RESEARCH PAPERS

Plant Names, Politics and Identity: '*a rose would smell as sweet by any other name...'*

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This article presents a series of perspectives on the importance of plant names and aspects of the power relations involved in naming, for individuals and groups in Europe and the Russian Far East. The aim of the discussion is to explore how the process of naming plants, affects, and is affected by, social and ethnic identity. The first section of the article discusses different plant naming traditions in Europe, the Judaeo-Christian tradition, the rise of scientific methodologies and the Linnean system. The second part of this article is a discussion of the different naming traditions in Udege, Nanai and Sakha communities in the Russian Far East. The emphasis of this second section is on exploring the history of naming traditions in these communities and how the variety of naming traditions current in the region helps to define social and ethnic identity.

Introduction

Just as Romeo cannot escape the social consequences of his actions by merely changing the name of his beloved Capulet, the names of plants are embedded in social context and the changing of them has social and political consequences. 'Common' and scientific naming of plants has a long and diverse history in western culture and the historical trajectory of European naming has relevance for the progress of Russian colonisation and control among the different nationalities of the Russian Far East.

Europe, Christianity and Linnaeus

> *And out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air, and brought them to Adam to see what he would call them; and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was its name.* (Genesis II, 19)

It is one of the central tenets of Judaeo-Christian tradition that God created the world for man and that all the plants and creatures of that world are part of a grand plan for providing for human well-being. The Doctrine of Signatures, prevalent in the medieval period and espoused wholeheartedly by scholars such as Paracelsus, was the belief that God created all plants to be useful to humans, and that there were signs of this usefulness in the shape of the plants (Arber 1938; Findlen 1990). Thus for those who could read the signs, the leaves of liverwort suggested its suitability for curing liver problems. Unfortunately the 'Fall of Man' and the expulsion from Eden lead to a confusion in reading the signs of nature, and as with agriculture, the lot of humans was to struggle to achieve that which formerly had been given freely. Francis Bacon in the early 17th century, proposed that the aim of the natural sciences was to recover that knowledge which had been lost after the fall, and that this type of scientific enquiry is divinely sanctioned.

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> *For it was not that pure and spotless knowledge, by which Adam gave names to all things according to their kind, that was the origin and occasion of the Fall, but that ambitious and headstrong greed for moral knowledge - of telling good from evil - so that man might desert God and make his own laws, that was the ground and manner of this temptation. On the contrary, of the sciences which concern themselves with Nature, the holy philosopher* (Solomon) *declares: "It is the glory of God to conceal a thing; but the glory of a king to discover a thing", in much the same way as if the Divine Nature took pleasure in this innocent and good-natured children's game of hide-and-seek, and out of His indulgence and kindness to men chose the human soul to be His companion in play in this game."* (Bacon 1994, 15)

The seeds of future tensions between scientific and 'common' naming in Europe can be seen in Bacon's attitude towards those who, by the force of their intelligence and status, the scientists, have the superior moral right to discover the truth and to name. In the Baconian model the divide between 'common' and scientific knowledge is bound up with the divine right to give names.

The use of the term 'common name' is fraught with problems of definition and also of understanding the social contexts which give rise to these 'common names'. At the very least it implies a degree of social cohesion among the groups of people who agree to use a particular name to refer to a specific plant. The processes by which plants acquire their names, from their appearance, characteristics, or from the specific linguistic and historical context of the naming group involved, are of course, diverse. It is tempting to believe that non-agricultural plants especially, as representatives of the 'wild' as opposed to the plants of human control, would be free from explicit manipulation in the power struggles of human groups. In many cases it may be that plants acquire their popular names, simply from their appearance, usage, or supposed qualities. However, Thomas (1983) details the way in which some supposedly 'common' names in Britain were specifically changed because of religious concerns, or are post-medieval in origin, created by individual authors of herbals. Both Goody (1993, 156-7) and Thomas (1983, 82) discuss the changing of pagan plants names, and the population of the wild with the plant representatives of Catholicism, the Virgin Mary and the saints. Hence many of the 'common' names which contain the word "lady" in them, e.g., lady's smock, refer to the Virgin Mary, and the saints and other Biblical characters are represented by plants such as St-John's wort, Solomon's Seal, Star of Bethlehem, etc. Also any plant which was considered to have negative qualities such as, texture, smell, taste, poison often contained the word Devil in its name. The names cow parsley and traveller's joy were specifically created in new herbals of 1538 and 1597 receptively (Thomas 1983, 72-3). In Europe at least, the influence of printed herbals in homogenising and propagating the 'common' names of plants has a long history (Arber 1938), and the interplay of oral tradition and the printed herbal is another aspect of the social contexts of naming.

The most widespread scientific system of naming plants in the modern world is based on the Linnaean system. The Linnaean system of Latin binomials, genus and

species, is a world-wide system of botanical naming which governs a universal system of unique identifications. The same plant, in theory, can be recognised from the name and the accompanying description, to a botanist trained in the Linnaean system, whether they live in Greenland or South Africa. The same common name, in contrast, can apply to several different plants within a very small region. In Linnaeus' 1737 description of his method for botanical naming he makes it clear that there are strict rules for the binomials which permit "*no names based on the plant's scent, taste, medical properties, moral character or religious significance, all of which he considered to be highly subjective qualities, varying according to the beholder.*" (Thomas 1983, 86). The Linnaean system is also written in Latin which has done nothing to lessen the divide between specialists and non-specialists in the naming of plants. Not only was the definitive name given to a plant by specialists, often alienated from the people who came into contact with the plants in their daily life, but the new names were in another language and aimed to be devoid of symbolic, historical or local significance.

> *....by eroding the old vocabulary, with its rich symbolic overtones, the naturalists had completed their onslaught on the long established notion that nature was responsive to human affairs. This was the most important and most destructive way in which they shattered the assumptions of the past. In place of a natural world redolent with human analogy and symbolic meaning, and sensitive to man's behaviour, they constructed a detached natural scene to be viewed and studied by the observer from the outside, as if by peering through a window, in the secure knowledge that the objects of contemplation inhabited a separate realm, offering no omens or signs, without human meaning or significance.* (Thomas 1983, 89)

Names and Naming in the Russian Far East

After this brief overview of some of the major plant naming processes of Europe, I would like to turn to a discussion of some of the different plant naming systems in the Russian Far East and their historical contexts.

The Russian expansion into Siberia and the Far East started in the late 17th century. The Russians continued to acquire new territories until the middle of the 19th century, when they finally took over the Primorye region, the home of the Udege and Nanai people (Forsyth 1992; Gibson 1969; Slezkine 1994). Starting in the 18th century, the Russian expeditions and administrative organisations often included botanists and other scientists, to name, describe and catalogue the possessions of these new territories. Highly influential scientists from the long running Kamchatka Expeditions were the botanist, Krashnennikov, and the zoologist, Stellar. Stellar gave his name to some of the local fauna including the now extinct sea cow and the Stellar sea eagle. The extract below is from Pallas' instructions to the members of the Billings Expedition:

> *ARTICLE V*
> *Pay special attention to trees, shrubs and land and aquatic plants.....Note when they grow, flower and ripen. Lose no opportu-*

> *nity to make detailed notes of everything which may be useful to society, either as food for people or forage for animals or as medicines. Investigate how they prepare dyes and pelts. Collect specimens of wood, bark, gum, resin, seeds, bulbs, and roots. Also collect things that may be raised in European gardens, and make note both of their scientific and local names.* (1785, quoted in Dmytryshyn *et al.* 1988, 292-294)

In Primorye, the botanists were among the first people to enter and explore the newly acquired territory (Maack 1861; Maksimovich 1862). These floral descriptions covered not only the economically useful plants but, in line with the Linnean system, the aim was to classify all the plants irrespective of their connection to humans. Thus humans observed, named and catalogued the plants and animals around them, and the objective naming system emphasised the gulf between the natural world and the world of the observers, the human world. Those who participate, the natural, are segregated from those who are detached enough to observe the entirety, humans. However the individual botanists who created the names did not always live up to the ideal of removing all anthropocentrism or historical connections. The scientific name of the medicinal plant ginseng is *Panax ginseng*, where *Panax* is derived from the word *panacea*, a cure-all, and *ginseng* is the Chinese name for the plant literally, "shaped like a man". Thus the scientific name is made up of information relating to its curing power, ethnic associations and spiritual beliefs. In the same way the wild kiwi fruit, *Actinidia kolomikta*, takes its specific name, *kolomikta,* from the Tungus-Manchu name for the plant. The Russian botanists coming across the plant for the first time, adopted the local name into the scientific name, thus again incorporating ethnic and historical associations into a supposedly objective scientific name. Also it is common here as in other parts of the world for the original discoverer to give their own name to the scientific name. The specific name '*maximowiczii*' or '*maakii*' is common in Primorye, named after the first European botanists Maksimovich and Maack, to describe the region's flora.

The Soviet state vigorously embraced science as one of the bases of its authority. It was an objective tool for increasing human mastery over nature, free from the shackles of superstition and religion. Science subjects formed a major part of the education of children throughout the Soviet world from the early 20th century, including the children of indigenous communities. Thus most people in the Russian speaking world are familiar with the social and linguistic context of 'science speak', where scientific names, measurements, quantification are acceptable ways of describing the world around you. It is common to hear in conversation that spring greens are good for you because they have "a lot of vitamins", certain foods are healthy because they contain certain minerals or proteins etc.

At present in the Russian Far East the naming situation for plants is very complex and coexists at various different levels. The Russian scientific system uses both the Linnaean, Latin binomial system, and a scientific, binomial system in Russian. Thus even within the specialist system, not only are there two languages but also two different scripts. This potentially increases the alienation for those who are not trained to decode this information from access to the proper names. To know the scientific

name of a plant is a sign of education and status. Russian is the main language of communication for most communities in the southern Far East, and indigenous languages are increasingly only spoken by older people in Udege and Nanai communities. In the Sakha Republic, Sakha is much more widely spoken but most people also speak and read Russian. Given the social dominance of the Russian language in most communities, the use of Russian common names for plants is widespread and is also propagated by the easy availability of printed materials on plants and herbal medicines in Russian, among a highly literate population.

Against this background the names and naming systems of the different indigenous peoples also exist. Some of the indigenous names are still commonly used by local peoples, but they are not many and tend to relate to a few plants of popular use or symbolic importance. In the vast majority of cases it is only older people who remember the indigenous names and it is even rarer to know the referent of the name. Some of this information has been recorded in ethnographies, which are also often available in indigenous communities. This is another facet of the preservation of indigenous names through the written record. However, the written record and the creation of definitive dictionaries can lead to a solidification of the naming system, and often ignores any local or historical changes.

Podmaskin (1998) details some of the naming and taxonomic systems of the Udege from his fieldwork from the 1970s to the present. There are the same general categories of plants that would be recognisable in Europe: deciduous trees (*mo)*; coniferous trees (*ngangta*); shrubs (*moktoi*); herbaceous plants (*aunta*); climbers (*usimya*); berry plants (*gegdengku*); moss (*nobo*); lichens (*boato*); tree mushroom (*mogo*); and also certain distinctive plant families such as the Umbelliferae (*chunya*) and the sedges (*khaikta*) (Podmaskin 1998, 111).

Some plants have different names according to their age or stage or development, in complete contrast to the Linnaean system where a plant has the same name whether it is one month or ten years old. Ginseng has a general name in Udege, *olondo,* but it also has different names depending on the number of leaves and hence its age: two leaved ginseng with a straight stem is called *zyuta*, three year old plant *domtaiza*, a stem with lateral shoots *gani*, and a ginseng plant with five leaves *sipiye*. In the Bikin area, the Udege differentiate two species of ginseng, *ninto olondo '"male"ginseng'* and *anta olondo* '"female"ginseng', which are differentiated by differences in the root branching and the medicinal activity (Podmaskin 1998, 113). Scientific botany recognises only one species (*Panax ginseng*). The root of ginseng increases its medicinal effect with age and it is medicinally and economically practical to distinguish the plant at different stages of development or with different qualities. In the same way the poplar tree (*Populus maximowiczii*) is called different names at different ages by the Anyushki Udege: up to one year *kulu*, from one to two years *dikto*, from two to three *selikhe*, from three to four *sagdi kulu*, five years and older *amigda*. Any age after five it is considered suitable for making boats (Podmaskin 1998, 112). The naming system is related to the economic importance of the tree at different stages to the people who use it. It is a very anthropocentric system which illustrates the dependence of humans on the plants in their economic, medicinal and in other cases, spiritual life, rather than their independence from the natural world around them.

Not all the plant names relate to economically important plants. Maack in 1861 records many indigenous plant names for plants which he did not observe to have any economic use. Lévi-Strauss would argue that it is an innate behaviour of humans to classify and name the world around them in order to make sense of chaos (Lévi-Strauss 1966). The frame of reference in which the names are located is also an expression of the social and natural context. Many Udege names are based on comparisons with the local animals or features of daily life: black currants are *ogbuo amuni* literally "elk droppings" from the shape and colour of the berries; iris is called *inai ingini* literally "dog's tongue" from the shape of the flower; Daurian willow is *su zagda* literally "sunny campfire" which is related to the colour of the leaves (Podmaskin 1998, 111). The plant *Impatiens noli-tangere* is called *bagze umani* in Samarga Udege because the shape of the flower resembles the shape of the fishing hook of the mythological people the Bagse. This last example illustrates how much language and naming links a group of people with their landscape and their history, and also how much else is lost when the names are lost.

A further example of the power of names to locate and bind people to their history and territory is the use of plant names as protection from evil spirits. Podmaskin describes some of the personal names, which when given to people, were considered to give protection against evil spirits or animals because of the qualities of the plant in question, e.g. *ninga* literally "thorny" or "prickly" and *chungchi* literally "wild onion" (Podmaskin 1991, 37-8). During fieldwork with colleagues from the Institute of History in Vladivostok we met a Nanai woman called Nesulta Borisovna Zaksor, Nesulta is her given name and Borisovna is her patronymic, based on her father's name. Nesulta is the Nanai name for rowan berries. She said that her older brother had died very young, and that when she was born her parents decided to call her Nesulta, the name of a bitter berry, to dissuade evil spirits from coming near her. It is also interesting to note that her father was called Boris, a Slavic name, and the decision to use a specifically Nanai name for the daughter is a important one. If the idea was simply to use the name of a bitter berry they could have called her *ryabina* which is rowan in Russian. The use of a Nanai name illustrates the desire to provide local protection from local spirits. It is the actual name which is important not the concept.

This is in contrast to most scientific paradigms which stress the universal application of basic principals irrespective of local conditions. Perhaps more than any other empire in recent history the Soviet empire was responsible for the movement and relocation of vast numbers of people. Attachment to a particular area was seen as part of the superstition and sentimentality of the past. Science could locate humans in any part of the world, deserts or tundra, or indeed space itself, by mastering the principles of the natural world. The linguistic changes of the 20th century and the extensive replacement of local names by Russian have increased the symbolic conquest of past histories and territorial attachments. The question of land rights, and traditional territories has only recently resurfaced in the post-Perestroika world of the Russian Federation. The Udege of the Bikin have already been involved in local and international attempts to stop logging in the Bikin area and to gain territorial rights over their traditional land (Newell and Wilson 1996; Shnirelman 1993). However, it is not yet clear if these claims will be successful.

In the Sakha Republic the situation is different. The Sakha people at present number about the same, or even outnumber, the Russians who live in the Republic. The Sakha language is also widely used and the resurgence of 'Sakha identity' is an important issue in the post-Perestroika Republic. Ethnographic books about the Sakha past are also commonly available in towns and villages and many people are very knowledgeable about their history as it is recorded in these books.

When on fieldwork people frequently mentioned the plant *unnulla* to me, sometimes known as "Sakha bread." Maack (1994) and Seroshevskii (1993) wrote in the 19th century about the importance of this plant as a widespread root food of the Sakha people. They identify it as *Butomus umbellatus*. However, despite the number of times Sakha people in the villages and the city of Yakutsk mentioned this plant, and how important it had been to the Sakha in the past, only a handful of people could actually point out the actual plant. The name has retained its important ethnic and historical associations but the plant itself has become forgotten. It is not used as a food resource anymore and even those who talk of their Sakha identity and history with a great deal of pride, have no desire to start collecting the roots of this wetland plant to make into bread. It has become a plant of the mind. Its name has entered the symbolic sphere and in some cases has been appropriated for the ethnic identity discourse. For the most part the name no longer refers to a living entity which is seen, touched, eaten, but has become a symbol of historical and ethnic associations.

Another case of plant names and politics in the Sakha Republic is the naming of ground mushrooms. As in the southern Russian Far East, the use of ground mushrooms is generally associated with Slavic tradition (Sem 1973, 114). In one village a Sakha woman told me that her mother would never eat mushrooms because she thought of them as a Russian food. At present many Sakha people as well as Nanai and Udege use ground mushrooms extensively and generally they use the Russian names for these mushrooms. However in a 1980 publication a Sakha botanist published a list of names of fungi in the Sakha language (Ugarov 1980). When I was given this publication in 1999, one of the botanists at the Academy of Sciences in Yakutsk pointed out that many of these names were not traditional Sakha names but had been created to form a new Sakha system of fungi naming. Despite the lack of a tradition of using ground mushroom, the author of this publication felt the need for the names to exist in the Sakha language. It is important to recognise the symbolic power of names and language in creating and maintaining ethnic and territorial identities. These fungi exist in Sakha territory but because of a historical lack of interest in using them, they did not generally have a traditional range of names to describe them. Yet to use only the Latin names or the Russian scientific or 'common' names was insufficient for the author of the article.

Concluding Remarks

I hope to have illustrated in this article some of the symbolic power of the use of plant names in political control and in expressing social and ethnic identities. The roles of tradition, oral history, language, writing, specialists and scientists, in shaping the different ways in which we describe plants, are interlocked, and elements of all of them constantly change and influence the way we relate to and name the world around us. The archaeological relevance of plants is not only to provide information

on food or ecology, but to expand the possible ways of understanding identity, ethnicity and boundaries. Archaeology or prehistoric archaeology at least, is ill equipped in many ways to explore the expression of territoriality and boundaries through names. However, anthropology, and also literature in works such as Chatwin's *Songlines* provide vivid illustrations of the vitality of the act of naming in human communities. No study of human communities can ignore the emotional and symbolic power of the name.

> *..each Ancestor opened his mouth and called out, 'I am!' 'I am - Snake... Cuckoo ....Honey ant ..... Honeysuckle .... And this first 'I am!', this primordial act of naming, was held then, and forever after, as the most secret and sacred couplet of the Ancestor's song. Each of the Ancients (now basking in the sunlight) put his left foot forward and called out a second name. He put his right foot forward and called out a third name. He named the waterhole, the reedbeds, the gum trees - calling to right and left, calling all things into being and weaving their names into verses.... They wrapped the whole world in a web of song, and at last when the earth was sung, they felt tired.* (Chatwin 1987, 73)

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