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STANDARDIZATION OF GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES
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REPORT ON THE STANDARDIZATION OF GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES IN CAMEROON
Submitted by the Government of Cameroon

1. In Cameroon the Geographical Service is at present the body concerned, at the federal level, with the whole problem of standardization of geographical names.

Several authorities publish lists of names from time to time. These lists, being made for different purposes, cover specific categories of toponyms; for example:

The Territorial Administration Office prepares lists of polling stations;
The Prefectures and Sub-Prefectures prepare lists of villages for census purposes;

The Office of Overseas Technological and Scientific Research (ORSTOM) publishes lists of villages department by department.

In preparing the lists of names for the maps it publishes, the Geographical Service has to use all the documents listed above as well as information collected in the field.

2. These names are transcribed according to principles of standardization which are described below.

Standardization presents a special problem in Cameroon because it is a bilingual country. French and English are the two official languages of the Federation, French being spoken in the Federal State of East Cameroon and English in the Federal State of West Cameroon.

The policies applied in the two States will therefore be examined in turn.

3. In East Cameroon the preparation of the final basic maps, scale 1 : 200,000, with contour lines, is far advanced and more than four-fifths of the country has been covered. Hence the question of standardizing the names to be marked on these maps has been under detailed consideration for a long time. East Cameroon has

adopted the "Principles for transcription of African toponyms" drawn up by the French National Geographical Institute for use in the African States where it is responsible for map making. These principles were laid down in final form in 1963 and represent the fruit of linguistic and cartographic experience in widely varied linguistic areas of Black Africa.

They can be summarized as follows:

The Roman alphabet is used;

The conventions adopted do not, generally speaking, conflict with the existing rules which link spelling with pronunciation in French;

In principle, all letters are pronounced; however, some digraphs in current use have been preserved;

One letter, or one digraph, represents one phoneme only;

The use of diacritical marks has been reduced to the strict minimum.

The various phonemes to be transcribed have been brought into a fixed relationship with the letters and digraphs used for the purpose. For phonemes which do not exist in French, digraphs have been chosen which come as close as possible to the actual sound.

Field research on geographical names follows a standard pattern: the investigator listens to the local name and, so far as possible, notes it down phonetically. It is also recorded on tape.

All existing information is collected from the administrative authorities and old maps are consulted in the office.

From the study and comparison of these various data emerges the transcription of the name which will appear on the map.

Names of such administrative importance as to be in frequent official use, such as the names of departments and of the capitals of administrative districts, are adopted unchanged even when they are not in strict conformity with the rules of transcription (e.g. Dschang, Company).

4. In West Cameroon the problem is altogether different.

At the date of reunification, cartographic coverage was very scanty; there were only a few small-scale maps of the whole country and a few large-scale maps covering only a fraction of the national territory.

The first thing that had to be done, therefore, was to provide the country with a complete set of temporary maps on the 1 : 200,000 scale, and this was done between 1962 and 1965. The problem of toponymy was not gone into thoroughly at the time.

Work on the final basic maps has now begun; the field work is finished and the first sheets will be published in 1968.

The first principle will be to respect the linguistic individuality of the Federal State and, consequently, to ensure that the conventions adopted do not, generally speaking, conflict with the existing rules which link spelling with pronunciation in English.

The other basic principles will be the same as in East Cameroon, i.e.: use of the Roman alphabet; pronunciation (with rare exceptions) of all letters; one letter (or digraph) per phoneme; and the least possible use of diacritical marks.

The application of similar principles in both States ensures the desired consistency at federal level. Furthermore the same letters or digraphs will be used to transcribe a phoneme whenever possible.

For phonemes which are transcribed differently in the two systems, an equivalence will be established between transcription according to the rules of English spelling and transcription according to the rules of French spelling: for example sh and ch, u and ou, i and dj.

The presentation of the system of standardization will thus be one and the same for the whole of the Federation, but it will be diversified to take into account the special characteristics of the two Federal States.

5. In order that the maps of the Federation may be readable by English speakers and French speakers alike, a phonetic legend will be attached to each map, briefly setting out the principles and equivalences described above.

6. Later on, in the light of what is learned at the Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names, it will be possible to set up a national names authority to prepare "gazetteers of geographical names" for Cameroon and "lists or glossaries of geographical terms".