

Enhancing the place-name studies acumen: Historiographic reflections between (urban) Africa and Israel/Palestine



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Embracing a synoptic perspective, the conference lecture shall analyse research tendencies in place-name studies (toponymy) regarding sub-Saharan Africa, in light of their wider interference with other area-studies research traditions in toponymy, that is, of Europe and Israel/Palestine. While the last two decades are characterised in a 'critical turn' in place-name scholarship and self-conscious engagement with critical theories of space and place, only meagre number of references touches sub-Saharan Africa (and Latin America and Asia). In addition, the recent research is over-concerned with the understanding that place naming reflects the power of modern political regimes, nationalism and ideology. The preoccupation with political power's control over both landscape and history is especially true for publications in English, which tend to be centred on the West and Eastern Europe, with only few geographic exceptions. The Euro-centrism is accentuated considering the manifested uni-directionality of some of the research, such as that on street-renaming policies in European cities following revolutionary changes of political regimes, often disconnected from bottom-up responses on the part of the urban residents. It is also accentuated because of the classical methodological problem within the field of human geography, of the reliance on maps and gazetteers to study place names, on the expense of participant observation, interviews, and ethnographic methods. Similarly, in the case of the highly ideological and contested environment of Israel/Palestine, the Jewish-Arab conflict has engendered not only a divided and split space along status, ethnic and national lines – but also split place-name historiographies with a remarkable contextual arrogance. By referring to some recent pioneering collective projects in place-name studies regarding the global South and by showing their potential enriching quality in terms of methodology and content, the conference paper strives to contribute for a de-Eurocentricity of toponymic scholarship. This is through pointing on some inspiring and inclusive research directions, highlighting urban histories, (post-)colonial legacies and mundane practices/terminologies.

The conference paper is tightly connected with an exploratory international photography exhibition that took place in HIT and at the Architect's House gallery in Jaffa last summer, entitled "Street signage from here to urban Africa and back again" (curated by Dr. Liora Bigon and Dr. Arch. Michel Ben Arrous from Centre Yavné, Bordeaux & History Department, Bar Ilan University). By tying together a rich visual collection of street signs from (post-)colonial Africa and Israel, the exhibition examined the signage as an outcome of dialectic processes, historical and current, of spatial production, attached imagery, emotions and symbolism.

The aim of the exhibition was threefold. First, it strived to de-colonise place-name studies by bringing into the fore the global South and its urban politics and practices of naming and signage. Second, the exhibition not merely sought to document toponymic inscriptions in the cityscape, but rather, to understand the cityscape as a written and unwritten inscription produced by wider, variegated, forces. Street signage in the global South thus normally reflects a colonial heritage of multiple European powers and post-colonial developments. However, top-down heritages have been constantly interacting with indigenous bottom-up naming conceptions by the space users. The exhibition focused on these interactions in terms of identity/alterity interplay; and memories and counter-memories in a variety of scales, languages and contexts. Third, not only did the exhibition correspond with the actual and perceptual realities today in situ in the regions in question, it was also a pioneer in offering analytical categories (through eight thematic panels) to investigate the processes that have shaped this visual corpus. In the following are three exemplary expo panels, with some images:

Panel # 2: (Post-)Colonial ideologies and signage

Discursive relations between place-naming policies and colonial, post-colonial and post-independence state ideologies in Africa and Israel are exemplified in this panel through short insights on Francophone, Anglophone and Lusophone Africa, and on British Palestine and independent Israel.



Tel Aviv, Israel

Michel Ben Arrous

In 1948, the British regime interfered in the naming process of Tel Aviv streets, asking its signage to be written in Hebrew, Arabic and English. Maar Dizengoff, the mayor, agreed, employing ceramic plaques as contemporary inscriptions, to be made for Tel Aviv's 12 main streets by the Bezalel School of Arts and Crafts in Jerusalem. After compiling 11 ceramic plaques, amongst them for Nahlat Benayamin Street, the British administrator insisted that the plaques must be made of iron, with letters on blue background "as in Cairo and Alexandria". As a result of this colonial policy of standardising street signs across the British Empire, new plaques were later installed. But, interestingly enough, the Arabic transcription was omitted by the hegemonic group – a practice of cultural Islamisation that has been recently contested in the High Court by Arab activists and is now being changed by the municipality.

Senegal

Liora Bigon

The strategic position of Dakar, the westernmost city of Africa, was acknowledged by the French following the Crimean War and in the age of modern imperialism. Its first streets were named together with the drawing up of the first city plan in 1862, intended for the French colonist community. The designation of Dakar as the capital of the Afrique Occidentale Française (AOF) Federation in 1902 administered with the consolidation of the French colonialist doctrine of 'assimilation'. The latter aimed at turning the colonies and their populations into an integral part of the metropolitan country. Consequently, 'Rue de France' in Saint-Louis, and in Dakar 'Rue Gallieni' (after the then renowned military commander and administrator) and "Fattou" (after the neurobiologist who discovered the vaccination against some tropical diseases, official to the white presence overseas) exemplify those assimilationist views.

right: Dakar, Senegal
left: Saint-Louis, Senegal



Fez, Morocco

Samira Hassa

Rue Bringau honoured the personal photographer of Sultan al-Hafiz, a French engineer who was killed during the Fez riots of April 1912. The riots began as a mutiny of Moroccan infantrymen under French command, in response to the sultan's agreement to make Morocco a French Protectorate. Riots soon turned their anger against the Jewish quarter, murdering dozens of its residents and leaving 12,000 homeless. The Fez riots or Trifid (literally the 'back', as they came to be remembered) were a bleak moment in the history of Moroccan Jews and a factor in their mass emigration after the restoration of Moroccan independence. More than fifty years after the repeal of the Protectorate (1956), the colonial signpost is still in place, coexisting with a new one that honours an anti-colonial figure. The street was renamed after Patrice Lumumba (here misspelled), the first democratically elected Prime Minister of what is now the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC, ex-Belgian Congo). An outspoken African nationalist and Pan-Africanist, Lumumba was assassinated in January 1961 on the orders of Belgian officials aided and abetted by the CIA. The misspelling of his name results from a phonetic rendering by the person who translated it into French from the Arabic. The switch from rue Bringau – notice the assimilationist French language only – to bilingual rue Patrice Lumumba reflects both the will to assert the primacy of Moroccan Arabic and the persistence of the French language in Moroccan cityscapes. Strikingly enough, Barber is absent, despite the policy that in 2011 promoted it to the status of second official language, after Arabic.

Maputo, Mozambique

César Cumbre

This series of four images shows the physical process of replacing a street name in Sonembo, one of the most prestigious areas of the Mozambican capital. First, the name on the initial marble plate is covered with black ink, rendering it illegible. Then, the marble plate with the blackened plate is removed. The list two photos show a new marble plate bearing the new name, before and after the official unveiling. What, under Portuguese colonisation, was an avenue named after the Portuguese general Sebastião Botelho, has now become a street bearing the name of Samuel Dubula Numbula – an ardent promoter of African languages and cultures who deeply impacted the cultural dimension of Mozambican's struggle for independence. Photos were taken in February, May, July and September 2007 respectively.

Panel # 3: Reshaping the public space: Bottom-up responses

Top-down, ideologically driven policies of street-naming and signage generate, almost by definition, bottom-up reactions and responses. Examples in this panel encompass graffiti, alternative signage, self-initiated signage and creative reuse of signage codes. They convey different attitudes to official signposting, ranging from protest and engagement to mockery and ironic distance. Each, in its own way, challenges the hegemonic claim of a dominant culture.

Akko, Israel

Michel Ben Arrous

In 2001, UNESCO listed the Old City of Akko (Akkō, Akko, Saint-Jean d'Acre), as a World Heritage site. As a result, street names in the Old City are generally perceived by the state and city's authorities as a means of symbolic consumption, assisting the financial accumulation of tourist capital. The sign 'The Turkish Bazaar' constitutes part of a series of orientation plaques intended mainly for visitors from Christian or Jewish backgrounds in the historic part of the city. These signs highlight Hellenistic and Roman Antiquity, the Crusades period, and the contemporary Arab-Muslim population and their history.



The local residents of the Old City – who, since 1948, are an ethnic and religious minority in the municipal council, responded with anger to this new symbolic space and the erasure of their collective past. One of their ways of protest has been to insert and further stress the Arabic language in the public space. The image shows an alternative plaque affixed by the extremist Islamic Movement, making creative use of signage visual codes. Many such green plaques, containing verses from various Muslim scriptures, were put up in the quarter. This one says: "I cherish my religion and my Islam." The municipality did not remove these counter-hegemonic signs.



Ibadan, Nigeria

Kaneem Kehinde Sanusi

The image illustrates the translingual experiences of people in Ibadan, one of the major cities in south-western Nigeria. English, the dominant colonial language, remains the sole official language of the country. However, beyond the overriding primacy of English in the public space, the complexity and heterogeneity inherent in Ibadan's linguistic landscape are on display through parallel linguistic practices in the same location. The sign names and describes a specific domain, a mosque: 'Temidire Gbigba Adura Masjid'. Agbome, U.I. Junction, Ibadan. 'Three languages are creatively deployed here: Temidire Gbigba (Yoruba), Adura (Arabic adapted to Yoruba pronunciation), Masjid (Arabic), written in English transliteration; U.I. Junction (English). The whole text describes Temidire Masjid as a place where prayers are granted by God, located at University of Ibadan (U.I.) Junction in the Agbome district.



Lubumbashi, DRC

Donatien Dibwe dia Mwebu

Mayi Iko – literally, water is here (i.e., water for sale, in plastic sachets). The inscription is in Kiswahili, a language widely spoken in Lubumbashi, the mining capital and second largest city of the Democratic Republic of Congo, DRC. A major lingua franca throughout East and Central Africa, Kiswahili was favoured by mining companies in and around Lubumbashi, during and after Belgian colonisation, as a vehicular language for use with and between migrant workers from neighbouring regions and countries. The address of the water business is number 3 Kabongo Avenue, Kabongo being the name of a former Luba chief. The Luba people, indigenous to the region since at least the 5th century, have over time evolved many variations of the Luba language. Interestingly, the hand-written address skips the French generic term 'Avenue' which would feature on an official street sign, French being the official language of the DRC.

The image illustrates a postcolonial situation where a vehicular language (Kiswahili), rather than the official language (French), becomes the vernacular for a language-rich region. This water business is just one of many mundane, small-scale and bottom-up language choices that, in the end, have made Kiswahili so evident in Lubumbashi's streetscape and public space.



Mapelane, Mozambique

César Cumbre

This dirt track in Mapelane, some fifty kilometres north of the capital Maputo, is officially a street but has no formal street sign. Residents have hung an unofficial plate of metal on a tree, mentioning both the street name and the administrative code number of the area (B3). They respond to a situation of signage deficiency as a reminder that informality does not necessarily seek to protest, replace, or compete with the official naming and street-posting policies. It nevertheless constitutes a self-empowering initiative, one that gives the residents a hold on their daily environment, corrects a form of marginalisation, and makes the correction visible.

Panel # 4: The politics of street numbering

By the rationalisation and quantification of the 'lived spaces', street numbers are part of calculative techniques, monitoring and surveillance efforts since the emergence of the modern (colonial) state. In the postcolonial period, street numbering has indeed remained the preferred policy in many African countries. Aside from several World Bank failing economic-betterment programmes, it is mainly for one basic reason: names often stir controversy, numbers never do.



Dakar, Senegal

Xavier Ricou

While numbered streets rarely carry meaning for their residents, a Senegalese advertising company took advantage of their intersections. Throughout Dakar, this advertising poster for a ginger candy was posted prominently at street intersections. In a visual play with the address, Marithou (right) and Eva (left) are co-visible in a weekly TV broadcast that catagolizes polygamy by exposing in theatrical form its inherent intrigue. The two characters are a 'marriage' (consequently since they learn that their common husband has an affair with still another woman, Marithou wants to leave, and Eva tries to bring her back home).

Being widely posted at intersections, the adverts acted as playful orientation cues for many Dakarites: "when you get to the intersection, go with Eva," or "follow Marithou", instead of mentioning left/right directions or street names. The series sparked protest from an ultra-conservative organisation which complained of some supposedly risqué images. Against this background, the adverts took on special meanings at certain street corners, such as the one photographed here with Eva leaning in the direction of the neighbourhood mosque and Marithou pointing in the direction of nearby nightclubs.

Notice that the main road is both named and numbered. Bore the name of the poet and storyteller Binago Diop well before being adorned with a totally untypical PE 27.



Jaffa, Israel

Edna Langenthal

In the words of the photographer: "A house in Jaffa on a numbered street. The numbering of streets does not derive from a perception of relation to a place, such as the one that gives the street a name – names carry an historical and cultural weight, and thereby raise tension and provoke about them. Rather, the numbering is derived from a mathematical understanding and from a spatial perception of geometric infinite space. Everything, as an object, can be virtually quantified, detached. The Municipality of Tel Aviv-Jaffa is the first one in Israel to proactively name its streets, though there are streets that are named and numbered, such as 3895 Street (Jaffa streets were numbered by the British Mandate, and also partially by the Tel-Aviv-Jaffa municipality immediately after 1948). From the outset, each street has a number in the local authority's records, and if it has yet to be named, its number is used. The municipality said this was a temporary phenomenon, until the street would be named. But this situation has continued for many years. This situation is sometimes connected with informal or disputed 'grey' areas, where, since 1948, their residents' (Jewish or Arab) title to land has yet to be settled."



Maputo outskirts, Mozambique

César Cumbre

The junction of 'Rua 5.767' (Street 5.765) with 'Rua 5.750' in KaKaventa, a suburban district of Maputo, Mozambique's capital. These streets are also informally called 'Rua dos Apoloniares Conf' (Hills) (Streets Lower Contact) They Hippolytus – the latter name being humorously associated with the Greek tragedy about sexual desire and Aphrodite). Just underneath the fixed official street numbering system, there for economic-efficiency considerations but meaningless to the space users, temporary mobile signposts were placed by these users to make some sense. Very common, these spontaneous names attract city residents to express themselves by the social act of adding alternative toponymy to the numbering system, acting as a gateway for capturing the actual life of the residents.