeed be regarded as a source of ancestral understanding, we must be wary of the danger of assuming this as fact, as this can lead to an admittedly tried and tested process of evaluating place names with the prioritisation being on "original" names. Quoted by Jandt (2004), Levi-Strauss wrote, "we list features, we sift questions of origin, we allot first places" (p. 43). Although

in some settings, like Aotearoa New Zealand where an Indigenous people and oral tradition existed prior to the introduction of a written language, it is nearly impossible to claim a name as "original". As the old adage goes, history is told by the victors, which in this case means place names were recorded by the literate settlers. Writing is a tool that can, and has, been used to exert control over others (Wiseman & Groves, 2014, p. 89) as well as a means of erasure of native histories, especially in a colonial context. Even though uncovering the "original" names of the Otago region is an unrealistic task, we can however attempt to find the "oldest recorded" names, with the caveat that with further research and resources that could change.

5. Place names as tools in conservation and "dysplacement" studies

Anthropological research has recently been focusing quite heavily on environmental impacts and conservation. However, we must also note that Indigenous populations are disproportionately impacted by environmental pollution, and that many Indigenous populations have lifestyles dependent on the immediate environment, be it land or sea, for subsistence as well as spiritual practices (Gross, 2021, p. 19). In the August 2021 edition of "Anthropology Today", an article by postdoctoral fellow Lena Gross (2021) looking at oil sands and settler colonialism in Canada, questions: "What happens when lakes are no longer lakes but toxic ponds containing mining waste and Indigenous knowledge and cosmologies of water as life-bringer are threatened because consuming water suddenly is connected to cancer?" (p. 19). This is why sites of toxic waste dumping, oil sand extraction, and mining sites require place-name scholars to look at more than just the colonial name and use of a space, but the Indigenous knowledge that is at risk of erasure. Additionally, place names can help in the preservation of sacred and significant spaces as they clearly communicate the meaning and importance of that space to outside communities. Gross continues,

> The land was like an archive, holding the past in its landscapes. Coming to certain places triggered the telling of specific stories linked to the land, and through

telling these stories, knowledge about the land and its history was passed on. Once the landscape became unrecognizably changed, the 'archive' it was holding was also in danger of getting lost. Without physical access to specific places, their stories would be forgotten. (Gross, 2021, p. 20)

One further point by Gross that is important to consider in terms of place-name study is the concept of *dysplacement*, as coined by anthropologist Deborah Davis Jackson. Dysplacement is meant "to describe a type of displacement that is invisible and psychological rather than physical, and therefore is often overlooked" (Gross, 2021, p. 20). Could this not be a useful concept to apply to the study of toponyms? After all, place names are a cerebral concept; while they can be in the physical landscape in terms of signage, they often seep more deeply into the human subconscious than any sign could.

6. Conclusion

The basis of an anthropological-onomastic approach to place names is a focus on movement and society. Mauss believed, as quoted by Levi-Strauss (1967), that when attempting to understand the thoughts and life of an Indigenous people, that movement above all was the "fleeting instant in which society becomes or in which men become, sentimentally conscious of themselves and their situation vis-à-vis others" (p. 14).

Human movement and migration can be evidenced in the human psyche as well as physically evidenced in the landscape. Looking at the text "Senses of Place" by Basso and Feld (1996), Edward Casey scrutinises existing anthropological suggestions "that the people we study transform a pre-existing, empty, and absolute space into meaningful place" and suggests the contrary, "that place is general, and includes space, and that space is particular and derived from it" (Low & Lawrence-Zúñiga, 2003, p. 17). I interpret this to mean that space is not a void to which we as humans give life by christening it with a name and purpose, but that the spaces we as humans occupy, morph, and name to suit our needs and desires are merely reactions to a physical place. As previously mentioned, Rodman (2003) very much supports deeper engagement

with toponyms through an anthropological lens, emphasising the idea that "places are not inert containers. They are politicised, culturally relative, historically specific, local and multiple constructions" (p. 205). When it comes to the specifics of this research in consulting Pākehā names in the Aotearoa New Zealand namescape, there are more issues to consider than purely matters of the formation of the name itself. For instance, the socio-political impact of these non-native place names is, I would argue, an issue of paramount concern when surveying the region of Otago. The commentary available through the analysis of place names on the movement, development, and settlement of a foreign community in Aotearoa New Zealand and the impacts that had on the existing native society are concerns that not only intrigue anthropologists, but geographers, politicians, sociologists, and onomasticians as well.

References

Ainiala, T. (2016). Names in society. In C. Hough (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Names and Naming* (pp. 371–382). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Basso, K. H. (1996). *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language among the Western Apache*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.

Basso, K. H., & Feld, S. (Eds.). (1996). *Senses of Place*. Santa Fe: SAR Press.

Boas, F. (1934). *Geographical Names of the Kwakiutl Indians*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Boas, F. (1986). *Anthropology and Modern Life*. New York: Norton. (Original work published 1928)

Brown, M. F. (2008). Cultural relativism 2.0. *Current Anthropology*, *49*(3), 363–383. https://doi.org/10.1086/529261

Cohen, S. B., & Kliot, N. (1992). Place-names in Israel's ideological struggle over the administered territories. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, *82*(4), 653–680. http://www.jstor.org/stable/2563694

Dominy, M. (1995). "White Settler Assertions of Native Status." *American Ethnologist 22*(2), 358–374.

Gross, L. (2021). Fuelling toxic relations: Oil sands and settler colonialism in Canada. *Anthropology Today*, *37*(4), 19–22. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8322.12666

Helleland, B. (2012). Place names and identities. *Oslo Studies in Language*, *4*(2), 95–116. https://doi.org/10.5617/osla.313

Jandt, F. E. (Ed.). (2004). *Intercultural Communication: A Global Reader*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.

Levi-Strauss, C. (1967). *The Scope of Anthropology* (O. Paul & R. A. Paul, Trans.). London: Jonathan Cape Ltd. (Original work published 1960)

Leysen, B. (2023). *Pākehā Place-Names of New Zealand's Clutha and Central Otago Districts: an Anthropological Onomastic Study* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. University of Glasgow.

Low, S. M., & Lawrence-Zúñiga, D. (Eds.). (2003). *The Anthropology of Space and Place: Locating Culture*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

Malinowski, B. (1944). *A Scientific Theory of Culture and Other Essays (with a Preface by Huntington Cairns)*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press.

Oxford University Press. (n.d.). Cultural, adj. and n.: 'Compounds'. In *Oxford English Dictionary*. Retrieved April 10, 2022, from www.oed.com/view/Entry/45742

Rodman, M. C. (1992). Empowering place: Multilocality and multivocality. *American Anthropologist*, *94*(3), 640–656. http://www.jstor.org/stable/680566

Rodman, M. C. (2003). Empowering place: Multilocality and multivocality. In S. M. Low & D. Lawrence-Zúñiga (Eds.), *The Anthropology of Space and Place: Locating Culture* (pp. 204–223). Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

Wiseman, B., & Groves, J. (2014). *Introducing Levi-Strauss: A Graphic Guide.* London: Icon Books.