

# SUMMARY RECORD OF THE FIFTH PLENARY MEETING<sup>1</sup>

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva, on Wednesday, 6 September, 1967, at 3.20 p.m.

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### *President:*

Mr. BARANOV (*Union of Soviet Socialist Republics*)

### **Exchange of experience on problems identified in the report of the Group of Experts on Geographical Names** [Agenda item 8] (*concluded*)

The PRESIDENT invited comments on problem (*p*).

Mr. SCHULE (Switzerland) expressed the hope that the compilers of glossaries of geographical terms would bear in mind the difference which often existed between the local meaning of such terms and the meaning assigned to them by geographers. Local usage generally defined a feature as it occurred in the locality, thereby limiting the meaning of the term used to designate it. A knowledge of the range of local meanings of terms would be of only indirect assistance to geographers, who had to work with precise terms that always bore the same meaning. In some cases, therefore, a glossary of terms for geographers would conflict with local usage. Moreover, many technical neologisms invented by geographers for their convenience were unrelated to any locally used terms. The cartographer's approach to a glossary of geographical terms would therefore be different from that of a linguist adopting local usage as a basis. A dictionary of local dialectal terms was being compiled in Switzerland; he gave instances of terms which bore different meanings in different parts of the country, and of terms whose meaning differed from usage in France.

Mr. NEDELEC (France) acknowledged that it would be difficult, if not impossible, to compile an authoritative glossary of standardized terms in view of the great variety of local terms used and their different spellings and meanings in different regions. Many place names and family names derived from such terms; he gave some examples. After the 1960 meeting, the French National Geographical Institute (GN) had published a glossary which included meanings of many dialectal terms found on maps and occurring in place names and family names. Copies were available for any delegations interested.

Mr. LEWIS (United Kingdom) thought that the Conference should concern itself in the first instance with glossaries of terms which occurred in geographical names, and not with glossaries of all geographical terms. It should

not become too deeply involved in the vast subject of geographical terms or the essentially linguistic science of onomastics. He felt that it would make little progress unless it limited its objective, at least in the initial stage, to generic terms which formed a part of geographical names.

Mr. GOMEZ DE SILVA (Mexico) agreed. He thought that the different ways in which geographical terms were used in different countries were often the result of ambiguous or inaccurate translations.

Mr. BURRILL (Pan-American Institute on Geography and History), speaking at the invitation of the President, expressed agreement with the French representative that it would be impossible to compile authoritative glossaries of all geographical terms at that stage. However, the Conference could not confine its attention to generic terms occurring in place names. The different meanings attributed to geographical terms by different persons and in different parts of the world had created a major problem in geography, and efforts should be made to standardize usage by publishing authoritative definitions of terms.

Mr. CORDERAS DESCÁRREGA (Spain) agreed. Authoritative guidance was needed to clear up misconceptions; he gave some instances of misinterpreted toponyms in his country.

Mr. ORMELING (Netherlands) drew attention to the practice followed in many schools of inventing simplified names, which were easy to memorize, for geographical entities abroad that had no official designation. For instance, the term "Castilian Separation Mountains" was commonly used in Netherlands schools but was not found on maps.

Mr. MURZAEV (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics) said that the key to the interpretation of geographical terms and of many geographical names lay in etymology, which could therefore be the key to their standardization. However, not all geographical terms were of interest to the Conference; it was essentially concerned with terms from which geographical names were derived. The rest could more appropriately be studied by linguists. It was important for those concerned with the standardization of names to have a clear understanding of local semantic changes which altered the function of terms incorporated in geographical names. He had submitted under agenda item 10 an "international glossary of local geographical terms", discussing the principles on which such a glossary should be based. The text would be presented in Committee II.

The PRESIDENT invited comments on problems (*q*) 1 and 2.

Mr. HOVDA (Norway) observed that place names were a part of a country's cultural heritage and had in many cases been transmitted orally from ancient times, thus constituting valuable historical material. Many place names or names of features in Norway had no descriptive or

<sup>1</sup> The original text of this record appeared as document E/CONF.53/SR.5.

generic element. They could not be translated or modified by the addition of such generic elements for purposes of standardization. Norway had a special committee to deal with appeals in regard to geographical names.

Mr. MUTZIGER (United States of America) drew attention to the ambiguity resulting from the use of abbreviations, which was the subject of problem (q) 2.

Mr. BREU (Austria) cited as an instance of such ambiguity the use, in Italy, of the letter "S" as an abbreviation for many forms of the word "San"; that practice created difficulties for people who did not know Italian. It was admittedly necessary to indicate the nature of the geographical entity named, but on maps that could not be done by adding a generic term to the existing name.

Mr. LEWIS (United Kingdom) felt sure that the group of experts had not intended that generic terms should be attached to existing geographical names, but only that indexes should give an indication of the nature of the entity to which the name applied, and should include a glossary of the generic toponyms in existing names.

Mr. DAHLBERG (Netherlands) agreed that in some countries it would be impossible to add generic terms to place names. One solution would be to preface the full geographical name with the generic term in very small print.

The PRESIDENT invited comments on problem (r).

Mr. MUTZIGER (United States of America) said that the Group of Experts had intended the problem to be brought to the attention of countries which included the definite article in some of their geographical names, so that the integration of articles in those names could be standardized. The experts had not been sure of the significance of such standardization for domestic use, but considered it important for foreigners to know whether the article was being used.

Mr. SFICLEA (Romania) said that in his country the names of rivers, for instance, could be written in three ways on maps. In the first place, the definite article might precede the hydronym; secondly, the article might be omitted on maps containing many names; and thirdly, the article might be omitted, and the hydronym preceded by the Romanian word for "river". The third variant was most satisfactory for domestic use, while the second was most convenient for foreigners.

Mr. BLOK (Netherlands) observed that the question whether the definite article was essential depended on the language of the country where the place name occurred. In the Netherlands a simple rule had been evolved: the article was regarded as essential if it had to be repeated after an adjective qualifying the place name. Perhaps that rule could apply in some other languages.

Mr. LEWIS (United Kingdom) said that that rule would not apply to the English language.

Mr. BURRILL (Pan-American Institute on Geography and History), speaking at the invitation of the President, said that in his opinion the Netherlands rule was purely domestic in its application.

Mr. BURU (Libya) said that in Arabic the definite article was an essential part of a geographical name.

Mr. BREU (Austria) suggested that, to avoid confusion, countries whose languages included the definite article in the name itself should give all the alternative forms of the name in their gazetteers.

Mr. AYOUBI (Lebanon) said that in his country it had been decided to omit the Arabic definite article "El" in the

Roman transcription when the article occurred at the beginning of a geographical name. That solution had the advantages of taking practical usage into account and of simplifying spelling on notices, signs and so forth. Nevertheless, the article was retained if it occurred in the middle of a geographical name.

Mr. CORDERAS DESCÁRREGA (Spain) said that in his country the question was regarded as one for the Spanish Language Academy rather than as a geographical or topographic matter.

Mr. MUTZIGER (United States of America), referring to the Lebanese representative's remarks, said that United States cartographers wished to know the exact names of geographical features in Arabic, for confusion might arise if the article were included at the beginning of a place name on an Arabic map, where the script had not been latinized.

The PRESIDENT invited comments on problem (s).

Mr. BURU (Libya) said that in recent years there had been a trend towards standardizing the Arabic alphabet in English and French. Arabic writers had reached agreement on the transliteration, and *Gazetteer* No. 41 of the United States Board of Geographical Names had been taken as a basis. The Arab States had decided that classical Arabic should be used in writing the alphabet, to the exclusion of dialects. It had not yet been decided, however, whether the English or French transcribed form should be authoritative; Libya used the English spelling, but countries such as Morocco and Algeria used the French.

Mr. MUTZIGER (United States of America) had been interested to note that countries other than his own had had difficulties in documenting name spellings in the Arabic alphabet area. For instance, the problem was referred to in the USSR paper submitted under agenda item 11.

Mr. LEWIS (United Kingdom) observed that the term "Arabic script", used in the document just mentioned seemed preferable to "Arabic alphabet".

Mr. VADIIE (Iran) drew attention to a transliteration system for geographical names in Arabic prepared by the head of his delegation in consultation with United States experts and contained in the *Romanization Guide* published by the United States Board on Geographic Names.

Mr. MAHIAR-NAVABI (Iran) said that, although great stress was being laid on ambiguities in documenting Arabic-alphabet names, he did not think Arabic usages were as ambiguous as those of the Roman alphabet. Where Arabic was concerned, the question was simply one of including or not including signs representing short vowels, but the sounds of the Roman alphabet varied widely among the European languages. Those difficulties might perhaps be overcome by using a phonetic system based on the Roman alphabet.

Mr. LEWIS (United Kingdom) agreed with the previous speaker as to the inadequacy of the Roman alphabet, but observed that there was no reliable way of rendering Arabic name spellings into other languages unless short vowels were fully indicated.

Mr. GOMEZ DE SILVA (Mexico) asked whether the consensus among Arabic scholars referred to by the Libyan representative meant that all diacritical marks should be included in standard name spellings.

Mr. BURU (Libya) reiterated that the Arabic-speaking countries had reached agreement on a standardized Arabic alphabet.

The PRESIDENT invited comments on problem (t).

Mr. GOMEZ DE SILVA (Mexico) asked why the experts had not referred to the written Chinese language in paragraph (t).

Mr. MUTZIGER (United States of America) replied that, although place names in Chinese raised problems of pronunciation, those problems were not as serious as the problems involved in reading Sino-Japanese and Sino-Korean characters. Where Japanese place names were written only in Sino-Japanese characters it was very hard to tell what the pronunciation should be, since many of the characters had three, four or even five different readings. Moreover, many Japanese maps showed names in Sino-Japanese characters for features named under Chinese influence, and names in *kana* for other features; the same, *mutatis mutandis*, applied to geographical names in Korea.

Mr. SUN (China) said that the pronunciation of Chinese characters was not uniform because many dialects were spoken in China. In 1928, however, the Government had published a phonetic system known as national phonetic letters, giving a standard pronunciation for each character. The system was taught from the primary school level, and could be checked with dictionaries. The phonetic system was not yet, however, being introduced into maps in the way that *kana* was being used on Japanese maps. An attempt had also been made to standardize the transcription of Chinese names into the Roman alphabet.

Mr. BREU (Austria) inquired whether the phonetic rendering of Chinese into Roman characters established by the Peking authorities was generally acceptable to the Conference.

Mr. LEWIS (United Kingdom) considered that that question might be discussed fully in Committee III.

The PRESIDENT invited comments on problem (u).

Mr. BURRILL (Pan-American Institute on Geography and History), speaking at the invitation of the President, said that problem (u), like problems (f) and (l), was mainly one of providing grammatical information.

The PRESIDENT invited comments on problem (u) separately or on the list of problems as a whole.

Mr. VADIIE (Iran) said that it was absolutely essential to find generally applicable principles of standardization. That need was clearly brought out in the USSR paper on problems of correlation between national and international standardization of geographical names.<sup>2</sup>

Mr. LAMBERT (Australia) said that a point not covered in the list of problems just examined was the question where to draw the boundary between oceanographic features and features dealt with by national name-standardizing bodies. In his opinion, national standardization should cover not only land areas but also a country's continental shelf.

Mr. GOMEZ DE SILVA (Mexico) observed that, in addition to the continental shelf, features in other parts of oceans—whether or not including a continental shelf—should be named, perhaps by a supranational authority.

Mr. FRASER (Canada) suggested that features in national or international waters might be dealt with by Committee IV. The question was the treatment of names of features subject to a single sovereignty.

Mr. LAMBERT (Australia) confirmed that the features he had in mind were those falling within the sovereignty of a single country.

Mr. LEWIS (United Kingdom) considered that the problem should be referred to Committee I, since it related to the limits of application of national standardization. The Australian representative had raised an important point; the Conference had hitherto concerned itself mainly with land names, whereas interest in resources situated beyond coastal limits, especially the resources of the continental shelf, was increasing rapidly. Even if the Conference could lay down no rules concerning limits, it could discuss the problem of names of features lying immediately outside coastal waters.

Mr. BURRILL (Pan-American Institute on Geography and History), speaking at the invitation of the President, observed that the discussion would relate to two different matters: first, the names of relatively small features known and named by people living on the adjacent land; and secondly, features discovered during the execution of oceanographic programmes and which had not been named. Both types of features could be discussed in Committees I and IV.

Mr. KOMKOV (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics) endorsed the views expressed by the two previous speakers.

The PRESIDENT announced that the Conference had completed its consideration of agenda item 8.

#### Election of officers

[Agenda item 3] (*concluded*)

*Mr. Ratajski (Poland) was elected Vice-Chairman of Committee I by acclamation.*

*Mr. Halvorsen (Norway) was elected Rapporteur of Committee I by acclamation.*

*Mr. Mahiar-Navabi (Iran) was elected Vice-Chairman of Committee II by acclamation.*

*Mr. Rosu (Romania) was elected Rapporteur of Committee II by acclamation.*

*Mr. Khamasundara (Thailand) was elected Vice-Chairman of Committee III by acclamation.*

*Mr. Pergorier (France) was elected Rapporteur of Committee III by acclamation.*

*Mr. Matta (Lebanon) was elected Vice-Chairman of Committee IV by acclamation.*

*Mr. Loxton (Kenya) was elected Rapporteur of Committee IV by acclamation.*

#### Reports by Governments on the progress made in the standardization of geographical names

[Agenda item 7] (*continued*)

Mr. SUNTHAN (Cambodia) said that, since its establishment in 1955, his country's National Geographical Service had had a toponymy section which was responsible for standardizing geographical names. Before that time, the staff concerned with the subject had been mainly French and the subordinate posts had been filled by Viet-Nameese. Place names had been transliterated into Roman letters according to French systems, and many of them had been interpreted by persons who did not possess a very good knowledge of Khmer, the national language. All the early maps of Cambodia on the scale of 1:100,000, 1:400,000 and 1:500,000 had been printed in Roman letters, but the National Geographical Service had now published a series of special maps with place names in Khmer for the use of schools.

<sup>2</sup> See below, agenda item 12.

A bilateral agreement concluded between his country and the United States in 1957 had made it possible for the National Geographical Service to carry out a project for the standardization of geographical names with the assistance of the United States Army Map Service, and to produce maps on the scale of 1:50,000 which showed place names in both the Khmer and the Roman alphabets. Unfortunately, owing to lack of experience, some errors had been made in the transcriptions into Roman letters. As a normal procedure, the service sent out teams to collect the names of inhabited places, watercourses and other geographical features from the local inhabitants. Those names were subsequently recorded according to the local pronunciation and checked with the land registration authorities of the province in question. Since the inhabitants of the north-eastern province had a marked regional accent, it was difficult for foreign researchers to record place names correctly. It was possible, therefore, that certain errors had occurred in compiling information on those parts of the country which had been covered by researchers from the Philippines.

The service was currently working with the Ministry of the Interior on a compilation of all place names in the kingdom. Those names were generally of historical or

legendary origin, although some might have other characteristics. For example, certain villages in the north-eastern province had Laotian names, which were either translated directly into Khmer or replaced by new names connected with local history or legend. He pointed out, in conclusion, that the real name of his country was "Kampuchea", which was rendered in French as "Cambodge" and in English as "Cambodia"; from a phonetic point of view, the English form was closer to the original than the French.

Mr. SIMPSON (Ghana) said that, before 1967, the various organizations in his country which were responsible for geographical names had worked independently. Only recently had a central committee been formed, under the auspices of the Academy of Sciences, with a view to national standardization. That committee was being assisted in its work by regional sub-committees which dealt with the problems of local dialects. Since there were at least twelve different dialects in Ghana, which covered an area of 92,000 square miles and had a population of 7 million, progress to date had been understandably slow and much remained to be done.

*The meeting rose at 5.50 p.m.*