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GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES IN EMERGENT MULTI-LINGUAL COUNTRIES

Paper submitted by the Government of Kenya

GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES IN EMERGENT MULTI-LINGUAL COUNTRIES

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A study of survey and mapping periodicals and conference proceedings reveals very little material on the subject of geographical names and suggests that cartographers take an insufficient interest in this aspect of their work. Most of recent significant thought and investigation has been by experts in other fields, e.g. languages or anthropology. Of work published in the English language, the papers of Aurousseau, Berry and Burrill at the Fifth International Congress of Toponymy and Anthroponymy at Salamanca in 1955, and other works by the same authors, are particularly valuable to cartographers.

Cartographers have a special responsibility for geographical names because once a name appears on a map, it is, rightly or wrongly, accepted by a great many people as authoritative both for geographical position and for spelling. They should therefore take positive action to obtain authentic and accurate names for all features shown on their maps.

Where there is any doubt, the guiding principle should be that the whole of any name on the map should be easily recognisable as the name of the same feature when spoken by a local (possibly illiterate) inhabitant.

("Whole name" here means including both the generic (if any) and specific terms). Special difficulties in reaching the best forms arise in multi-lingual countries.

The many problems of initial recording of names, when the first systematic topographical mapping of a formerly primitive country is

executed, are probably well known. The problems vary from place to place but some of the commonest are: absence of a written native language, transliteration of local orthographies, variations of local pronunciation or dialect, lack of knowledge of the native language by the travellers or surveyors who record the names, errors introduced by third-language interpreters, alternative names (in different vernaculars) for the same geographical feature, wrong spellings established by long usage, etc.

A few examples from Kenya may illustrate these points :-

Except for the coast region, Kenya was a blank on the world map until 1883 when Joseph Thomson was the first traveller to make sketch-maps of his route to Lake Victoria. As with the many who followed him in the next 15 or 20 years, his guides and interpreters came from the Coast and their native tongue was Swahili, a language of the Bantu group. The interpreters, not unnaturally, had some difficulty in rendering non-Bantu names, which the travellers then tried to record in English orthography on their maps. Thus a name like Ol-oldian (Maasai language) was recorded as Londiani (the final i being typical Bantu). Similarly Ol-onongot has become Longonot. Many such distortions have become established spellings and are unlikely to be changed.

In some places the early travellers failed to record a native name for a feature and therefore gave it an imported name, e.g. Lake Rudolf, Aberdare Range, Thomson's Falls. The reasons for not recording a native name varied: some places were uninhabited and hence had no name,

e.g. Mackinnon Road, Hoey's Bridge; while some had no dominant native name, e.g. Lake Rudolf is named quite differently by each of the tribes (Samburu, Turkana, Merille, Gabbra and others) who live around it.

Such imported names have therefore persisted.

Some imported names given to previously unnamed areas, however, have been overtaken by the growth of a nearby place and eventually superseded. Thus Port Florence was absorbed into Kisumu and Fort Harrington into Moyale while today Murang'a has overtaken Fort Hall in local usage.

In many places the early surveyors recorded a specific native name for a feature but added an English designation, e.g. Odiero Hill. Such hybrids are gradually being rationalised by the substitution on the map of the appropriate vernacular designation: in this area the vernacular is Luo and the name in local usage is Got Kodiero.

Such simple rationalisation is not always possible. Consider, for example, the Uasin Gishu Plateau. This area was known to the nomadic Maasai (who called it Ewuasin Ngishu) but had no settled inhabitants before the arrival of immigrant farmers in 1908. There is no true vernacular in the District today; certainly it is not Maasai and thus there would be no merit in translating the generic "Plateau" into that language. (It may be noted here that outside a few places on the coast, Swahili is not a vernacular in Kenya; in the Nilotic, Hamitic and Cushitic language areas particularly, it is as much a foreign language as is English).

A somewhat similar problem arises in several areas where the "immigrant" language is other than English, e.g. in the North-Eastern Region of Kenya, a high proportion of place-names are of Boran origin but most of the present inhabitants are Somali. It is difficult to decide whether the correct rendering of a name in such an area is according to the way it is pronounced in the original language or the way it is pronounced by the present inhabitants.

Another class of bi-lingual hybrids which presents a difficult problem in rationalisation is that in which the native specific name is, or includes, a generic term, e.g. Naivasha, which derives from the Maasai Enaiposha meaning lake. We have a Naivasha town (which is an established name) and a Lake Naivasha, in which the English generic "Lake" is as redundant as the "Desert" in Sahara Desert (Sahara = deserts, in Arabic). We must continue to use it, however, to distinguish in doubtful contexts the lake from the town.

Finally, there is in parts of Kenya a problem of transliteration. Both Maasai and Kikuyu have their own orthographies which are officially recognised but which differ from Swahili. The Survey of Kenya, as the executive of the Kenya Standing Committee on Geographical Names, has a Government mandate to spell native names on maps in Swahili orthography (which is a simplified form of the English R.G.S.II system).

Kikuyu uses the same alphabet as Swahili except that the Kikuyu letter c equals the Swahili ch. However, many of the letters have a

different pronunciation, particularly the vowels, which may be modified by various diacritical marks.

Thus the Kikuyu pronunciation of the town name written in Kikuyu as Thika would be in Swahili Dheka. However, the form Thika has become established and cannot now be changed. The fact that Kikuyu and non-Kikuyu pronounce it differently has to be accepted. Following from this, it has been decided that all Kikuyu names will be spelt on the map as they are spelt in Kikuyu, only omitting the diacritical marks and rendering c as ch.

No similar problem arises in Maasai areas, because the Maasai orthography is a recent innovation and nearly all place-name spellings are already established in Swahili orthography.

In general, cartographers are not qualified to solve all the problems involved in determining correct place names, nor to give decisions on spelling. Any country in which such problems arise clearly requires a national committee or board with both the ability to find the best answers and the authority to publish them. Such a body should include experts in cartography, phonetics and languages and should have regional sub-committees whose members must have intimate knowledge of both the local geography and the vernacular.

It is suggested that this Conference resolve to urge member governments to set up such national committees, wherever this has not yet been done.

References

The book "The Rendering of Geographical Names" (1957) by M. Aurousseau, former Secretary of the British P.C.G.N., contains over three hundred references.

"The Place-Names of Ghana" by Dr. J. Berry (1958) is very relevant to the present discussion.