



Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General

21 May 2012

Original: English

Tenth United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names

New York, 31 July – 9 August 2012

Item 9 of the provisional agenda*

**Geographical names as culture, heritage and identity,
(including indigenous, minority and regional language names).**

Highlights on the Tunisian toponymic landscape

Submitted by Tunisia**

* E/CONF.101/1.

** Prepared by Eng. Naima FRIHA, National Centre for Cartography and Remote Sensing, TUNISIA

Summary

The toponymic landscape of any country is the mirror that reflects the historical, cultural, political and most social aspects of a society.

The long civilisational history of Tunisia led to the geographical name in Tunisia to be a mixture of languages. The toponymic landscape is still dominated mainly by the names that depict the Berberian, Phoenician/Carthaginian, Roman, Andalusian, and French history and heritage.

The toponymy is generally twinned with the cartography which is still partly relying on the existing maps, inherited from colonial epochs and which represent a remarkable distortion at the toponymic level. Also the lack of linguistically skilled surveyors who collect those names on the field in parallel with the lack of scrutiny research on the semantic scope of names, the lack of standardization tools are together important aspects that have contributed to the deformation and the heterogeneity of the geographical names.

Winded by the revolution of 14th January 2011, this landscape has once again changed and has given another perspective with respect to the socio-political stance.

There were conflicting opinions about the changing of names during the revolution and the attribution of new ones, between approving the new given names in relation to the revolution and disapproving them and suggesting a most symbolic names' selection that may withstand all the vicissitudes of history.

The awareness about the regulation of the geographical names' sector and its protection from further distortion and abuses becomes then an emergency rather than a necessity. In front of this situation the National Centre for Cartography and Remote Sensing empowered by the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN)'s resolution, I/4 has urged the setting up of a national toponymic committee, which project is pending approval.

Introduction

The toponymic landscape of any country is a mirror that reflects the historical, cultural, political and most social aspects of a society.

“Place names can offer a way to reach further back to the past, to act as vestiges of culture. Names are the part of the immaterial cultural heritage of the community in which they are used. Place names, their history and the stories related to them root people in their environment, and provide them with a spiritual foundation, as well as an indigenous local identity. (Paikkala, Sirkka, Vienna 2009).”

The choice of geographical names reflects the people’s behaviour and memories often marked by the historical and social events related to them.

Geographical names are therefore not just addresses, but a form of message that often carries confused feelings, expresses someone’s ambitions to prove his right about the identity of the space he belongs to, which identity unstable and Changing with time and circumstances.

Places’ naming procedures have evolved over time, from a simple man’ initiative to root himself to the area he is occupying and obtain a self identity to regulatory procedures to give the geographical names that official aspect.

But officilizing names do not always mean giving them the stability and preserving them from violations and abuses. They may be winded by events and not escape to changes. The impact of events on the stability of geographical names becomes more threatening mainly in the absence of responsible authorities to regulate this sector.

In the following, there will be some highlights on the toponymic landscape in Tunisia from the ancient times until the Tunisian Revolution of 14th January 2011 and the devoted efforts to regulate the sector at the national level.

The Tunisian toponymic landscape before the revolution of 14th January 2011

The different cultures represented in the names in Tunisia reflect the country’ rich history. Its strategic location attracted many waves of settlers whose presence has contributed to a cultural and ethnic blend of civilizations and peoples. Berbers, Numidians, Phoenicians/Carthaginians, Romans, Byzantines, Normans, Andalusians, Arabs, Spaniards, Sicilians, Maltese, Turks and French all mingled on this small territory. This led to the geographical names in Tunisia to be a mixture of languages and to a difficulty and complexity to track all the aspects of the linguistic situation in Tunisia.

The following examples can witness about the long civilisational history and the rich toponymic heritage that could in many cases preserve its identity through millenia.

The Berber language can be considered as the oldest language in Tunisia and could relatively be maintained in mountainous areas of the south of the country. As examples of the Berberian toponyms: Tynes (Tunis), Tamaghza, Tataouine, Sedwikech, Ghomrassen, Matmata, Tala, Kesra, etc...

The name of Carthage is the symbol of the Carthaginian Empire, the cradle of the civilizations that existed for almost 600 years and ruled the shores of the Maghreb, Sicily, Portugal and Spain and whose ports were a major maritime power in the Mediterranean basin.

The Roman Empire extended over the whole country and founded many cities. Many roman toponyms are still alive and could preserve their form through time. Like: Neapolis (Nabeul), Touga (Dogga), Maktaris (Makthar), Zikwa (Zaghouan), Sika (El kef), Outhina (Oudhna), Tisdrous (El Jam), Soufeitla (Sbeitla), Bulla Regia etc...

The Arabic toponyms started with the arrival of the arabo-muslim civilization to Tunisia on the 7th century. The name Al Qairawen (Kairouan) is emblematic of the creation and the development of the Arab civilisation in North Africa. Toponyms from other civilizations and languages were translated and adapted to Arabic sounds like Capsa (present Gafsa), Cercina (Qerqna), Neapolis (Nabil).

Many famous cities built by the Andalusians are still bearing Andalusian names like: Ras Jbal, Rafraf, Al Alia, Metlin, Kalaat Al Andalous, Sliman, Grombalia, Jdaida, Al Battan, Belli, Turki, Es Slouguia, Testour, etc...

Then came the French protectorate that lasted for more than half a century and has intensively marked the toponymic landscape. Many places were named after religious and French settlers like Ste Marguerite Ste Marine, St. Louis, Ferryville (with reference to Louis Ferry), Henriville, Pavillier etc... which have been changed after the independence by toponyms that reflect the Tunisian feelings of recovered freedom and independence like: حي الزهور (City of flowers); حي التطور (City of Development); ساحة الاستقلال (Place de l'indépendance), etc...

Also, names of leaders and martyrs have replaced settlers' names: Ferryville became Menzel Bourguiba (with regard to Habib Bourguiba, the first President of the Tunisian Republic); Pavillier became (Menzel Mhiri). Many squares and streets were named after the martyrs like 'Place of Farhat Hached', 'Avenue Hedi Chaker' etc...

However, many French names are still used until now like: Dubosville, Monfleury, Saint Jacques, Lafayette, Montplaisir, etc....

It is to be mentioned that there is a lack of interest given to the toponymic' field and the lack of focus on the subject continues to relegate, as the toponymy is generally twinned with the cartography which is still partly relying on the existing maps, inherited from colonial epochs and which represent a remarkable distortion at the toponymic level. Also the lack of linguistically skilled surveyors who collect those names on the field in parallel with the lack of scrutiny research on the semantic scope of names and the lack of standardization tools are together important aspects that have contributed to the deformation and the heterogeneity of the geographical names.

Besides the array of the above mentioned events and their impact on the stability of geographical names in the country, has come the revolution of 14 th January to exacerbate the situation and make the toponymic landscape more heterogeneous and complex.

The impact of the revolution on the naming of places

The self-immolation of the city's street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi in Sidi Bouzid was the first clashes of the Tunisian Revolution known by the media under different names : 'The Revolution of the Dignity', 'the Revolution of the Dignity and Freedom', 'the Jasmine Revolution' (in reference to

the jasmine flower very famous in Tunisia), the Arab Spring (in reference to the revolutions of Arabic countries).

After the 14th January' revolution, the toponymic landscape has once again changed and has given another perspective with respect to a socio-political situation.

During the riots, spontaneous initiatives were taken to remove all names with relation to the former president Ben Ali 'regime like 'Place 7 Novembre'' and replace them by names flowing from the revolution like "Mohamed Bouazizi", or "14th January2011" (Date where the president left the country).

From the authority' initiatives, the Municipality of Tunis has announced on 17 February 2011 in an official statement to change the name " Place 7 Novembre" to " Place 14 Janvier 2011" and " Boulevard 7 Novembre'' to "Avenue Mohamed Bouazizi"

The name of the former president was also removed from all panels and edifices bearing his name, like the Mosque of Carthage (ex "Mosquee Al Abidine") and the new airport of Enfidha (ex " Aéroport Zine Al Abidine Ben Ali ").

Names of the revolution' martyrs have been assigned by the committees of the revolution to the places where martyrs died.

Some reflections about the new naming

There were conflicting opinions about the changing of names during the revolution and the attribution of new ones. For instance, some approved the changing of the street name from "Boulevard 7 Novembre" to "Boulevard Mohammed Bouazizi", others preferred the name "Boulevard 14 Janvier 2011" arguing that the revolution is the revolution of an entire people, not of a unique person. Others have seen that the date of 14th January is not for Tunisians as glorious and meaningful as the date of 17th December 2010, which coincided with the outbreak of the Tunisian revolution and the entry of the Arab world in an era of freedom and democracy, through the sacrifice of late Mohamed Bouazizi.

Some others suggested to replace the name of "Place 7 Novembre" by "Place des Martyrs de la Révolution du 14 Janvier 2011" and set up a monument for the martyrs with a complete list of them. The idea of the "Unknown Martyr", like the "Unknown Soldier" was also suggested.

Others, while remaining optimistic about the future of Tunisia, were wondering: What if one day we would again have to change the name of this place to give it another date? And therefore suggested most symbolic names' selection that may withstand all the vicissitudes of history.

The ideas with regard to places naming had thus flocked, converged and diverged and each idea was reflecting each one's aspiration and attachment to the renamed place, and each name was charged of messengers and feelings.

We can see then how the geographical names are subject to changes and how they could be winded by the events. The frequency of such changes is important particularly in the absence of a national toponymic authority.

The awareness about the regulation of the geographical names' sector and its protection from further distortion and abuses becomes then an emergency rather than a necessity.

To this end, the National Centre for Cartography and Remote Sensing of Tunisia empowered by the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN)'s resolution I/4, has urged the setting up of a national toponymic committee, which project is in progress to be approved.

Bibliography:

Barbara Meiring : Aspects of Violence Reflected in South African Geographical Names 2010 *werkwinkel*.

Brahim Atoui : Le toponyme : Titre de propriété, titre cadastral ? , *The 15th International Seminar on Sea Names, 3-5 September 2009, Sydney, Australia*.

Evelyne Ben Jaafar: Les Noms des Lieux en Tunisie, Racines vivantes de l'Identité Nationale. *Cahier du C.E.R.E.S. Série géographique N°6 Tunis 1985*.

Naima Friha: The impact of foreign languages, local dialects and colonization on the evolution of geographical names in Tunisia, *UNGEGN Bulletin N°39, 2010*

<http://unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo/ungegn/docs/Bulletin/ungegnbulletin39.pdf>

Nasr m., Dhieb m., Masmoudi y., Chouari w. (Faculté des Lettres et Sciences Humaines de Sfax, SFAX, TUNISIA): Vers une base de données des noms géographiques en Tunisie "cas de la feuille topographique de sfax n°107.

Paikkala, Sirkka : Places, names & stories – a pilot project on geographical names in Finland, *Wiener Schriften zur Geographie und Kartographie, Vol. 18, Wien 2009, pp. 65–70*.

Tommy Ntsewa : Pursuit of geographical names transformation on the African continent towards a common African destiny. *Geographical Names Workshop, 8 – 9 June 2010, Indaba Hotel – Fourways*.

Tunisia News: Mediterranean heritage, History and culture, *N0 699 March 10, 2007*.

<http://leaders.tn/article/la-place-et-le-boulevard-7-novembre-de-tunis-debaptises?id=4166>.