



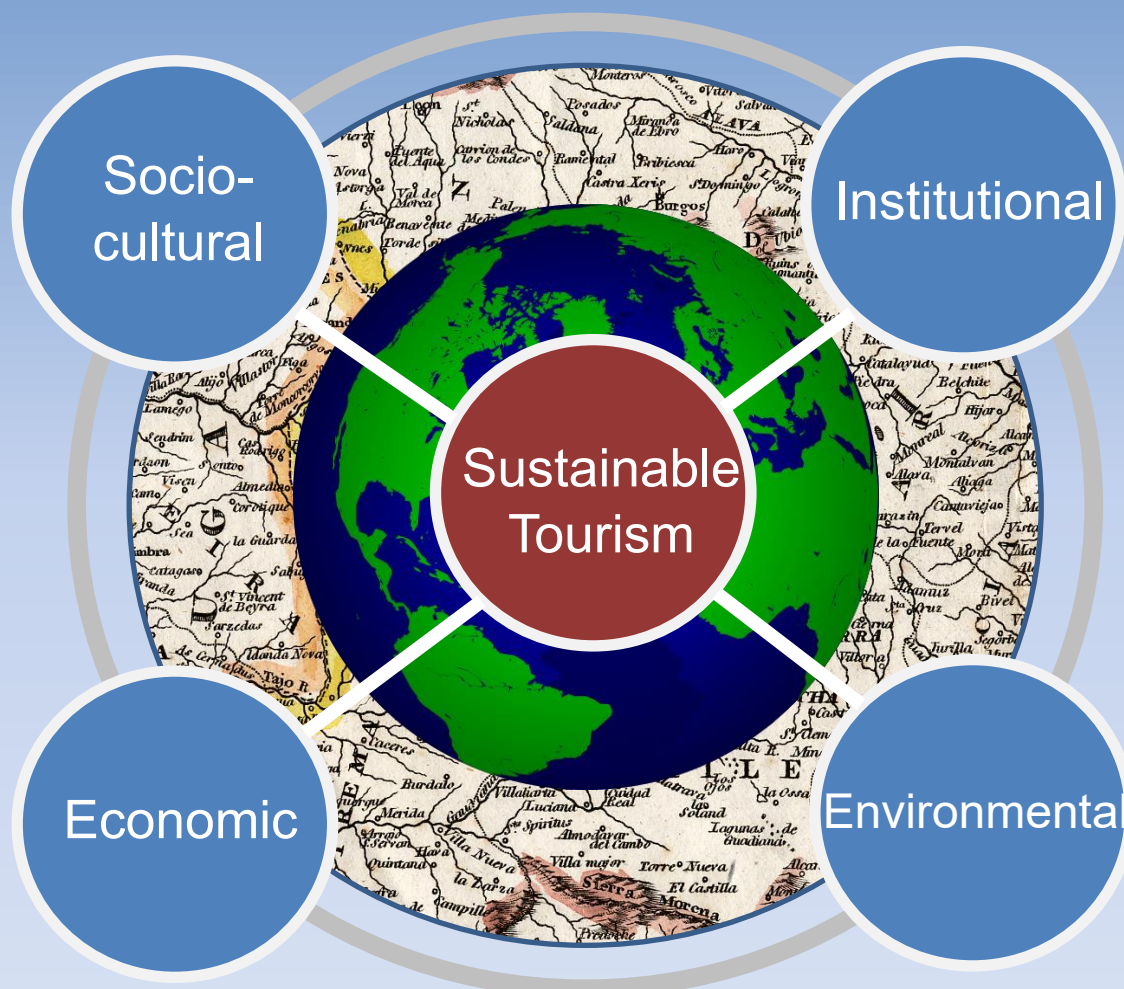
United Nations Group of Experts  
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GEOGRAPHICAL  
NAMES

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# Geographical Names and Sustainable Tourism





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**Secretariat of the Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEKN)**  
**Room DC2-1508**  
**United Nations**  
**New York, NY 10017, USA**  
**Tel: (212) 963-5823**  
**Fax: (212) 963-0623**  
**E-mail: [blake1@un.org](mailto:blake1@un.org) ;**  
**[geoinfo\\_unsd@un.org](mailto:geoinfo_unsd@un.org)**

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## Danish postcolonial microtoponymy and the ‘threat’ of sustainable tourism-The cases of Tranquebar and the Danish West Indies

In spite of its rather limited size in terms of both area and population, Denmark is among the European nations to have held several colonies around the world. The nature of these colonies covered a variety of forms, from mere trading stations in India (1620-1845) and slave ports in Ghana (1659-1850) to larger colonies of slave-based plantations in the Caribbean (1672-1917), and Arctic fishing and hunting communities in Greenland (1721-1953). In all these places, the Danish colonial administration introduced a number of place-names in its own language. In some of the colonies, this included an extensive microtoponymy in the form of urban street names.

When the Indian colony of Tranquebar (Tharangambadi) was sold to the British in 1845, it came with at least thirty streets and lanes within its urban walls named in Danish (e.g. *Strandstræde*, *Østergade*, *Hvilestræde*, *Prins Jørgensgade* and *Endeløssstræde*). To little surprise, the new British administrators saw little use in maintaining the Danish microtoponymy with its challenging pronunciations, and the streets of Tranquebar were soon renamed in English, some as direct translations (*Kongensgade* > *King Street*) others with entirely new meanings (e.g. *Købmagergade*, ‘Merchant Street’ > *Goldsmith Street*). A rather creative solution was found for *Dronningensgade* (‘Queen Street’), which was translated into the hybrid Indian-English name *Rani Street* (*Rani* being the female form for ‘princely ruler’).

A different scenario took place when the Danish West Indies in the Caribbean was sold to the USA in 1917, to become the US Virgin Islands (USVI). In the three major towns of the islands – Charlotte Amalie (St. Thomas), Christiansted and Frederiksted (St. Croix) – not only the names of the towns themselves, but also their Danish microtoponymy were maintained by the new American authorities. Names like *Commandantgade oven Vandet* and *Wimmelskaftsgade* could hardly have possessed a much lesser challenge to American tongues than what the British had met in Tranquebar. Plans for a reform was in fact promoted by a local committee in Charlotte Amalie in 1922 already, in which new colloquial names in English were suggested for all the town streets – with both the practical concerns and a wish to get rid off the colonial legacy embedded in the names as the explicit motivation (Knud-Hansen 1922). However, the proposed reform was dismissed by the American authorities, apparently to acknowledge the toponymy’s value as cultural heritage. The transfer of the West Indies had been a protracted and troublesome process, with significant diplomatic efforts on both sides, which besides the end price of the islands (\$25 million in gold dollars) had led to an extensive contract of transfer agreements, in which the USA promised to honour various cultural and societal aspects of the former Danish citizens on the islands (Tansill 1932). The toponymy was not mentioned among the concerned issues, but it may be that the American lawmakers nevertheless did not want to risk a complaint on the matter from the Danes, which could lead to new diplomatic tensions between the two nations.



All the three main towns of US Virgin Islands still have many Danish street names, even if these – quite understandably – occasionally offer some challenges to the local sign-making authorities. This is, for instance, seen in Charlotte Amalie, where *Prindsess Gade* (from *Da. Prinsesse Gade*, ‘Princess Street’) and *Torre Strade* (from *Da. Torve Stræde*, ‘Market Lane’) have developed some peculiar spelling forms compared to Danish orthography in both 1917 and today.

Photo by Johnny Grandjean Gøgsig Jakobsen

In 1993, a new attempt was made to reform the challenging street names in Charlotte Amalie, and this time it led to a compromise, in which secondary names in English were added to some of the primary ones in Danish (Daily News 1993). As in the case of Tranquebar, the solutions differed from direct translations (*Kongensgade* > *King Street*) to entirely new names (*Dronningensgade* > *Seventh Day Street*). I am not aware if reform plans have been discussed for the towns of Christiansted and Frederiksted on St. Croix, but here secondary names in English have been added to the Danish ones as well, although here almost exclusively as direct translations (*Compagniets Gade* > *Company Street*; *Dronningens Tværgade* > *Queen Cross Street*).





*Several urban street signs in the US Virgin Islands both have an official Danish name and a secondary colloquial name in English. The latter can either be a direct translation of the Danish name (as Kongens Gade / King Street in Frederiksted, St. Croix) or a completely alternative name (as Dronningens Gade ('Queen Street') and Seventh Day Street in Charlotte Amalie, St. Thomas).*

*Photo by Johnny Grandjean Gøgsig Jakobsen.*

The risk of a diplomatic crisis between Denmark and the USA in case of a full abandonment of Danish street names in the USVI is hardly a matter of concern today. The Danish colonial heritage is, however, still present in the historical and cultural awareness of the local USVI-authorities as well as among many individual Virgin Islanders, of whom several still hold Danish family names. But apart from the introvert aspect of maintaining the street names as a part of the islands' cultural heritage, an extrovert economic motive has emerged as well in recent years: tourism. For the significant number of American mainland tourists coming to especially St. Thomas, the curious Danish microtoponymy may be seen as an extra, exotic flavour to the Caribbean attraction in general. But within the last couple of decades, a growing number of Danish tourists have turned their attention to the islands as well, attracted by the offered combination of Caribbean lifestyle with a national-romantic Danish colonial past. Around the time of the 'Transfer Centennial' in March 2017, the attraction even led to several weekly, direct flights between Copenhagen and the USVI, and especially Christiansted on St. Croix was in periods turned into a virtual Danish holiday centre. Without doubt, the presence of Danish street names in the USVI towns – even put on street signs in a classic shape and colour recognised from Copenhagen – plays a significant role in the 'colonial nostalgia' enjoyed by the Danish tourists.

Thus, most local lawmakers around the world would think twice before starting to alter anything which appears to bring in tourists – even if it means that the local community have to endure peculiar street names with difficult pronunciations and obscure meanings. But things change all the time. While the devastations of the hurricanes Irma and Maria in September 2017 and the on-going COVID-19 pandemic may only have put serious, but relatively short-termed stops to the stream of Danish 'colonial tourism' to the USVI, the new and apparently more long-termed effect of 'sustainable tourism' may show more fatal for the former Danish West Indies' prospects of rebuilding its 'pre-Irma' attraction to Danish tourist families. Time will show if such a possible decline in Danish tourists across the Atlantic Ocean will also lead to a diminished USVI motivation to maintain its Danish street names.

**Johnny Grandjean Gøgsig Jakobsen**

*Assistant Professor, University of Copenhagen, Denmark*

*Email: [jggj@hum.ku.dk](mailto:jggj@hum.ku.dk)*

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