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Exonyms

Recent discussions in the United States Board on Geographic Names concerning the creation of anglicized exonyms

Submitted by the United States of America**

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The Foreign Names Committee of the U.S. Board on Geographic Names (US BGN) is responsible for standardizing foreign geographic names for use within the United States government. The general policy of the US BGN for standardizing foreign names is to use the local official name for a geographic feature. Thus in principle US BGN approves names that are as close as possible to endonyms. Names in non-Roman scripts are romanized by systems developed or approved by the US BGN, in collaboration with the Permanent Committee on Geographical Names for British Official Use (PCGN). Conventional names for features with well-established English usage are approved, but US BGN practice is to limit these to as few as is practical.

This policy is consistent with resolutions passed by the United Nations Conferences on the Standardization of Geographical Names (UNCSGN) calling for the use of unambiguous local names and the limitation of exonyms. However, in the last several years there has been discussion in the US BGN concerning the limitations encountered in the application of this policy across the full spectrum of geographic names users in the United States government. These discussions may have a profound effect upon the standardization of foreign geographic names in the U.S. government, and potentially in the English speaking community.

Different users, different needs. Generally speaking, two groups of geographic names users exist in the United States government: the "field user" and the "desk user." These two groups function under different linguistic contexts. The field user operates in the local foreign area and requires the locally used geographic names. Common types of field users are relief workers, military personnel, and data collectors. The desk user is operating in a domestic environment and is communicating with an English speaking audience. Analysts, reporters, and clerical personnel are desk users.

The current US BGN policies concerning foreign names standardization favor the field user. Desk users in the U.S. government have been constrained by not having US BGN approved foreign geographic names that are useful to them. The following are some of the problems associated with the desk user when applying strict endonyms.

Generic (descriptive) terms. In strict endonymic usage, a geographic name should carry with it its local form generic term, such as in Huang <u>He</u> and <u>Wadī</u> Tāthlīth (emphases added). In many cases, the generic is embedded in the name, such as in Königssee and Take-shima. These distinctions are important to the field user who needs to communicate locally, and since field users are often using maps as their reference, the type of feature the generic defines is visible on the map.

But the desk user, operating in his domestic environment, cannot communicate to his audience a generic term that is unfamiliar. A domestic user cannot be expected to know that for instance, Pulau Bangka is an island, or Rybinskoye Vodokhranilishche is a reservoir. The obvious remedy for the first example is to substitute "pulau" with "island," thus giving the name Bangka Island (after reversing the generic term). The problem of translating generic terms for domestic use is compounded when one considers that there are dozens of generic terms in hundreds of languages around the world, and the user must have some form of reference to be able to define them.

Adjectival forms. In many languages, most notably some Slavic ones, geographic names are referenced in adjectival form. In the example noted above, Rybinskoye Vodokhranilishche would be properly translated in English as "Rybinskian Reservoir" or Reservoir of Rybinsk. A desk user unfamiliar with Russian orthography, in attempting to anglicize this name to make it familiar to his audience, might unknowingly call it "Rybinskoye Reservoir," which is an improper translation.

Diacritical Marks. English is the most widely spoken language using the Roman script that does not generally employ diacritics. More perhaps than in other European countries (including the United Kingdom), people in the United States are generally unfamiliar with diacritics and their use and resist employing them in a domestic context. This applies also to U.S. government employees, many of whom do not know how to create diacritic symbols using the keyboards at their workplace. Indeed, certain systems of communication used regularly by U.S. government personnel, such as telegrams, are technically incapable of using diacritics at all. The result of

this is that, too often, U.S. government employees – and the American public at large – simply remove the diacritic symbols and substitute unfamiliar letterforms with familiar ones. This creates a sort of an exonym, and often results in mispronunciation by the English tongue.

Popular local usage of Roman-script forms. Often, a strict transliteration from a non-Roman writing system to the Roman alphabet produces a name that is not popularly used by the local inhabitants. For instance, the city usually seen in Roman script as Ramallah is rendered from the standard Arabic as Rām Allāh when using the BGN/PCGN romanization system for Arabic. This problem can occur even when an official romanized name exists for a feature; the official Survey of India name for the capital of Gujarāt State is Ahmadābād, but by far the most popular local form is Ahmedabad.

Conventional names. In US BGN terminology, conventional names are names used in lieu of local official names because of long-standing English usage. As stated previously, US BGN policy is to limit approval and usage of conventional names to as few as possible. But problems confront the desk user when applying this policy. The first is the issue of trans-boundary features. While some features that cross boundaries do have conventional names assigned to them (Danube River, Tien Shan), most lesser-known features do not, and the user is confronted with a choice of names that may not suit his context. For example, if a desk user is writing on a project concerning the Irtysh River that involves the waters of the river in both Russia and Kazakhstan, which name does he choose: the Russian Irtysh or the Kazakh Ertis?

Another problem associated with limiting the scope of conventional names occurs when unfamiliar places become well known because of current events. Often a non-official name for a geographic feature will surface during a news event and will be widely used by the English speaking media. Once a familiar exonym takes root through popular usage, attempts at "imposing" an unfamiliar local official name, per US BGN policy, are resisted.

Confronting the problem. In recent discussions the US BGN has confronted the problem of the competing contextual needs of the field user and the desk user. It has been acknowledged that, contrary to US BGN policy, many geographic names users in the U.S. government have made frequent use of anglicized or variant names to satisfy the needs of their English-speaking customers. This practice is contrary to the principal goal of the US BGN, which is to provide its users with a standard geographic name for every known named feature.

This dilemma has led to the suggestion that some form of policy guideline should be implemented to meet the needs of the desk users. Discussions are underway on how to provide users with an anglicized name as a corollary to the local form. One recommendation is to provide a translation of a set of common generic terms, which could replace the local term in a geographic name. These could be published as part of an ongoing series of US BGN toponymic policy guides issued by the Foreign Names Committee for each country in the world. (It has further been suggested that guidelines on how to convert adjectival forms of names could also be included in this document series.) But this solution can lead to mixed results, with the potential of several names being used. For instance, the Indonesian province of Nusa Tenggara Barat could be rendered as "West Nusa Tenggara," "West Lesser Nusa," "Lesser West Nusa."

Another approach would have the US BGN approve English forms of important features, such as principal administrative divisions, when it is deemed useful to do so. For instance, the US BGN-approved name "Gambēla Hizboch Kilil," a province in Ethiopia, is not nearly as useful to the desk user as would be "Gambela People's State." And in the example given above, Nusa Tenggara Barat could be rendered by the more widely used English name of "West Lesser Sundas," although this would mean substituting the native "Nusa" for the conventional "Sunda(s)," thus creating a completely exonymic form for the feature. The same problem is seen in another province in Indonesia, Maluku Utara. Would this be rendered as "North Maluku" or should it use the US BGN-approved conventional name for the feature it represents, thus making it "North Moluccas"? Practical implementation of this approach would require that the US BGN would need to approve a new set of anglicized names for a potentially large body of features, a potential strain on resources.

Conclusions. The awareness of the "desk user" as a distinct and separate type of geographic name consumer, and discussions aimed at creating what is essentially a set of anglicized exonyms to meet his needs, is a profound event in the history of the US BGN. This action in essence negates the principle of "one name for one feature" by which the US BGN prefers to operate. However, it has been noted that desk users have for some time now created their own anglicized names for geographic features to suit the needs of their English-speaking consumers, and have been going about this process with no official guidance or policy standard.

The Foreign Names Committee of the US BGN has recently acknowledged that English-speaking geographic names users in the United States government require anglicized exonyms to perform their work effectively. As the organization within the United States government that regulates the use and application of geographic names, it is the duty of the US BGN to provide these names. Discussions are currently ongoing among US BGN member agencies on how to develop principles, policies and procedures to address this problem in a logical and useful manner.

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