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  THE STANDARDIZATION OF
  GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES
Geneva, 4-22 September 1967
Item 8 of the provisional agenda

EXCHANGE OF EXPERIENCE ON PROBLEMS IDENTIFIED IN THE GROUP OF EXPERTS' REPORT

Submitted by the Government of Kenya*

A separate paper has been submitted under item 7 of the provisional agenda.[1]
Some duplication of the information given in that paper and this one is
unavoidable.

The problems are identified by the same letter as used in the Experts'
Report:

(a) Names of features are collected by land surveyors of the Survey of
Kenya engaged in field-checking topographical maps. If local written forms are
available the surveyor copies them. If there is no written form available he
records what he hears, using Swahili orthography. The spellings are checked
wherever possible by a local authority (usually administrative, educational or
religious) whose recommendations are also recorded, together with information on
language, meaning and alternative names.

The whole record is examined by the Standing Committee on Geographical Names,
or its secretary, and amendments may be made to conform with accepted principles
on published usage, etc.[2] Historical evidence prior to about 1880 does not
exist for Kenya, except for some places on the coast of the Indian Ocean.

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* Prepared by J. Loxton, Secretary, Standing Committee on Geographical Names.
[1] See E/CONF.53/L.3.
[2] For details see E/CONF.53/L.3.

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(b) The statement under (a) above applies equally to determining extent of features. Kenya is completely covered by topographical maps at scales 1:50,000 or 1:100,000. This simplifies the task. Generally, current usage outweighs historical evidence. For example the mountains called Ol Dainyo le Satima by the Maasai were first put on the map in 1883 as the Aberdare Range. The latter name is still the one in common use, the name Satima being now restricted to the highest summit.

(c) Where there is doubt, alternative names are added on the maps in parenthesis after the name commanding most support.

(d) The local name is shown on maps against the part of any feature to which it is known to apply. No principle has been laid down for deciding on an over-all single name for a feature not already possessing one.

(e) Principles have been laid down for dealing with names written in minority languages.[3]/

(f) Choice of variations: this problem occurs mainly in areas where there is no written form of the local language or where a written form is comparatively new. The advice of an expert on the language must be sought. For example, we have on maps of Maasai country, the forms Uaso, Waso, Ewaso, Ewuaso, meaning river. The Government's adviser on the Maasai language recommends the last spelling. This will be adopted on revised editions of maps.

(g) Optional parts: this problem has not been encountered in Kenya.

(h) Only one successful attempt has been made to change an established name in Kenya (TEITA to TAITA). This proved so difficult under present procedures that no further attempt will be made unless or until the SCGN is given more powers. A recent attempt to change GARBA TULLA to GARBA TULA failed.

(i) The SCGN has no control over commemorative naming.

(j) No attempt has been made to change any duplicated name.

(k) See (f) above.

(l) See (r) below.

(m) and (n) these problems (elimination of subjectivity, and local acceptance of standardization) occur in Kenya; a few attempts at solution on the lines suggested have failed.

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[3]/ See E/CONF.53/L.3, recommendation II.

(o) Kenya is fully covered by topographical maps at scale 1:50,000 or 1:100,000 which form the basis of geographical names recording. The maps are all gridded so that a grid reference can be quoted for any feature or the position of any name.

(p) Definition of geographical entities, glossaries: The problem exists but little work has been done on it. An example of the problem is the word DAM, which in the original English means a bank of stone or earth impounding water. In Kenya it refers to the body of water so impounded.

(q) (i) Designations: On maps the generic term is usually omitted, since the name is attached to a feature whose nature is self-evident, as for example, river names are printed in blue along the blue river line symbol. However, where the specific part of the name is an adjective, the generic term must be added such as Cold river, not Cold. This simple rule is complicated in Kenya by the problem of local and national languages. For example, Nairobi was founded in Maasai territory and takes its name from the Maasai name Enkare Nairobi meaning river of cold water. In and around the City, Maasai is no longer a language of daily use, English being at present dominant. Hence the river is usually referred to as Nairobi River. But there are other streams in Maasai land also called Enkare Nairobi and these are so written on maps.

(q) (ii) Unambiguous abbreviations: There is at least one case in Kenya where an ambiguous abbreviation is deliberately used! This is the use of L for Laga (Boran) or Lagh (Somali). The reason for this is that a large part of NE Kenya was originally inhabited by Boran who gave names to features which are still in use. Somali nomads are now the principal inhabitants and the problem (unsolved) is whether the Boran name or Somali name is the one to be adopted in each case.

(r) The problem of the definite article occurs mainly in the Maasai language group. Usually it is considered as integral in the name. It changes its form with the number and gender of the noun. It is frequently shown as a separate word though probably it is more correct to attach it to the noun, as in Arabic.

(s) and (t) Not applicable to Kenya.

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(u) Indication of gender, stress, and pronunciation: Since names on Kenya maps come from up to thirty languages, this would require lengthy documentation which has not been attempted on maps or in the Gazetteer. Although most names are written in Swahili orthography, it does not follow that the rules of Swahili pronunciation, etc., apply. Examples of names commonly mispronounced in Kenya are Chania (Choa - nya, not Cha-ni-a), Sasamua (Sasaa - mwa, not Sasa - mu - a), Nyeri (in which the digraph Ny is to be pronounced as -ni- in English onion, and Nye- as a syllable).

(v) The experience of the SCGN indicates fairly clearly what a national names authority requires in order to function effectively. The requirements may be summed up briefly under the heads: powers, resources, time.

Powers: The powers of a national standardizing authority must be written into the national law. The authority, or the minister to whom it is responsible, must have the power to order that, once a spelling has been approved, it shall be used in all official documents.

Resources: The central board of the authority should be a policy-making body and should make the final check on the recommendations of local committees or consultants to ensure that they conform with approved principles. The actual collection of names on the ground can be done by a surveyor who need not necessarily be a linguist. He will frequently need the aid of an interpreter. The examination of names should be done by a local committee, or in some places one or more individual consultants. It is essential that this authority should, individually or collectively, have an intimate knowledge of both the geography and language(s) of the area on which it adjudicates. Names recommended by local committees and approved by the central board must be published officially (e.g., in a Government Gazette) and time allowed for objections to any name.

The Board must keep a watch, once a name has been finally published and approved for official use, that it is in fact used in the correct form in all official publications.

To perform all these duties and to maintain records effectively the Board must have adequate resources: it needs a full-time secretary having considerable linguistic and geographical knowledge, together with organizing ability, the personality to get action on district committees, and supported by sufficient clerical and records staff.

Time: This is the most difficult requirement to provide: the longer an incorrect name or spelling is in current use, the more firmly it becomes established, and the more difficult it becomes for the Board to rectify it. It follows that effective national geographical names authorities should be set up without delay.

References:

J. Loxton	Geographical Names in Emergent Multi-Lingual Countries. (Proceedings United Nations Regional Cartographical Conference, Nairobi, 1963, vol II).
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" "	Names on the Map (Corona, Nov. 1959, HMSO, London).
" "	Mountain and other Names (Bulletin of the Mountain Club of Kenya, No. 59, Nairobi, Dec. 1964).