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REPORT BY THE EXPERT FOR LATIN AMERICA OF THE UNITED NATIONS GROUP OF EXPERTS ON GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES, PROFESSOR DOCTOR FRANCIS GALL

A brief account of activities which have taken place since the Second Conference and fourth session held in London is given below. For said purpose, this report has been divided into: (a) national and (b) regional.

a. NATIONAL.

1. National Names Authority:

The Joint Commission on Geographical Names was established in 1959 by Ingeniero Alfredo Obiols Gómez, at that time Director General of the Instituto Geográfico Nacional (National Geographic Institute), who laid the basis for the standardization of geographical names in Guatemala on July 22, 1960. In accordance with the resolution adopted by the 1967 Geneva Conference, on 2 March 1968 the Joint Commission was changed into the Autoridad Nacional de Nombres Geográficos de Guatemala (National Geographical Names Authority of Guatemala).

It is felt, in all fairness, that in this report public recognition should be given to the pioneer work carried out by Ingeniero Alfredo Obiols Gómez in Guatemala, who laid down the basic procedures of standardization which were later supplemented by the resolutions and recommendations adopted up to date by the United Nations. This has made it possible that Guatemala should occupy the place it now holds, as well as that within the continental scope other countries have adopted the standardization procedures of Guatemala.

2. National standardization:

The national standardization is the responsibility of the National Geographical Names Authority, as outlined in preceding paragraph 1.

In accordance with the Presidential Resolution dated 20 May 1959, no geographic name of Guatemala is considered official unless so declared by the National Names Authority, whose chairmanship by reason of office is held by the Director General of the National Geographical Institute.

All pertaining to this matter can be seen in document E/CONF.61/L.17, "National Standardization" of the Second United Nations Conference held in London in May 1972. This is the reason why its relevant items are not repeated herein. The registered standardized geographical names appear in the maps and other official national publications.

For the VIIIth. General Population and Housing Census, all collaboration has been offered to the Dirección General de Estadística ( General Directorate of Statistics). The Census will be held from 26 March to 7 April 1973. Mention should be made here that the National Census Bureau on 9 January 1973 sent a letter to the writer, to the effect that definitely all geographical data which is to be published as a result of said Census, will correspond exactly to information given by the National Geographical Institute through its Names Authority.

3. Geographical Dictionary of Guatemala:

All details related to this matter appear in paragraph 4 of document E/CONF.61/L.72, presented in May 1972 at the London Conference.

The National Geographical Institute has reiterated that it will give all its support in order that the final manuscript for the second edition of the "Geographical Dictionary of Guatemala" should be completed within this year. The new edition, with accompanying maps, will consist of six printed volumes, each one approximately of the same size as volume one of the Dictionary published in 1960. Up to this date, more than 150,000 guatemalan geographical names have been studied and standardized, as well as additional information drawn from the wide field of Human Geography. Some entries run from one to fifty single spaced typed sheets each

As enciclopaedic reference, the Geographical Dictionary will contain not only references to old and/or traditional or historically geographical names by means of cross references, but also the literal citations of documents found in the national and private archives; as well as verbatim citations of the pertaining excerpts of historians, chroniclers and of the Indian chronicles, as many of the toponyms can be traced back to the Indian period - before the Spaniards coming to the country in 1524 - up to the present time.

4. Minority languages:

It is a known fact that there exist in Guatemala about twenty main minority languages, which have as their common origin Mayan languages. That is to say, that they can be defined as those languages which are still used by any number of people, and which are different from those known as national and/or ethnical languages.

Said languages, being unwritten, present certain problems in the preparation of geographical material, as it is frequently difficult to know how to write the names within the areas which they represent or, in other words, which is the orthography to be used.

The problem is further complicated due to diverse practical and cultural considerations. Certain conventional signs can be difficult to reproduce. Also, minority groups are sometimes very jealous of its identity, resisting any attempt in adjusting a more universal notation of the geographical names within their area. Lastly, the utility of published material for the linguistic majority, as well as for foreigners, should be taken into consideration.

At the beginning, it should be advantageous to acknowledge the three main methods for transcription of the sounds of speech used by linguists.

Firstly, the purely phonetic transcription, in which all sounds, as many as possible, are annotated. They would include sounds like relative tone, relative accent, respiration, clature, and so forth.

The second method is known as phonemic transcription, or one in which the sounds of speech called allophones (as well as allotones and characteristics of accent) which are not shown graphically, but are combined in global unities known as phonemes. This would appear at first glance to be considerably superior to the phonetic transcription and, in fact, it is in many aspects. Two or more sounds which function as one are combined into one single symbol; the incontrastably characteristic features of tone and accent are omitted and separation of the words is observed

The third method has a greater pragmatic value, as it is used for publication of literature in a given language. This is designated as practical ortography. In the development of the system, certain factors as symbols used in the national language, publication facility, teaching facility, and so forth, are taken into consideration.

It is evident that a solution is near at hand. However, one or two problems remain to be solved. Firstly, it may be difficult, impossible or very expensive, to obtain linotype fonts or settings for special and/or modified symbols. It has also to be borne in mind that, even if a practical ortography of a minority language can adjust itself up to a certain limit to the alphabet pertaining to the national language, it is compulsory that all the phonemes of the minority language should be represented, in order to show its phonemic contrasts. The result of this are characters which have no significancy for those who speak the national language.

Therefore, even if the practical ortographies lend themselves in an excellent manner for publication of literature in minority languages, it is obvious that, taking into consideration that persons who talk other languages will be using geographical material to be published, it is deemed necessary to make one additional adjustment.

This final step will produce what could be termed as a standardized alphabet, or one which is limited in all its forms to the national official language.

The opinion is sustained to the effect that usage of such standardized alphabets is the proper method for publishing geographic material where minority languages still prevail. Among other reasons, following can be adduced:

1. There is no need for special linotype fonts, nor typewriters with special signs or symbols.
2. Even, if the geographical names will not appear exactly as the natives pronounce them, nevertheless they will understand the reference to place names within their region.
3. Thus, the geographical documents will be more useful for those using the national official language.
4. In many instances, following such a practice would only legalize a de facto one and, therefore, would not represent any change. Rather, it would be in accordance with Resolution 16 of the First Geneva United Nations Conference held in September 1967, which refers to the annotation of geographical names in unwritten languages.

On the other hand, certain adverse effects are to be expected for using standardized alphabets. Following can be anticipated:

- (i) When contrasting characteristics of minority languages disappear, ambiguities could be expected. This is a natural result of standardization, but despite its apparent difficulties, the ambiguities tend to diminish when the elements are found in context.
- (ii) The standardized alphabet would not conform to the practical orthography used in the literature of the minority languages, and a certain amount of negative reactions from its users can be expected.

These reactions can be reduced, after explaining to those using minority languages that it refers only to the geographical names and not to the language in itself, and that it represents a required measure in view of the international demands.

- (iii) Certain non-linguistic adjustment should always be carried out.
- (iv) The geographical names with standardized alphabets appearing on maps, dictionaries and so forth, due to their own nature will not carry information as to how they should appear in



phonemic or practical ortographies. The standardization procedure is irreversible. This would put certain obstacles in the road of a scientist interested in geographical names for linguistic or etimological purposes.

However, a partial solution to this problem may be the publication of explanatory material, as has been done already in Guatemala, which is considered to be an useful tool in the hands of the scientist who may work in areas where minority languages are spoken. It will not only serve him for writing the language (be it with practical ortography or standardized alphabet), but it will provide him with a valuable key for the correct pronounciation of its phonemes.

On basis of the above-mentioned facts, the writer is working actively with the Instituto Indigenista Nacional (National Institute for Indian Affairs) and the Instituto Lingüístico de Verano (Linguistic Summer Institute) in the preparation of alphabets which will contain the phonemic, phonetic and standardized ones. Due to its own nature the work is very arduous, but with all our good will satisfactory progress is being achieved having in mind above everything else, that the standardized or official alphabet will be incorporated to geographical documents to be published.

For instance, among the encountered difficulties is the use of the apostrophe or glottal stop (') in the Mayan languages. No full agreement has been reached yet on this, but as matters are at the present time, it can be anticipated here that the glottal stop (') will be used, instead of the number "7" or a question mark without its little dot at the bottom as some linguists use it, due to already mentioned reasons. There is also the use of double vowels, as well as the differentiation in the Spanish language of sounds by means of the letters "c" and/or "k", to mention only some of the problems which are being encountered, but hoping that on a national level they will soon be solved.

(b) REGIONAL.  
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Besides what the Chairman of our Group of Experts, doctor Meredith F. Burrill may report, the writer would like to mention briefly following items:

1. El Salvador:

In accordance with the latest information on hand, the Instituto Geográfico Nacional (National Geographical Institute) is preparing the printing of volumes II and III of its Geographical Dictionary of El Salvador. Volume I was delivered to the Secretariat at London in May 1972 on occasion of the Second United Nations Conference. The geographic names will be the official ones, as resolved by its National Geographical Names Authority.

2. Costa Rica:

The firstly published volume covering the coastal and islands geographical names was delivered in London.

The writer has now the honor, upon request of the Director General of the Instituto Geográfico Nacional of Costa Rica, Ingeniero Mario Barrantes Ferrero, to deliver to the Secretariat the second volume which deals with orographic features. Work is now in progress for publication of the volumes pertaining to the hydronymy and populated places. The work is well advanced, notwithstanding its complexness, especially of the last mentioned volume. This, due to the fact that the territorial division of Costa Rica is very dynamic and that it is desired that each of the more than nine thousand toponyms should carry, besides its geographical information, also its political and administrative location at district level. All this, within the scope of the forthcoming Geographical Dictionary of Costa Rica.

3. Third Regional Central American Meeting on the Standardization of Geographical Names:

It is understood that the matter related to the third regional Central American meeting on the standardization of geographical names, upon request of Guatemala, will be taken up in Panama in April 1973 on occasion of the Xth. General Assembly of the Pan American Institute of Geography and History and its related meetings of consultation.

4. First South American Regional Meeting on the Standardization of Geographical Names:

In accordance with information furnished to the writer by the Embassy of the Federative Republic of Brazil in Guatemala on 13 February 1973, the proposed first South American regional meeting on the standardization of geographical names is now being scheduled to be held at the Itamaraty Palace of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Brasilia, from Monday 17 to Saturday 22 September 1973.

5. First Latin American Meeting on the Standardization of Geographical Names:

The writer expects that the first meeting of the Division for Latin America on the standardization of geographical names will be decided upon during the first South American meeting in Brasilia.

6. Spain:

In accordance with his letter to the writer of 12 December 1972, copy of which is being delivered to the Secretariat, the President of the Consejo Superior Geográfico (High Geographical Council) at Madrid, notified that as per instructions received from the Presidency of Government, it will participate in the activities of the Latin American Division.

Upon request, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Guatemala instructed its diplomatic representatives in order that the respective geographical authorities be informed accordingly through their chancelleries.

7. Suriname:

The writer is expecting a communication from Mr. J.B.Ch. Wekker, Director, Central Bureau for Aerial Mapping at Paramaribo to the effect that, as mentioned by him personally in London in May 1972, Suriname wants to participate in the activities of the Latin American Division.

8. Mexico:

Upon his return from the Second Conference held in London, the writer had a talk in Mexico City with Ingeniero Hugo Rodríguez Esperza, of the Dirección General de Geografía y Meteorología (Directorate General of Geography and Meteorology), regarding the participation of Mexico within the Division for Latin America.

Due to the elapsed time since, the Expert has written on this matter to the Mexican authorities through the Embassy of Mexico in Guatemala.

The writer will be glad to give any further information that may be required.