

**Twenty-third Session
Vienna, 28 March – 4 April 2006**

**Item 18 of the Provisional Agenda:
Other Toponymic issues**

Toponymy of Mongolian geographical names

Prepared by Tsendsuren Oyunchimeg, Mongolia.

Toponymy of Mongolian geographical names

1. Introduction

Mongolia, a country with harsh climate geographically situated in Central Asia, is about 1200 meters above sea level, occupies a vast territory of 1.5 million square km from west to east. It is an independent country that has many-hundred-year history of nomadic lifestyle and culture even though its population is only around 2.5 million.

Until 1990 Mongolia was a socialist country. Since the downfall of the socialist system there have been several changes in lives of Mongolian people due to the transition into market economy and new-found economic and social relationship with other countries of the world.

The Administration of Land Affairs, Geodesy and Cartography (ALAGaC) is a Regulatory Agency of the Mongolian Government and is accountable to the Ministry of Urban Development and Construction of Mongolia.

One of the main responsibilities of the ALAGaC is to determine accurate geographical names of Mongolia and to confirm and to enforce geographical names and also clarify and standardize geographical names.

A geodetic and cartographic division of the agency is in charge of geographical names.

2. Mongolian territorial names and its features

For hundred years Mongolians have worshipped, respected and named mountains and rivers. This tradition is directly connected with the to Mongolian long history of Mongolian of nomadic way of life.

Mongolians have developed the foundation of geographical names of mountains, cairns, knolls, hillocks, rivers and streams while they moved from one place to another. For instance, clarification of geographical names of a topographic map at a scale of only 1:100 000 clarified over around 240 thousand names.

As Mongolians observed and studied their territory and named it according to its peculiar features when they changed their location, territorial names are very useful for the finding of minerals and determining historical events.

For example : The mining minerals from Oyu tolgoi, Erdenetiin ovoo, Altat, Mungut, Zest etc show that nomads knew resources of the places long back.

- Experts of many countries are interested in the fact that Mongolians named land surface shapes and formations with names of human organs. For example : Mouth of mountain, nose, head, or back, flap, foot etc.

- Mongolian geographical names were told by people for over a long period of time, so historical and cultural heritage was created by these expressions thus determining resource of many thousands of geographical names is as difficult as determining historical events and resources of chronology.

- Geographical names have been told from generation to generation within the community reflected indigenous language of nationalities which were established throughout the history of Mongolia and languages of neighboring countries. Hence geographical names were named with expressions used by the local people .

- From long ago people, who were included in Altaï-Uralian language group, have lived on Mongolian territory, therefore current Mongolian geographical names include many ancient turkish, manchus and tungues words.

For instance: Name of “Huvsgul”, Mongolian largest lake, comes from “kul”-which means “lake” in turkish language. However, in Uralian expression it was keul and in other expressions it was kula, guel etc and all of them meant lake or a lot of water.

There are many Turkish expressions in Mongolian geographical names. Moreover, there are many Mongolian names in Turkish language.

- The “Mongolian Secret History” which is about great Chingiss Khan`s life and many other historical books retained geographical names not only for Mongolian people but also for world historical heritage. Researchers determined places of birth and death and conquest of Chingiss Khan through making comparative research on current geographical names with geographical names of mentioned in historical scriptures.

There are some barriers in studying and determining Mongolian geographical names which do not usually occur in other countries. Due to dispersed settlement of the people in vast area it is difficult to note and determine every geographical name on maps as only a few people in the area know the names of the mountains, crains, knolls, springs. But people who live nearby do not know them. There are occasions when mountains are named differently from its front and back sides. Moreover, it is common for names to be altered.

Geographical names in countries with sedentary civilisation - names of city, street, square, building etc account for most percentage. Even though modern Mongolian have lived in city and village for over a century, they are not accustomed to name streets and squares by their given name, but they name them by their shape and colour by the tradition.

Hence, some names of mountains are written, said and transcribed in many ways.

For instance: One of the Mongolian largest mountain, Hentiy range is named and said differently, and Khentey range, the name of the administrative unit /province/, is written differently as well.

3. Research on Mongolian geographical names

In 1925, Mongolian National Standing Committee of Geographical Names was established under the Academy of Science of the former Soviet Union and it worked out a methodology to explain geographical names on Uigur-Mongolian scriptures. As a result, the publication of “Mongolian modern geographical names” has become an important document for surveying Mongolian geographical names.

Mongolian modern language is totally different from the ancient Uigur-Mongolian pronunciation, which makes it impossible to use the language directly.

In 13th century travelers like Plano de Caprino, Vilgelm Rubruk, Marco-Polo who traveled and did research first in Mongolia established the writing of Mongolian geographical names into Latin transcription. Mongolian geographical names are often found in their maps and books about their travels around Mongolia.

Mongolian geographical names written on geographical maps, lapidary inscriptions and historical scriptures are accounted as historical heritage.

4. Measures taken to preserve and protect geographical names in Mongolia

International conference on Geographical names which was held in 1967 in Geneva appealed to all the countries of the world to cooperate in determining and applying geographical names and advised every nation to establish a national organization in charge of geographical names.

In Mongolia regulations on “Prohibition of changing geographical names arbitrarily” and “Establishment of territorial committee” were approved and missions on determining and collecting geographical names were given to local administrative organization first in 1949, 1961.

The National Standing Committee of Geographical Names was established according to the Decree 280 of 1980.

Hence, the /former/National Geodetic and Cartographic Department started a project to determine geographical names at the national level in order to note them on maps and put an end to the arbitrary change of geographical names.

In the framework of implementation of the decree a field research was done on Mongolian territory from 1980-1985 and around 240 thousand geographical names of mountains, ranges, valleys, rivers, lakes, wells, springs were determined and noted on 1210 topographic maps at scale of 1:100 000 from 1987-1990. They were discussed over by aimag and soums administrative units and the National Standing Committee of Geographical Names and started being use on geographical maps, atlases in geodetic and cartographic activities.

As there was inadequate focus on the usage of geographical names at the national level the correct names were not used.

On the other hand, like other organizations National Standing Committee of Geographical Names was shut down due to the transition into a market economy and difficulties in property.

5. Recent measures taken to preserve and protect geographical names

The organization developed and approved a draft on geographical names and as one provision to be included in the Law on Geodesy and Cartography of Mongolia in 1998. As the draft on geographical names at national level were to be approved by Mongolian Parliament, geographical names collected during 1980-1990 and were approved in 2004. First time in the history Mongolia, geographical names were approved officially and the parliament is to discuss issues on giving and changing names every 4 years.

Still above approved names do not include names of administrative units, city, village, street, square, buildings etc.

The following on geographical names were approved in the law.

- State Geodetic and cartographic organization together with governances of aimags and soums regulate the provision organizations, entities, citizens with information on official geographical names and their spelling, usage and protection

The state geodetic and cartographic organization must carry out projects such as the publishment of geographical name list, dictionary, reference book, accurate spelling, registration of new names and name changes, their application on geographic maps and they should be in consideration with suggestions from related scientific organizations.

Following objects names were relevant to geographical names:

- physical geographical objects such as land, sea, ocean, gulf, bay, island, peninsula, mountain, range, valley, gobi, desert, river, lake;
- man-made objects like dam, pool, ditch;
- national, local or administrative units and their agricultural, industrial, transportation and communication objects;

The procedure of clarification or modification of old geographical names is based on referential and historical resources. In case there is no resource it should be done on the basis of opinions of native citizens, experts and researchers.

The naming of newly established objects should adhere to the following principles:

- Name the object after the person who discovered, studied, established or possesses it,
- Name the object with its old name according to its location, color and time period
- Nearby objects of other kind may have the same name

Geographical names can be changed on the following occasions:

- If names of several objects of same kind complicate the works of road, transportation, communication and other organizations
- If locals ask to re-establish the traditional name,
- If the name is not suitable for the real nature of object or are rather eccentric.

- New or modified geographical names should meet the following requirements:
- Reflect specific characters of the environment and the geographical object and historical, cultural and life-style features
- Consist of less than three words suitable for Mongolian language and expression

It is stated that **“Geographical names pertinent to administrative and territorial units should be generalized by the Government and approved by the Parliament”**. Also the law prohibits changing official geographical names in official documents and events, translating into other languages except for Mongolian, transcribing into other languages according to their pronunciation”.

As a result of ALAGaC’s cooperation with the Name Research Center of National University of Mongolia on the establishment of a data of geographical names which were determined from 1980-1990, 8 toponymic dictionaries /with CD/ were published and are useful for customers all kinds.

The formation of geographical names at the national level has made it possible to use the geographical names in all issues related to the national defence, geology, mining, infrastructure, tourism, and environmental protection, land privatization, regional development and all fields as culture, education, communication and media.

We assume this will contribute to the realization of Mongolia’s commitment to the UN’s resolution on standardization, protection and exchanging geographical names at the global level.

6. Standardization and further objectives

Standardization of geographical names was first debated by United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names at conferences of UNESCO and the main objectives of the Experts Group were indicated in 6 categories.:

- (a) To emphasize the importance of the standardization of geographical names at the national and international levels and to demonstrate the benefits to be derived from such standardization;
- (b) To collect the results of the work of national and international bodies dealing with the standardization of geographical names and to facilitate the dissemination of those results to Member States of the United Nations;
- (c) To study and propose principles, policies and methods suitable for resolving problems of national and international standardization;
- (d) To play an active role, by facilitating the supply of scientific and technical help, in particular to developing countries, in creating mechanisms for the national and international standardization;
- (e) To provide a vehicle for liaison and coordination among Member States and international organizations on work associated with the standardization of geographical names;
- (f) To implement the tasks assigned as result of the resolutions of the United Nations Conference on the Geographical Names

Even though we are grateful for the above aims, we reckon that our cooperation with the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names has not been sufficient.

The Administration of Land Affairs Geodesy and Cartography has been working on geographical names with its full capacity, but, unfortunately, it has not done any significant work on implementing UN’s resolution, especially the standardization of geographical names.

On one hand, it is due to inadequate number of measures on geographical names taken by the state, and it is related to our lack of knowledge on standardization of geographical names.

Even though trainings and seminars on geographical names have been organized by UN, we have never had a chance to attend them due to lack of funds.

In the framework of establishing a geographical data Geodetic and cartographic division of the ALAGaC has been working on the conversion of 1:100 000 scale map into digital form for the last 2 years, therefore, both geographical elements of these topographic maps and their geographical names are being digitized.

Our knowledge on setting up a data of geographical names on topographic maps and coordinating them is rather insufficient.

In the future we will implement our commitment to the resolutions of United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names and determine our national standards of geographical names at the international standard, and will cooperate with other countries on geographical names.

Also there are some problems on transcribing and habituating geographical names into Latin transcription.

Because when Mongolian modern alphabets like uy, ue, oe, o, ai, oi, ei were transcribed into latin people from Germany, England and Spain tend to pronounce them differently.

The 7th conference of United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names was held in New York city in 1998 and document number E/CONF.91/CRP.11 categorized 80 languages which do not use roman alphabet. 39 of them applied for romanization of their geographical names and had it decided correspondingly. However, Mongolia was registered as not requested country for United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names. Inner Mongolia, Russia and its former states such as Uzbekistan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgystan, former Yugoslavia applied to United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names romanization of geographical names.

United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names suggested this version of romanization of geographical names in the document dated 1st of March 2000.

Àà	à, à	Èè	i, i	Pð	r, r	Øø	sh, sh
Áá	b, b	Éé	y, y	Ññ	s, s	Ùù	shch, sh
Ââ	v, v	Êê	k, k	Òò	t, t	Úú	i
Ãã	g, g	Ëë	l, l	Óó	u, u	Ûû	i, y
Ää	d, d	Ìì	m, m	Țț	u, u	Üü	i, i
Åå	yo,	Íí	n, n	Ôô	f, f	Ýý	e, e
„	yo,	Îî	o, o	Õõ	h, h	Ðð	yu, yu
Ææ	j, j	Ɔ	o, o	Öö	ts, ts	ßÿ	ya, ya
Çç	dz, z	Ïï	p, p	×÷	ch, ch		

Compared to other versions of romanization of geographical names of countries, which use cyrillic writing, and the recommended version for Inner Mongolia it is necessary to point that some of the alphabets disaccord with this version.

Due to the transition into a market economy and that democracy has been developing in real terms in Mongolia for the last 15 years settlement of the people changed dramatically and many moved to urban areas. Thus, historical geographical names have been forgotten and naming and changing of names of places arbitrarily have often occurred.

Moreover, as the land privatization law was ratified 3 years ago and since then there has been great need for precise land boundary and territory. Therefore, knowing the geographical and historical names have become very important.

In addition, there are not many people who know the territorial names and the number of youth is has increased, so measures on teaching the youth the historical names and preventing the names from being forgotten have become vital for our country.

As mentioned above due to nomadic way of life Mongolians have created a great historical heritage of geographical names, thus our main goals are the realization of Mongolia's commitment to UN and the re-establishment of historical names.

Written by

Ts.Oyunchimeg

Senior specialist of cartography at ALAGaC

- human made objects like dam, pool, ditch
- other objects such as national, local or administrative units and their agriculture, industry, transformation and communication;
- The procedure of determining old geographical names and determining them newly is based on referential and historical resources and if there is no resource it should be determined on the basis of native citizens, experts and researchers' opinions.

- For naming newly established objects following principles should be followed:

- Name after the person who discovered, researched, established or possessed the object,

- Name the object for old names with determination of directions, colors and time,

- Nearest other kinds of objects may have the same name,

Geographical names can be changed following occasions :

- If same kinds of several objects name make difficulties in road, transformation, communication and other organizations' work,

- If native citizens asked for re-establish traditional name,

- not suitable for the objects character and named for unusual expressions.

- Newly named or changed geographical names should qualify following requirements:

- Reflect specific characters of environmental, geographical objects and historical, cultural and living features,

- Consist of less than three words suitable for Mongolian language and expression.,

- It is stated that **“Geographical names relevant to administrative units should collect by the Government and approve by the Parliament”**. Also the law prohibits that **“Apply by changing geographical official names in official documents and activities, translate into other languages expect for Mongolian, transcribe into other languages pronunciation”**.

During 1980-1990 in scope of responsibility for geographical names of ALAGaC and as a result of working with Name Research Center of NUM on establishing national determined geographical names toponymic 8 dictionaries /with CD/ were published and become very fruitful to all types of customers.

At national level building geographical names is made possible for using geographical names in all fields such as national defence, geology, mining, infrastructure, travel, natural protection, land privatization, local development issues, culture, education, communication and media, moreover; it is very beneficial for Mongolia to fulfil her responsibility for implementing the UN's decision on standardizing, protecting and exchanging geographical names at international level

6. Standardization and further objectives

United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names discussed geographical names at international level at the annual meeting of UNESCO firstly and the main objectives of the Experts Group was indicated through 6 categories.:

- (g) To emphasize the importance of the standardization of geographical names at the national and international levels and to demonstrate the benefits to be derived from such standardization;
- (h) To collect the results of the work of national and international bodies dealing with the standardization of geographical names and to facilitate the dissemination of those results to Member States of the United Nations;
- (i) To study and propose principles, policies and methods suitable for resolving problems of national and international standardization;
- (j) To play an active role, by facilitating the supply of scientific and technical help, in particular to developing countries, in creating mechanisms for the national and international standardization;
- (k) To provide a vehicle for liaison and coordination among Member States and international organizations on work associated with the standardization of geographical names;
- (l) To implement the tasks assigned as result of the resolutions of the United Nations Conference on the Geographical Names;

Even Administration of Land Affairs Geodesy and Cartography works on geographical names within its capacity it has not made any significant work on implementing UN's decision, especially on standardizing geographical names yet.

On the one hand it is due to shortage of activities on geographical names taken by the state, on the other hand it is related to our lack of knowledge on standardizing geographical names.

However, trainings and seminars on geographical names were organized by UN, by reason of financial problems there were not participants in them.

Geodetic and cartographic division of the ALAGaC organized work on converting map at scale 1:100 000 into digital form in scope of establishing geographical information system in last two years and geographical elements of these topographic maps including geographical names are being digitized.

We have no sufficient knowledge on connecting geographical names with topographic maps, establishing information system and coordinating them.

In future we will present Mongolian geographical names into United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names and implement the objectives while determining Mongolian geographical names at international level and cooperate with other countries of the world on geographical names.

Also there are some problems on transcribing geographical names into Latin transcription.

Because when Mongolian modern alphabets like uy, ue, oe, o, ai, oi, ei were transcribed people such as German, English and Spanish pronounce them differently.

In 1998, in New York city 7th session of United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names was held and document number E/CONF.91/CRP.11 was categorized 80 language and pronunciation. 39 of them asked for transferring territorial names into Roman transcription and received the decisions. However, Mongolia was registered as not requested country for United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names. Inner Mongolia, Russia and its former states such as Uzbekistan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan,

former Yugoslavia requested issues on transferring geographical names to United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names.

United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names suggested Mongolia version for transferring territorial names into Roman transcription on document dated on 1st March 2000.

Àà	à, à	Èè	i, i	Pð	r, r	Øø	sh, sh
Áá	b, b	Éé	y, y	Ññ	s, s	Ùù	shch, sh
Ââ	v, v	Êê	k, k	Òò	t, t	Úú	i
Ãã	g, g	Ëë	l, l	Óó	u, u	Ûû	i, y
Ää	d, d	Ìì	m, m	Ůů	u, u	Üü	i, i
Åå	yo, yo,	Íí	n, n	Ôô	f, f	Ýý	e, e
·	yo, yo,	Îî	o, o	Õõ	h, h	Ðð	yu, yu
Ææ	j, j	Ɔ	o, o	Öö	ts, ts	ßÿ	ya, ya
Çç	dz, z	Ïï	p, p	×÷	ch, ch		

Comparing this version with other countries, which has the same scripture, transitional versions into Roman transcription and with recommendation on version for Inner Mongolia it is necessary to notify that there are some conflicts on some alphabets.

As a reason of transferring into market economy and developing democracy in real terms in Mongolia last 15 years settlement of the people was changed dramatically and moved to urban areas. So that geographical historical names have been forgotten and negative incidents like naming the place and changing the names arbitrarily have been occurred.

Moreover, last three years in Mongolia land privatization was started implementing and the procedure of entering land into market was implemented, hence; demarcation of land boundary and square accurately is required and determining the land boundary and knowing the geographical and historical name is become very important.

In addition, people who know the territorial names are decreased, so that activities on handing down historical names and preventing from forgetting the names are become one of the very important issues to be organized for our country.

As mentioned above due to nomadic way of life Mongolians made historical heritage of geographical names so that our main goals to be implemented are to prevent names from forgetting and refresh historical names.

Written by

A cartographic senior specialist of
ALAGaC Ts.Oyunchimeg