Preserving Oral History by Standardizing Indigenous Place Names for Towns and Cities in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

Nobuhle Ndimande-Hlongwa, Gugulethu Mazibuko

Abstract

This paper focuses on challenges for standardization of indigenous place names for towns and cities in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. These challenges include issues of legislation and the powers delegated to different committees and stakeholders e.g. district and provincial committees and provincial MECs. The lack of public awareness about standardization process is another challenge. The lack of support from other government departments involved also poses a challenge. The major challenge is funding of the standardization process and people's objection to proposed name changes. Oral history is preserved in various indigenous place names of towns and cities in KwaZulu-Natal. The paper aims to illustrate some of the challenges experienced by provincial as well as National government in the official recognition of indigenous place names for towns and cities within a multilingual country. The paper challenges the KwaZulu-Natal Provincial Geographical Names Council, the South African Geographical Names Council as well as the United Nations Resolutions on the Standardization of Geographical Names. The paper finally looks at how the South African government has handled the issue of naming during the transformation period and how people at grass root level have responded.

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Introduction

South Africa is one of Africa's fast developing countries with a population of 50 million. It has a bad history of apartheid which divided the people according to race, geographical areas, education, health etc. South Africa is divided into 9 provinces namely: Eastern Cape, Free State, Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal, Limpopo, Mpumalanga, Northern Cape, North West and Western Cape. KwaZulu-Natal is one of the coastal provinces and it is a focus of this paper. This paper will deal with the challenges for standardization of indigenous place names for towns and cities. These challenges include issues of legislation and the powers delegated to different committees and stakeholders e.g. district and provincial committees and provincial MECs. The lack of public awareness about standardization process, as well as lack of support from other government departments involved poses a challenge. The major challenge is funding of the standardization process and people objecting to the proposed name changes as witnessed in the renaming saga of Tshwane which according to Nawa (2011) has survived two cabinet ministers and now starring at the third minister. It will challenge Provincial Geographical Names Committees, SAGNC policy on standardization as well as the United Nations Resolutions on the Standardization of Geographical Names. In addition to that the paper will also look at how the South African government at local, provincial and national levels has handled the names during the transition period and how people at grass root level have responded. We have arranged the paper as follows: First, we provide history of naming in South Africa and the South African Geographical Names Council. Second, we discuss the Geographical names and the language situation in South Africa. The next section deals with standardisation of place names in South Africa and the challenges thereof of standardizing indigenous place names. In the final section we conclude the discussion.

History of naming in South Africa

Naming of places and what people make of places is according to Basso (1996, xiii) as old as people and places themselves, as old as human attachments to portions of the earth. As old, perhaps, as the idea of home, of 'our territory' as opposed to 'their territory,' of entire regions

and local landscape where groups of men and women have invested themselves (their thoughts, their values, their collective sensibilities) and to which they feel they belong. Naming in general is a world phenomenon that is as old as the human species. According to Koopman, (2002, 109) the major function of place names – in whatever country, and in whatever language is to identify, and thus to provide locational guidance. In addition to this place names are important in preserving cultural heritage. In 1939 South Africa set up the National Names Authority –later called the National Place Names Committee (NPNC). Its function was to standardize the names of cities, towns, townships, post offices and railway stations. It recommended names to the Minister of Education, Arts and Culture for final approval. Names were then published in the government gazette and these were known as 'official' place names. The NPNC was restricted to whites only in terms of membership, black people who were specialists in their African languages were only observers. The NPNC was not proactive, it did not go out to identify features that needed naming. In addition to that it was not created by act of Parliament, and its terms of reference were too limited. In 1998 a new body replaced the NPNC.

The South African Geographical Names Council

The South African Geographical Names Council (SAGNC) was appointed by the Minister of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology in terms of the South African Geographical Names Act, 1998 (Act No.118 of 1998), as a body responsible for standardizing geographical names in South Africa. It serves as an advisory body within the Department of Arts and Culture. The function of this body is to provide an environment where the process of transformation of the toponymic landscape of South Africa is realized. SAGNC is also responsible for facilitating the establishment of the Provincial Geographical Names Committee in all the nine provinces which then assist in the establishment of district committees in the municipalities. More information about SAGNC could be found in their official website at http://sagnc.dac.gov.za. The South African Names Authority has a two tier structure as it was presented by Kerfoot (2011) the chair of United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names in Johannesburg at the National hearings on Geographical Names. It is both centralised and decentralized meaning that decisions are taken at district, provincial as well as at national level. Application forms from individuals, communities, developers and institutions are submitted to the district committees who advise on the process, facilitate public hearings and submit forms to the provincial committee. The Provincial Geographical Names Committee (PGNC) verifies the process and requirements and make recommendations to the SAGNC. SAGNC make recommendations to the Minister for approval. Afterwards the name is gazetted. The Public has 30 days to raise objections to the gazetted names. The Minister refers the objections back to the SAGNC. In 2008, the Department of Arts and Culture launched a Social Cohesion campaign which included wide public hearings in all the nine provinces on geographical names mainly to explain the role of authoritative bodies like the SAGNC, Provincial Geographical Names Committees and District Committees. The aim of that campaign was to bring awareness about issues pertaining to naming and renaming processes and the involvement of all stakeholders in the process.

Geographical names and language situation in South Africa

The constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) recognizes eleven official languages namely: isiZulu, isiXhosa, Afrikaans, Sepedi, English, Setswana, Sesotho, Xitsonga, SiSwati, Tshivenda and isiNdebele. According to Ndimande-Hlongwa (2010, 208) all these languages should be used and developed as per the government's policy framework on language. Nine of the official languages are indigenous languages. The constitution further provides for the

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use and development of the official languages, and in particular development of historically disadvantaged indigenous languages. According to the 2001 census, isiZulu is the mother tongue of 23.8% of South Africa's population, followed by isiXhosa at 17.6%, Afrikaans at 13.3%, Sepedi at 9.4%, English and Setswana each at 8.2%, Sesotho is at 7.9%, Xitsonga is at 4,4%, SiSwati is at 2,7%, Tshivenda is at 2,3%, IsiNdebele at 1,6% and other languages are at 0,5%.South Africa has just conducted another census in 2011 and we might see some changes in these figures. These figures are also reflected in the graph below.

Home language	Black	Coloured	Indian or Asian	White	Total
Afrikaans	0.7%	79.5%	1.7%	59.1%	13.3%
English	0.5%	18.9%	93.8%	39.3%	8.2%
IsiNdebele	2.0%	0.0%	0.3%	0.1%	1.6%
IsiXhosa	22.3%	0.3%	0.1%	0.1%	17.6%
IsiZulu	30.1%	0.3%	0.2%	0.1%	23.8%
Sepedi	11.9%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	9.4%
Sesotho	10.0%	0.2%	0.0%	0.0%	7.9%
Setswana	10.3%	0.4%	0.0%	0.1%	8.2%
SiSwati	3.4%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	2.7%
Tshivenda	2.9%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	2.3%
Xitsonga	5.6%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	4.4%
Other	0.3%	0.2%	3.8%	1.1%	0.5%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
	35.42m	3.99m	1.16m	4.29m	44.82m

Geographical names and language situation in South Africa
(Census: 2001)

South Africa post 1994

South Africa celebrated 17 years of transition to democracy in 2011. The big question is how has the South African government at local, provincial and national levels handled the standardization of names during the transition period and how ordinary people have responded? Renaming and restoration of place names is still not a priority for many South Africans: Education, poverty, health issues, etc. are a priority for many South Africans. Whilst the naming and renaming have not been prioritized by various sectors in government, the study conducted by Nawa entitled: *Municipal Cultural Policy and development in South Africa: A study of the City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality* as part of his doctoral study have interesting revelations. As he was collecting his data, he arranged respondents into four cluster samples, namely the Mayoral, Portfolio, Senior Official and Ward committees. He distributed the same questions to all the committees. In the questionnaire there was a section where they were requested to rate, in order of preference or importance, five national icons or national symbols. These were: city flags, artistic building architecture, naming of objects and places, monuments, and statues. In the overall result three of the four clusters rated naming of objects and places as top of list of priorities. The only exception was the mayoral committee. This result explains the process where people are involved at grassroot level in decision making only to find that those decisions are not implemented at the top level.

Standardization of place names in South Africa

Standardization as applied to geographical names/toponyms is defined by the Group of Experts (Glossary, 311) as:

> "The establishment, by an appropriate authority, of a specific set of standards or norms, for example, for the uniform rendering of toponyms".

There is national and international standardization. International standardization is an activity aimed at reaching maximum practical uniformity in the rendering of all geographical names on earth. National standardization refers to the standardization within the area of a national entity, such as state. The first conference on standardization of geographical names held in Geneva 1967 took a resolution I/4 to establish uniform instructions for a national standardization programme. The process of standardization or name changing is well structured in South Africa. This is because it encourages community participation in the entire process. There are ten steps that are followed before an application is approved and the names included in the government gazette.

According to the handbook of SAGNC (2002:3) it is important to standardize names for the purpose of:

- Affirming a country's history and national identity;
- Trade & commerce;
- Transportation;
- Regional and environmental planning;
- Social services,
- Science & technology,
- Elections and census;
- Tourism
- Disaster management and rescue operations
- Communication;

Challenges of standardization

There are many challenges that are facing SAGNC in the standardization of geographical names in South Africa. SAGNC is not a separate names authority, it is government led. The process of approving names takes long because there is no timeframe given to the Minister to approve the names. The legislation only provides powers and duties of the SAGNC but is silent about duties of district committees, provincial committees and provincial MECs. In addition to this municipalities are on their own since there is no legislative framework that guides them in terms of their operation. The lack of public awareness about the standardization process is another challenge. Lack of support from other government departments involved e.g. transport for changing road signs, e.g. Stanger was changed to KwaDukuza but signage still remains as Stanger. Lack of funding is another big challenge for SAGNC.

Standardization of indigenous place names

The policies on the standardization of geographical names in South Africa are found on the Handbook of geographical names (2002, 4). We would like to challenge the principle for geographical names in South Africa which speaks to "one name for one entity". This principle does not support the multilingualism policy of the country. It also does not support

the constitution of the country. Place names are always linked to languages. In real life situations people create parallel names and they have been doing this since the evolution of naming. Geographical features in South Africa have dual names or multiple names because of the multilingual nature of the country. These names need to be standardized and the best way to do that is to agree on the new principle. We are proposing a new principle which we will be submitting to the SAGNC recommending dual place names. There are countries in the world like Norway, Slovenia and Finland who use bilingual names. In Norway they use Norwegian and Sami languages. In South Africa attempts to restore indigenous place names receive some resistance in certain quarters. What usually happens is that indigenous African people continue to use their unofficial indigenous place names. These indigenous place names are used in literature of the indigenous African languages and are official languages of the country. Below is a snapshot of what you get in KwaZulu-Natal province and it could be the same thing for Eastern Cape, Limpopo, Mpumalanga, Western Cape, Free State, Northern Cape, North West and Gauteng:

Examples of Dual Names of Cities and Towns in KwaZulu-Natal Province, South Africa

- Pietermaritzburg /eMgungundlovu
- Greytown /eMgungundlovana
- Melmoth /eMthonjaneni
- Ladysmith /eMnambithi
- Kranskop /KwaNtunjambili
- Weenen /KwaNobamba
- Newcastle /eMajuba
- Kenterton /eMqangqala
- St Michael /eNdonyane
- Highflats /KwaGqwathaza
- Richards Bay /eMandlanzini
- Stuartstown /eXopo
- Margate /eNkongweni
- Groutville /eMvoti
- Port Shepstone /eSayidi
- Paulpietersburg /eDumbe
- Camperdown /eMkhambathini
- Estcourt /eMtshezi
- Drakensburg /Okhahlamba
- Dundee /eMzinyathi
- Congella /KwaKhangela
- Durban /eThekwini
- Bergville /eMangwaneni
- Blaauwbosch /Kwagudlucingo
- Vryheid /eBaqulusini
- Botha's Hill /KwaNyuswa

It should be noted that in South Africa not only in KwaZulu-Natal the English and the Voortrekkers followed an imperialist model when they named geographical features. This resulted in repeating of place names especially from Britain (Jenkins, 2007, 88). This resulted in African people using original names of the geographical features or coining new place names. In some cases they translated the Afrikaans or the English names.

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Conclusion

The issue of toponyms, especially renaming and name changing is an urgent matter that should be prioritized by South African government. The SAGNC policy and principles should be revisited as per our recommendations. It is crucial that some kind of financial injection be put in place in order for recommendations to be implemented and objectives to be realized. The legislative needs be revisited to guide municipalities. Names are powerful symbols that connects us with our ancestors and our space and should be preserved as part of our oral history and cultural heritage. We must respect the language rights of all the South African people so that they can use their place names to redefine themselves, affirm their historical heritage and identity. The multilingual and democratic situation should open spaces for reaffirming our own indigenous place names. It should also open spaces for revitalizing indigenous ways of being and doing.

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Nobuhle Ndimande-Hlongwa
University of KwaZulu-Natal
School of IsiZulu Studies
hlongwan1@ukzn.ac.za

Gugulethu Mazibuko
University of KwaZulu-Natal
School of IsiZulu Studies
South Africa
mazibukog@ukzn.ac.za