Colonial city names as labels

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The dominant theories on the semantics of proper names (Mill, Kripke, etc.) explain that these names are simple interchangeable labels. The case of colonial onomastics can be seen as an illustration of this idea: The initial labels were replaced by others, imposed by the colonialists. However, the phenomenon of decolonisation may prove the opposite: It is because these new names were not perceived as labels that they were replaced. They had an important symbolic weight: the idea that the domination of the colonialists was shown by these names.

In the first part, we will discuss different semantic theories to infer that different points of view lead to different conclusions: Philosophers suggest that proper names are empty because they do not have intension (for instance, the toponym *Newcastle* is not a new castle), but historians or common people see other things in these names; they are not focused on intension but on historical facts or symbolical thoughts. In the second part, we will consider the colonial practices in terms of toponymy. Belgian and German practices are compared, especially concerning Rwanda and Burundi which were firstly German colonies and, in 1916, were given to Belgium. What stands out is that the Belgian rulers imposed city names linked to Belgium. For instance, Kinshasa was *Léopoldville* from *King Leopold*, but all the main cities in the colonies were given this kind of name. When Rwanda became a Belgian colony, Butare was the new capital under the name of *Astrida*, because of the queen Astrid.

This practice seems close to French colonial method, but different from the German one. In the German colonial empire, names from motherland were used but the data imply that main cities were not given German names, cf. *Dar Es Salaam*, *Lomé* and *Tsingtao*. There were German street names, for instance a *Marktstrasse* in Tsingtao or *Kaiserstrasse* in Windhoek (and castles built in Windhoek were also German-named), but the city names remained non-German. In Oceania, there were also a lot of German names (*Kaiser-Wilhelms-Land*, *Neupommern*, *Neumecklenburg*), but very few German city names. In the Ostafrika part, many geo-objects received German names (*X-Insel* or *X-Berge*), but there only seems to be less than a dozen city names (*Neu-Köln*, *Neu-Trier*, *Bismarckburg*, *Alt-Langenburg*, *Wilhelmstal*, etc.).

Belgian names were for the most part a hommage to the royal family and the motherland. We will conclude that most of these names disappeared with decolonisation because the symbolic weight of these names was too important to keep them. The new governments, just like the colonial administration, did not seem to consider them empty labels. Ironically, one of the very few that still exist is a city name that is German: *Finschhafen* in Papua New Guinea.