

Some aspects of indigenous toponyms in a Takbanuaz Bunun village

This paper discusses the geographical, social and linguistic dimensions of indigenous toponyms in Sinapalan, a Takbanuaz Bunun village in Nantou County, Taiwan. Bunun (De Busser & Li 2023) is a Formosan language and is subdivided into five dialects, Takbanuaz belonging to the central subgroup (Li 1988). Even today Bunun people keep using their native language to name different places in their local environment, although indigenous place name systems in general have been gradually replaced by standardized official systems during the Japanese and especially the Chinese nationalist rule of Taiwan (see Kang 2022).

Toponymic systems name a landscape and thereby turn space into culturally meaningful places (see e.g. Tuan 2001; Certeau 1984). Consequently, place names can vary from culture to culture, along a number of parameters. For instance, place names can either name point locations or areas, and named areas can be contiguous or dispersed. It is reasonable to assume that these variations in toponymic naming strategies are at the very least to some extent influenced by cultural and linguistic factors, as is also the case with other spatial expressions (Levinson 1996; 2003). Put simply, how people talk about the space around them is influenced by how they experience this space through the eyes of their own culture.

In this fieldwork-based case study, I will give an overview of the geographical context of indigenous place names in the village of Sinapalan, and describe their semantic and morphological properties in a socio-cultural context. I will then discuss how this toponymic system is crucial to understand the geographically grounded Bunun experience of their immediate social geography and its associated linguistic expressions.

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