

Populating the landscape with absent friends: the use of personal names in Palmerston Island toponyms

Rachel Hendery

Western Sydney University, Sydney, Australia

r.hendery@westernsydney.edu.au

ABSTRACT: This paper describes and contextualizes placenames on Palmerston Island, a small Pacific island populated by around 50 descendants of a mixed-origin group of settlers in the 1860s. The inhabitants today are monolingual speakers of a dialect that has been described variously as an English dialect or an English-based creole. I show that Palmerston English placenames are rarely complex or detailed descriptive names, and this can be accounted for by the small, isolated and densely-networked nature of the population. The isolation and transience of the community may also contribute to the high number of placenames that index people's names or other locations.

Keywords: creolization, English dialects, island studies, Palmerston island, placenames, population size, social networks, toponymy

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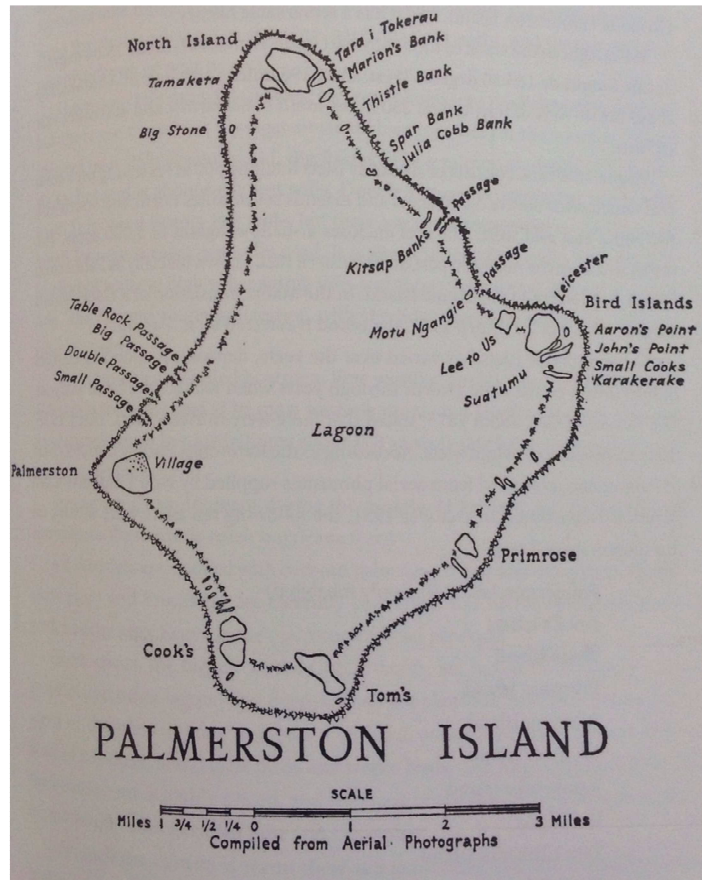
Introduction

Palmerston Island, part of Palmerston Atoll, is one of the most remote, isolated, and smallest inhabited islands in the world (see [Figure 1](#)). It was settled by an Englishman William Marsters, three Cook Island women – Akakaingara, Matavia and Tepou – and perhaps a handful of other people in the early 1860s (Hendery, 2013). Today, it has a population of fewer than 60 individuals, all of whom trace their descent back to the original small group. They speak a variety of English, with significant influence from Cook Island Māori (Hendery & Ehrhart, 2011; Hendery, 2015).

Placenames on Palmerston Island can take a number of forms, some English and some Māori. In both cases, a common strategy is to name a location after someone with whom it was or is still associated. While this naming strategy is not uncommon in the rest of the English-speaking world, on Palmerston it appears to serve a function that is not as necessary elsewhere. It ensures that Palmerston Islanders who have left the island temporarily or for a longer term are continually brought to mind: that their names remain on people's lips, are spoken to children who may never have met them, and that a space on the island is reserved for them should they ever return.

In this paper, I describe placenaming strategies on this tiny island and its surrounding lagoon, and situate them in the context of placenaming typologies that have been constructed for languages in general, and particularly for other places in the Pacific where a colonial language and naming traditions are overlaid onto a “pristine toponymy” (Zettersten 1969, p. 125). I will show that, on Palmerston, placenaming serves to populate the landscape with distant places, people, and events, and thus works to counterbalance the tiny size of the present population and Palmerston's isolation.

Figure 1: Map of Palmerston Atoll from the Cook Islands Archives, provenance unknown. Palmerston Island, the only part of the atoll that is permanently settled, is the west island with the label “Village”.



A number of typologies of placenames have been proposed, often categorizing placenames according to cognitive strategies (e.g. Stewart 1975's “descriptive”, “commemorative”, “folk-etymologies” and “mistake” types, among others), historical periods (e.g. categorizing English placenames as Anglo-Saxon, Viking, Norman, etc.), source language (c.f. Rudnycky 1958), or combining several of these levels (c.f. Gasque 2005 as described in Tent & Blair, 2011; Baker and Carmony, 1975). Many typologies are developed specifically for a single region, such as North America (Baker and Carmony, 1975) or Australia (Marchant, 1998, p. 316). One typology that is sufficiently flexible to be more widely used, and has a small enough number of categories to be useful in a place with relatively few placenames, is that of Gammeltoft (2005), who proposes three motivational categories, each with a number of subcategories. According to his typology, a place can be named for (a) the relationship of the locality to something external; (b) an inherent quality of the locality; and (c) the use of the locality.

We will see below that these three categories map quite neatly onto categories that we would have constructed in any case, purely on the basis of the Palmerston data itself. Palmerston does, however, have a further category, which I call “simple” placenames. These are terms so generic and straightforward that they would probably not be considered true

placenames in most parts of the world, e.g. *The Beach*, *The Generator*. I will return to the question of what counts as a placename below.

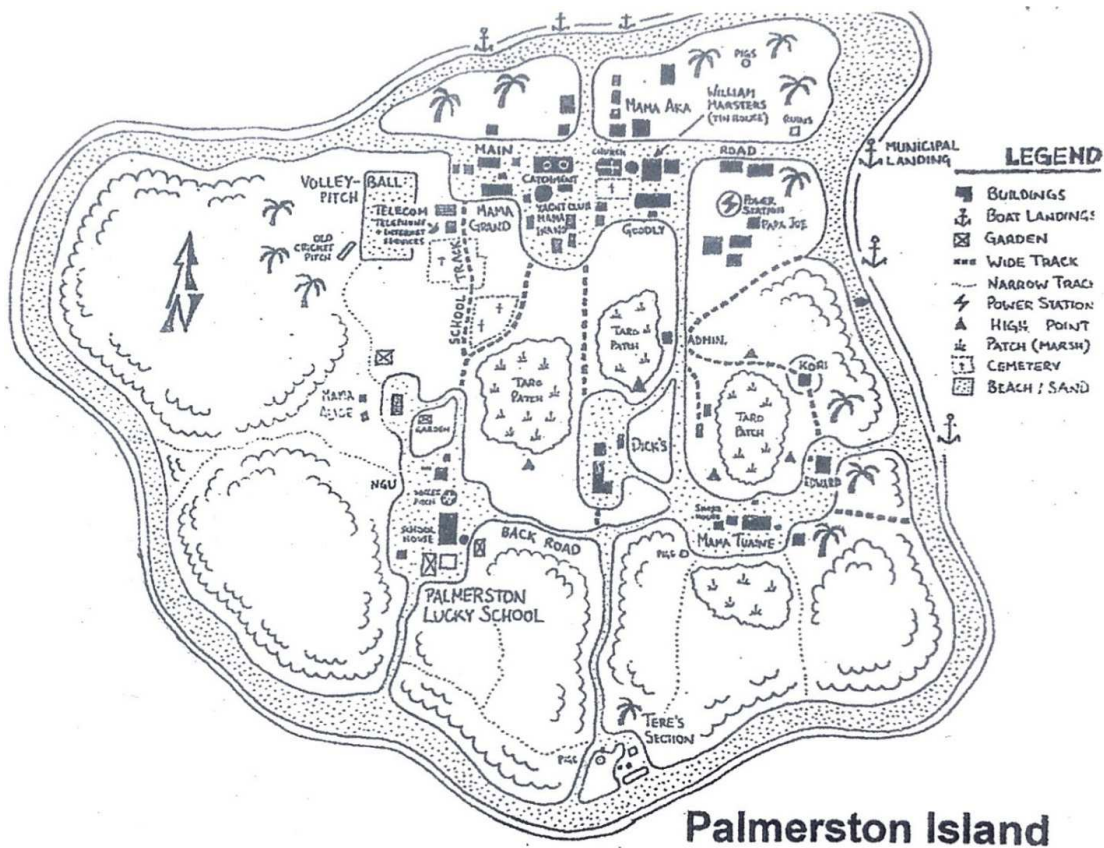
Palmerston placenames

Palmerston Island has only a fuzzy boundary between placenames and use of everyday words to denote places. With the small land area, and the high-context communication style enabled by a tiny population and dense social networks (Hendery, Mühlhäusler & Nash, 2015), there is little need for complex terms of reference to distinguish different locations. *The Yacht Club*, *The Catchment*, *The Generator*, *The Taro Patch* are all unique and therefore sufficiently distinctive. This means that more detailed place referents are often imposed externally due to the needs of people overseas, for example, in the Cook Islands government, to pick out referents on Palmerston from a wider set of possible referents elsewhere. For example, the traditional term for Palmerston Island itself is *Home (Island)*, but it has been called *Palmerston* or *Pamati* in official correspondence and on maps, and Palmerston Islanders when talking to others off-island will themselves also use these official terms.

Furthermore because the population is generally not literate, and because the 150-year history of the island is relatively short, there have not been the same opportunities for conventionalization and fossilization of placenames that occur in many other parts of the world. Is *Mama Aka's* a placename, or is it just a repeatedly innovated phrase to denote the house that belongs to *Aka*? It is not overly complex or descriptive, but then nor is *The Admin*, or even *Main Road*. In a large town elsewhere, a term like *Sarah's house* would not be considered a placename, but it would also be insufficiently unique and insufficiently widely known to be used as such beyond an immediate group of Sarah's acquaintances. It would not need to appear on maps, because other placenames would exist for referring to the location in which Sarah's house is found. These points are not true on Palmerston Island.

There are three main reasons why I treat such phrases as placenames here. The first is purely practical: that without them, there is really nothing to discuss in an article about Palmerston toponymy. I can count only seven names on the island itself that are clearly placenames by dint of being unable to be confused with a simple generic noun phrase. Whether we consider a general lack of placenames to be the feature of Palmerston Island toponymy worth discussing, or the simplicity of its placenames, is merely a matter of perspective, and either way, we are exploring the same phenomenon. Secondly, locational reference terms such as *Sarah's* or *Mama Aka's* are sufficiently conventionalised that they are marked on the only map that Palmerston Islanders have published of their own community (see [Figure 2](#)). These first two reasons are also reasons why we should consider simple placenames such as *The Beach*, *The Generator*, *The Admin* to be placenames. A final reason that applies only to the possessive placenames, however, is these constructions tend to remain in use long after the person they refer to has died or left the island, therefore the name has become uncoupled from its original referent and has come to refer directly to the place. I would argue that such cases are unequivocally placenames, and since they are structurally indistinguishable from those cases in which the person is still in residence in the place the name refers to, it makes sense to consider them together as a group, as I will do now, moving on to further discussion of the linguistic structures that are found in Palmerston toponymy.

Figure 2: Map of Palmerston Island.



Source: Base map cartography by Ngu Marsters. Additional cartography by Andrew Alfred Duggan and the following Marsters: Alfred, J. J., Marion, Munokoa, Taia, William and Yvonne.

The syntax of Palmerston placenames is fairly unremarkable. They generally consist of noun phrases (*Municipal Landing*, *The Old Cricket Pitch*), including complex noun phrases that contain a prepositional or possessive phrase (*Church of Zion*, *Tara i Tokera* = “North Point”, *Aaron’s Point*). Abbreviation to a possessive phrase by itself is not uncommon, for example *Tom’s*, which is presumably short for *Tom’s Islet/Island/Motu* construction is so rarely used that I am not even aware of which of the three it should be. The most structurally unusual on-shore placename is *Palmerston Lucky School*, but this kind of construction also occurs in standard English placenames such as *Townsville Main Road*.

Offshore placenames include some that are more structurally significant. Palmerston Islanders have names for many locations in and around the lagoon, most of which are rocks, sandbanks or islets. These include such structures as *Lee-to-us Island* (often abridged to *Lee-to-us*) and *Scratch-my-arse Rock*, also known as *Kick-my-arse Rock*. While the phrase that precedes the noun is a complex adjective phrase in the first case and a verb phrase in the second, in both cases they are more elaborate prenominal adjuncts than standard English (or indeed Palmerston English) usually permits. This does, however, parallel Cook Island Māori placenames, which allow such constructions, e.g. *Tapae-i-uta Tapere* “Turn-off-inland Subdistrict” in Rarotonga.

Most placenames on and around Palmerston Island are English-based. A few are Māori (*Motu Ngangie*, *Karakerake*, *Tamaketa*), but these usually turn out to be based on proper nouns. For example, *Karakerake* is named after a corresponding place in Penrhyn, the island in the Cook Islands group that William Marsters’ wives are said to have come from, and *Tamaketa* is named after a Manihiki man who lived on Palmerston for a time. When mixed-origin names are found, they usually take the form of *Māori descriptor* + *English noun*, for example *Ngutememu Rock* “thick lips rock”, *Manunui Rock* “big bird(s) rock”. Unlike some mixed-origin communities in the Pacific, there has not been a resurgence of interest in Palmerston’s Polynesian heritage, and so we do not find a deliberate move towards naming and renaming with Polynesian words, of the kind we find in New Zealand with Māori or, in a more similar context to Palmerston, with Tahitian names on Norfolk Island (Nash 2013: 66).

Moving on to the etymologies of Palmerston placenames, because there are so few of them in total, it makes sense to see first what types tend to occur at all, before we consider how this typology fits with those outlined in the introduction. They can be divided into three main types: simple, descriptive, and referential. Simple placenames are those that consist of the most straightforward noun phrase that a person could use to refer to the place, usually by its function. Such simple placenames include: *The Beach*, *The Catchment*, *The Generator*, *The Moorings*, *The Bush*, *The Admin* and *The Patch* (also known as *The Taro Swamp*, see [Table 1](#)).

Table 1: Descriptive placenames.

Physical descriptions	Functional descriptions
<i>Manunui Rock</i> “Big Bird(s) Rock”	<i>Home Island</i>
<i>Iron Rock</i>	<i>The Yacht Club</i>
<i>Long Rock</i>	<i>The Mission House</i>
<i>Loo’ard Land</i>	<i>The Taro Swamp</i> (aka <i>The Patch</i>)
<i>Table Rock</i>	<i>School Track</i>
<i>Big Stone</i>	<i>The Mainland</i>
<i>North Island</i>	<i>Main Road</i>
<i>Tara i Tokerau</i> “Point of North”	<i>The Old Cricket Pitch</i>
<i>Bird Island</i>	<i>Double Passage</i>
<i>Lee-to-us Island</i>	
<i>Motu Ngangie</i> (“Ngangie [= a type of plant] Islet”)	
<i>Back Road</i>	
<i>Big Passage</i>	
<i>Small Passage</i>	
<i>Small Cooks</i>	

Descriptive placenames is a larger category with two main subtypes: physical descriptions, such as *Long Rock*, *North Island*; and functional descriptions such as *Home Island* (the inhabited island), *School Track* (the track that leads to the school), *Refuge Hill* (where one goes to seek refuge from storms). Some descriptive placenames could be construed as either functional or physical: e.g. *Bird Island* is home to a large number of birds, but it is also where you go to hunt birds, for obvious reasons. The descriptive placenames are listed in [Table 1](#),

with the more physical descriptions on the left, and the more functional descriptions on the right. This division is somewhat arbitrary: *Big Passage*, *Small Passage*, and *Double Passage* are treated differently (*Double Passage* refers to the way two boats can pass through at the same time: a functional description; but it could also be interpreted as ‘double the size’ of the others). A few of the placenames at the bottom of [Table 1](#) – *Small Cooks*, *Refuge Hill* – arguably fall into the referential category instead or as well, which I discuss next. *Palmerston Lucky School* is the single placename I am aware of that is neither physically nor (purely) functionally descriptive, but rather includes a more abstract (even aspirational) adjective.

These descriptive placenames map onto two categories of Gammeltoft’s (2005) typology introduced above. These are the categories he refers to as “the inherent quality of the location” (= physical descriptions) and the use of the locality (= functional descriptions).

The remaining category of Gammeltoft’s typology, “the relationship of the locality to something external” is the third and largest category of placename on Palmerston. For the sake of simplicity, I call these referential placenames. This is the largest category because, apart from those listed in [Table 2](#) below, it includes the name of each house on the island, in the form *Mama Aka’s*, *Kori’s*, and *Edward’s*, among others. These are generally named after the head of the household, who tends to be the oldest person, and/or male. It is frequently the case that they continue to be named after that person even after they leave or die, and when the house is then inhabited instead by other members of the family. For example, when I stayed on Palmerston I lived at *Mama Tuaine’s*, a person whom I have never met, and who was not then living on Palmerston. The house was actually inhabited by her son Simon, who was my host. However, the place is referred to as *Mama Tuaine’s* as often as it is referred to as *Simon’s*: it is marked on [Figure 2](#) as *Mama Tuaine* in large print, designating the location as a whole, and *Simon’s house* in small print, designating a single building within that space. The space as a whole includes her other son, *Edward’s*, house. In this way, the use of *Mama Tuaine’s* for the whole compound, and *Simon’s* and *Edward’s* for two of the subordinate buildings, maps the hierarchy of the family tree onto the placename hierarchy. This close relationship between location and family tree has always been a feature of Palmerston Island, ever since William Marsters divided the island into three for his three wives, and set each up in a house in its own territory. Palmerston Islanders today all trace their ancestry back to one of the three wives (through the patriline) and have land rights, including right to build and reside, only in that part of the island originally assigned to that woman.

Referential placenames on Palmerston Island fall into three subcategories. There are placenames that refer to people (*Tom’s*, *Cook’s*, *Tamaketa*, *Marion’s Bank*), placenames that refer to other places (*Leicester*, *Karakerake*, *Cape Horn Rock*)¹, and placenames that refer to a historical event or story (*Scratch-my-arse Rock*). Most of the sandbanks in the lagoon are named for ships that were wrecked there (*Thistle*, *Spar*, *Primrose*, etc.), which could be seen as shorthand reference to the story of the shipwreck; or perhaps ships are so significant in Palmerston’s history that they form their own category, such that we have a division into subtypes of referential placename referring to: (a) people (b) places (c) ships and (d) events. Similarly *Cook’s* could be taken as reference to the actual person of Captain Cook, or as a shorthand reference to the story of Palmerston’s European discovery.

¹ I would argue that *Church of Zion* falls into this category, even though it is unlikely that it is named for Jerusalem as a physical location, but rather in the sense of *Zion* as a metaphorical spiritual homeland.

Table 2: Referential placenames.

<i>Palmerston</i>	named for Lord Palmerston
<i>Pamati</i>	Māori transliteration of Palmerston, often used in official Cook Islands maps or documents.
<i>Tamaketa</i>	named after a man from Manihiki
<i>Marion's Bank</i>	Marion was one of the first generation born on Palmerston
<i>Aaron's Point</i>	Aaron was one of the first generation born on Palmerston
<i>Suatumu</i>	named after a Penrhynese man who spent some time on Palmerston
<i>John's Point</i>	there have been many Johns in Palmerston's history
<i>Taenga's Sandbank</i>	
<i>Tom's</i>	there have been many Toms in Palmerston's history
<i>Ngutememu Rock</i>	'thick lips', a nickname for a past islander
<i>Cook's</i>	an islet, named for Captain Cook
<i>Leicester</i>	an islet, named for William Marsters' probable birthplace
<i>Karakerake</i>	an islet, named after Akakaingara's family land on Penrhyn
<i>Cape Horn Rock</i>	
<i>Small Cook's</i>	referring to <i>Cook's</i> , another islet also in the Palmerston lagoon
<i>Table Rock Passage</i>	a passage near Table Rock, also in the lagoon
<i>Calcutta Motu</i> [= "islet"]	
<i>Church of Zion</i>	
<i>Scratch-My-Arse Rock</i>	
<i>Thistle, Spar, Julia Cobb, Kitsap, Primrose</i>	sandbanks, named for shipwrecks

Memorializing of people and places

As seen in [Table 2](#), the strategy of naming a place for a person with whom it is/was associated is a common one on Palmerston Island. Whether or not it is a deliberate strategy, this naming convention serves to ensure that Palmerston Islanders who have left the island temporarily or longer term are continually brought to mind, and in some cases, such as in the naming of houses and housing compounds, it very literally reserves a space for them if they return. This is a necessary function on an island where nearly every young adult leaves to find work elsewhere, and where any serious medical problem requires an entire family to take a boat journey of several days' duration, remaining off-island indefinitely for the many months it may take to find a boat that will bring them back. It is, of course, not unheard of for a resident of (sub)urban Australia, for example, also to refer to nearby locations with the possessive form of someone who lives there, and in fact to continue to do so even after that neighbour moves away. This, too, is a kind of memorializing and inscribing of human relationships upon the toponymic landscape. The difference is that this is the exception, not the norm in urban or suburban Australia and similar locations, because we have other more official placenames to draw on. Moreover, because it is rare for a neighbourhood to be so densely interconnected, and with such a widely known history of residents, we could refer to all the houses by the names of their former (or even current) occupants. In this way, the Palmerston Island naming system, or 'non-naming' system, if you like, reflects the small, isolated and densely networked

nature of the community. A similar pattern is noticeable in how the islets and sandbanks around the Palmerston reef are named. Some of the names honoured in this way are key people from Palmerston Island's history: *Marion's Bank*, *Tamaketa*, *Tom's*, *Taenga's Sandbank*. Others are named for boats that have been wrecked there: *Thistle*, *Spar*, *Julia Cobb*, *Primrose*. And some index other places in the world that Palmerston Islanders see as important to their history: Leicester, Calcutta Motu, Cape Horn Rock, and Karakerake, named after land on Penrhyn Island that belonged to the family of Akakaingara, one of William Marsters' wives. This latter name encodes the historical relationship between Penrhyn and Palmerston, in the same way the name *Leicester* for one of the lagoon's islets refers to William Marsters' own birthplace.²

To reiterate, these referential naming strategies serve to mitigate Palmerston Island's isolation. It is one of the world's most isolated places. Visiting boats are infrequent, and at best only appear during the two months of the year when the weather is most favourable. It takes three to five days of travel to reach the nearest other inhabited islands, and until very recently, there was no reliable means of communication with the rest of the world.

With little medical treatment available on the island, if a Palmerston Islander becomes seriously ill or injured, a boat is sent from Rarotonga to collect them for treatment there (or in non-urgent cases, they travel on the next supply boat later in the year). In cases too serious for the Rarotongan hospital, the patient travels on to Auckland. The Cook Islands financially supports such travel and accommodation for the patient and their family. Most Palmerston Islanders have cousins, aunts and uncles, if not closer relatives, living in Rarotonga and Auckland, so the weeks or months of treatment and recovery, and then time waiting for the next boat back to Palmerston, are usually spent with this wider family.

Palmerston Islanders sometimes also travel to Rarotonga for education. A few families have sent their older children to live with relatives in Rarotonga or Auckland to attend school there, and Palmerston Islanders who hold such positions as teacher, nurse and police officer have spent months or years in Rarotonga undergoing training. Most families thus have a few members who have spent time in Australia, New Zealand, or at least Rarotonga, and all households have extended family living in these places. Most Palmerston children leave the island when they reach their late teens; some return when they are older and ready to settle down, but most do not.

The island then is continually losing people, and there is always uncertainty over who might return, and when. In the early days of the island, the young men would sign on to boats to work around the Pacific, for years or even decades at a time. Young women would marry off to other islands. While life on Palmerston today still has its dangers, it was even more risky in the past, and Palmerston's history is full of tales of drownings, hurricanes, tidal waves, shipwrecks and other misadventures (Hendery, Mühlhäusler & Nash, 2015). A Palmerston Islander's time on Palmerston was therefore fleeting and uncertain, but a place named for a person was a way of holding tight to their memory no matter what might happen.

Palmerston versus the world

I conclude by returning to the question of how Palmerston placenaming fits into the context of placenaming in general, in the colonial Pacific more specifically, in creole communities, and among "pristine" geographies. While Palmerston is not a typical colonial context, since the

² See Hendery (2013) for a discussion of the evidence for Marsters' early life.

Polynesian and English inhabitants arrived together to an uninhabited island, its history sits within the colonial context. The fact that the language spoken there today is a dialect of English, despite the initial settler group consisting of only a single English speaker and a number of Cook Islanders, bears witness to the effects European colonization of the Pacific have had on the linguistic context, of which placenaming is a part.

Like other parts of the Pacific that were subject to European colonizers, Palmerston placenames contain elements from both languages. Unlike many other such places, however, there is no layering of languages such that placenames embedded in the local geography and history are Polynesian while non-embedded colonial names impose relationships with external referents. The only instances of true exonymic placenames on Palmerston Island are the names *Palmerston* or *Pamati* itself, and that exists in both Māori and English form; indeed, the Māori term *Pamati* is more likely to be used by the external governmental powers. While English-origin placenames on Palmerston do sometimes reference external people and places – such as *Cooks*, *Leicester*, *Cape Horn Rock* and *Calcutta Motu* – there are plenty of Māori placenames that serve the same purpose of connecting the island with relevant external people and places, only this time, in the Pacific: *Suatumu*, *Tamaketa*, *Karakerake*.

A claim that has been made about island placenaming in particular is that naming places after incidents is more embedded culturally and ecologically, and are potentially more imaginative in some places, such as Tristan da Cunha or Pitcairn (Zettersten, 1969). Palmerston does not have this same wealth of places named for events, unless we consider shipwreck names to be pointers to events – the disaster – rather than objects (ships). The single case that is indisputably an event-based placename is *Scratch-My-Arse Rock*, a humorous commemoration that is a not-especially-significant event in the island's history.

Many typologies of placenames prove themselves unsuitable for Palmerston Island, either because they are geographically embedded in a different region, or because they are designed for places with much longer histories of naming. For example, Palmerston Island has not had sufficient time to develop 'mistake' or 'folk-etymology'-based placenames as are suggested as categories by Stewart (1975). Gammeltoft's (2005) typology fits Palmerston placenames quite well, but his further divisions beyond the three main categories into subcategories are unnecessary for a place like Palmerston with so few placenames in total.³

The final way in which Palmerston Island differentiates its placenaming from that of many other places, and from the expectations of most toponymy typologists, is through the widespread use of what I have called 'simple' placenames, or, if one prefers not to consider these placenames, then through an extreme lack of placenames in the central parts of the island. These simple placenames or non-placenames, and the use of referential names such as *Tom's* or *Mama Aka's* are made possible by the small size of the island, the small densely-networked population, and the high-context communication style this enables. These are not the case for many other locations, but it may be that there are more small island communities where these sorts of names exist, where it has not been remarked upon precisely because they seem too simple and non-conventional to be considered placenames at all. A closer examination and comparison of small isolated places with dense social networks that have had a longer history than Palmerston Island (such as Pitcairn or Tristan da Cunha) may help us understand better how such simple place referents can fossilize and develop into more

³ For example, Gammeltoft's places named for a quality are further divided into those named for their: (a) size (b) shape (c) colour (d) age (e) material or texture (f) that which exists near (i) creatures (ii) plant growth and (iii) inanimate objects, or (g) perceived qualities.

traditional toponyms, and would therefore contribute to our understanding of the special linguistic and anthropological nature of islands.

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