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THE STANDARDIZATION OF
GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES

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Item 7 of the provisional agenda

REPORTS BY GOVERNMENTS ON THE PROGRESS MADE IN THE
STANDARDIZATION OF GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES

Submitted by the Government of Kenya*

Many of the problems detailed in section II of the report of the Group of Experts on Geographical Names (E/CONF.53/L.2) have been encountered in Kenya and are now discussed in a separate paper submitted under item 8 of the provisional agenda. The following summary indicates the progress made in Kenya along the lines of the recommendations set out in section III of the report.

Recommendation I^{1/}

The Survey Act 1961 (Cap. 299 of the 1962 Laws of Kenya) repeats the provisions of earlier Acts that there shall be a Standing Committee on Geographical Names (S.C.G.N.) which shall advise the minister (for lands) on the spelling of all names on maps of Kenya, having due regard to historical, orthographical, and ethnic considerations.

It will be seen that the S.C.G.N. has only advisory powers and no executive authority. It can only recommend spellings to be published on maps but not their adoption in other spheres of activity.

* Prepared by J. Loxton, Secretary, Standing Committee on Geographical Names.

^{1/} This recommendation is also discussed in a paper submitted under item 9 (e) of the provisional agenda.

The S.C.G.N. held regular meetings from 1948 to 1952 during which time many decisions on policy and principles were made; these have been a valuable guide for Survey of Kenya (as caretaker for the S.C.G.N.) ever since.

The Chairman of the S.C.G.N. is (ex-officio) the Director of Surveys. The original members of the S.C.G.N. were each expert in one or more local languages and also each had extensive geographical knowledge of the country. Such qualifications were found mainly among missionaries and retired administrators. However it was not possible for a dozen members of a central Committee to cover adequately such a vast field of research (an area of 225,000 sq. miles (580,000 sq. km.), over thirty main languages and up to 30,000 principal geographical names). The Committee examined about 2,000 individual names and the majority of their decisions on spelling have been confirmed, but a large number were based on inadequate local knowledge and have had to be revised after further research.

The supporting secretariat and records work for the S.C.G.N. has been provided by the Survey of Kenya. Although the Committee has not met for many years, the task of collecting names, processing them through to the printed maps, and maintaining records has been carried on by the Secretary to the S.C.G.N. and by other Survey staff.

The method of collection and recording is as follows: The basic unit of collection is one sheet of the 1:50,000 scale national map (1:100,000 where there is no 1:50,000). When a map sheet is being field-checked prior to first publication or revision, the surveyor collects names of all features by local inquiry. The names are listed systematically on a form; the surveyor fills in the first three columns which give the map reference, the feature named, and the draft name. Where more than one administrative unit (usually a district) falls in one map sheet, each district is dealt with separately.

The surveyor takes the form to the most suitable local authorities; these may be administrators, missionaries, school-teachers, etc. (a specially chosen local committee would be the ideal). The consultant completes the following columns on the forms:

recommended spelling, alternative name (if any), vernacular spelling, language, meaning. A final column is provided for the International Phonetic System spelling; but as the Committee's only member who was conversant with this has left Kenya this column is usually unfilled.

After the forms are returned to the Survey Office, the S.C.G.N. should approve or alter the recommended spellings and send them to the minister for publication. These stages are at present in abeyance. The spellings are checked by the secretary (who may refer them to another consultant) and are passed for publication on maps.

Finally-approved names are card-indexed. However, out of 30,000 names collected, only 2,000 have reached this stage.

Copies of maps and names lists were supplied to the United States of America Board on Geographical Names which in 1964 published a Kenya Gazetteer containing 26,400 names. Since that date more names have been collected and revised spellings for others have been adopted; a new edition of the Gazetteer will become necessary.

Recommendation II

Some of the main principles laid down by the S.C.G.N. which have been continuously applied to the treatment of names on Kenya maps are now stated:

(a) Names should be spelt in Swahili orthography. (It may be explained here that in East Africa, English is the language of higher education, foreign trade and most commercial and Government business; but Swahili is the recognized lingua franca and is spoken either in pure or simplified form by many more people than English. It uses a Latin type alphabet omitting the letters Q and X while C only occurs in the digraph CH. Consonants are pronounced as in English and vowels as in Italian.) This rule is not yet applied to names of foreign origin spelt in English orthography, which are retained in their original spelling even if this contains a Q, X, or C;

(b) In addition to Swahili and English, several other orthographies are in use in various parts of Kenya (e.g. Kikuyu and Maasai). Where the spelling in a local orthography of a geographical name has become established by usage, it may be adopted on maps, subject to principle (a) above (e.g. Kikuyu C must be rendered as Swahili CH, Maasai n as Swahili NG etc.). The S.C.G.N. considered that less confusion would be caused by, for example, Swahili mispronunciation of Kikuyu THIKA than by transliterating it into Swahili DHEKA;

(c) Diacritical marks, apostrophes, and hyphens are to be omitted on maps;

(d) Incorrect spellings established by usage are accepted but the correct spelling may be shown in parentheses (in practice, this is rarely done);

(e) Where different language groups have different names for the same geographical feature, the alternatives should be given;

(f) "Private" names (e.g. of estates, roads etc.) must be accepted as spelt.

Recommendation III

Systematic treatment; this has been outlined under recommendation I above.

Recommendations IV, V and VI

No action has been taken on these (change of duplicated names, established names, and local spellings).

Recommendation VII

Minority languages: see above, recommendation II (b) above.

Recommendations VIII, IX, X, XI, and XIII

Extensive features, collective names, administrative units, optional parts of names, generic terms as parts of names, glossaries: in the compilation of the Kenya Gazetteer some steps have been taken along the lines of these recommendations. However, a great deal more research is still needed.

Recommendations XII, XIV, XV, XVI, XVII, and XIX

Nature of named features, parallel forms, definite articles, standard abbreviations, printing form of names, etymology: little action has been taken on these.

Recommendation XVIII

Precise location of features: topographical maps of Kenya are plotted on the Universal Transverse Mercator projection and all medium-scale maps carry a numbered grid. All lists of geographical names give the grid reference of the position of the name on the map.

Recommendations XX and XXI

Non-Latin-type scripts: not applicable to Kenya.