A PROJECTED UNITED NATIONS GAZETTEER SERIES

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The function of geographic names is to identify geographic entities
and facilitate reference to them. They are directly involved in communi-
cation and in information collection and ordering, the twin themes of the
1973 annual meeting of the Middle Atlantic Division of the Association
of American Geographers.

The United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (GEGN)
has on the agenda for its March 1973 meeting a suggestion that the US
Board on Geographic Names gazetteer series be converted into a United
Nations series. This could have far-reaching consequences. The proposal
was put before the Group of Experts on 1 June 1972 at its meeting immediately
following the Second United Nations Conference on Standardization of
Geographic Names. The proposal read as follows:

"We are at a stage where we need a challenging new direction
for our adventure in expertise. Aware of our growing ability to identify
what is in the world's interest and to relate more limited interests to it,
I would like to throw out some ideas and suggest that between now and the
next GEGN meeting we think about them and whatever supporting or different
ideas are generated here or in correspondence.

"Asking myself what we are trying to accomplish with our intensive
effort on romanization, I had to conclude that it is not an end in itself
but a means to an end which is maximum uniformity of names and most
successful communication of ideas and information through their use. If

uniformity in names is what we seek we may find it best not to start from the beginning.

"If, in a developing country that writes in non-roman, the linguistic and behavioral expertise that should be brought to bear on romanization for themselves _and_ the roman writers is inadequate, we ought not to blindly leave the choice wholly theirs, but to work with them, as has been done in notable cases. Even after systems are adopted, many, perhaps _most_, countries are not in a position to romanize all the names that will be needed by people, institutions, businesses and others in the country who do or will communicate about places and matters related to place.

"Even if single systems are adopted and used, the names will differ unless the non-roman starting points are uniform and the appliers' method are also uniform, both of which are hard to achieve.

"An obvious answer would seem to be files of standard names adequate for the bulk of users, readily available and kept up to date by supplements and revisions.

"The BGN gazetteers cover the world and have been through success-ive revisions. They contain about the number of names, some 4,000,000, that have been found to satisfy most requirements except those associated with large scale mapping. In their preparation and revisions effort has been made to obtain the best local names and the most official names that could be had, and co-operative arrangements of various kinds have been tried out. The gazetteers have no function of supporting any books, maps, atlases, or any other commercial product, no political objective, in fact no objective other than providing the best possible names to the most people most effectively and economically.

"Would you like to consider conversion of BGN gazetteers into UN or GEGN gazetteers maintained by the BGN and the countries covered co-operatively, and monitored by a GEGN group for conformance to agreed-upon standards?"

Lets go back and read again the statement of objective, then look at why we haven't reached it fully already, at how far we have come, and at how this new proposal might help. The stated objective is "maximum uniformity of names and most successful communication of ideas and information through their use." In assessing the reasons why this is still a problem and the progress that has been made, we need to review some of the record.

The International Geographical Congress last summer was the 22nd in a series that began in Amsterdam in 1871. That first one called for international uniformity in geographic names and the next few discussed how it might be achieved, but the effort was premature.

I used to say that those early efforts came to grief on the rock of pronunciation, the attempt to find or invent uniform writing that would evoke correct pronunciations from everyone, which can now be shown readily to be impossible. While I still think that was true, I also think it is a great oversimplification. Several other factors at work then must still be reckoned with.

There was little knowledge and less understanding of behavior patterns with reference to naming and name-using. One element in the pattern is resistance to name changing on the one hand and acceptance of continued name evolution on the other hand. One reason for change resistance is practical. Names once established in use are agreed-upon symbols equated

to their referents and have identification-communication values that new or modified names do not have immediately and may acquire only slowly.

In the late 19th century and the first quarter of this one, the colonial powers had already provided what they considered practical solutions of their administrative and commercial needs for names in the parts of the world they controlled. They put the names on maps and gave them world-wide currency. Non-correspondence with local names or forms was not only not considered cause for concern, it could even be looked upon as a virtue when local usage was varied or when the local people and cultures were regarded as inferior. This introduces the idea that in addition to the practical reasons for change resistance there were and are some subtler ones related to other aspects of behavior. Every human being and every human group or subgroup uses names, but much of the use-behavior is below the conscious level. This applies both to the mechanisms of language and to the perception of isolates from nature plus experience that are agreed to be geographic entities and are named. Even professional toponymists have to go through much shedding of mental set to admit either their own behavior in this field or the validity of concepts incompatible with their own mentally set ones. This bears importantly on international cooperation. Some of these things have only lately begun to happen or be understood.

For most countries in the early days there was no convenient source of names in mass already collected. For many countries there still isn't. The names in wide international circulation were and are only a fraction of those in local use. A recent field survey in New Brunswick by the Canadian PCGN found that the largest scale maps carried less than half

the names that are in actual local use. The BGN had a similar experience in Delaware. Modern descriptive linguistics was still to be developed. Since basic information and tools were lacking, the study of geographic naming and name-using behavior on any large scale would not have been feasible even if it had been thought profitable. Now such study is beginning in many parts of the world, tools are being developed and though we are still only on the threshold, the pace is quickening.

In the early days when the corpus of internationally used names was tiny it could not very well be anticipated that dealing with large numbers of foreign toponyms would not simply increase the size of the old problem, that it would bring to light a host of quite different problems and bring new motivations for collective behavior.

World War II changed all this spectacularly. In contrast to World War I that was contested in a limited area already mapped on large scale and with relatively fixed geographic names, World War II was fought all over the place including areas not mapped at all and with names not even reduced to writing or never written in roman letters. The massive corpus of names that had to be produced immediately would open up whole new areas of toponymy.

Early in 1943, just 30 years ago, military operations on the ground appeared inevitable in China and Japan and very likely in Korea and Thailand. Three to four million names in those areas had to be processed in two years. BGN did it, using the best information available, which was not very good. After the war, as the seriousness of shortcomings in the information were more and more exposed, some of the file was junked

and the rest was reprocessed. At the same time the need to straighten out names for the intelligence program came rapidly to the fore and for a decade became the organizational focus of the program, during which time hundreds of thousands of names annually were edited.

In the post-war period the BGN reexamined in detail and updated its policies and files on every area of the world. Since this was all compressed into a few years the recognition of recurrence of toponymic phenomena and related behavior was not just possible, it was practically forced. During all this time geographers and descriptive linguists were doing team research and problem solving, developing and testing concepts and procedures as they went along.

A massive study of toponymic generics in the United States brought to attention quite unexpected differences in individually held ideas as to the meaning of geographic terms. This led to formulation of some hypotheses about relevant behavior, its apparent ubiquity, and the significance of mental set.

While systemetically treated files were being built in the WWII and post-war periods, ways had to be devised for users to handle names not yet treated by BGN. One device used was issuance of directions for treatment, area by area. This helped, but such directions never produced enough uniformity in names, and as the files grew the emphasis shifted from dependence upon directions and editing to enlargement of the files and dissemination of the names in gazetteers, covering the world area by area. These were revised and greatly enlarged from time to time and given wide distribution not only in the United States but also abroad.

It was evident thirty years ago that international cooperation is indispensable. There are too many names for any one country to handle

by itself; it is the prerogative of nations to fix their own names; and since many languages and a variety of writing systems are involved, only by cooperation can order be brought out of chaos. Steps were taken in the 1940's to get cooperation under way, including in 1947 the first BGN/PCGN consultation that brought agreement on a joint system for romanizing Russian and in 1949 the establishment of a commission on standardization by the III International Congress of Onomastic Sciences (ICOS). In 1955 ICOS accepted two basic premises, first - that while uniform pronounciation is not possible, uniform writing is, and second - that international standardization has to be based on international acceptance of nationally standardized names. From that point a different forum and arena was needed, and the scene shifted to the United Nations.

, The first step in the UN, in 1958, was the drafting, circulation, and wide approval of a program looking toward greater uniformity in names. The next, in 1960, was a meeting of the first UN Group of Experts on Geographical Names. The Group was asked to spell out the problems that would have to be solved in national standardization programs, and to make a recommendation on the holding of a full scale conference. The Conference materialized in Geneva in 1967. It established that all countries share most of the problems in national standardization and international accept- ance of nationally standardized names, that international cooperation is indispensable, and that countries can cooperate even when they have differences of view.

The most knotty of all problems discussed at Geneva was romanization,

the transfer of names from other scripts into roman letters. Some individual transfer systems have been agreed upon, including the difficult one for Arabic; for some others we are still seeking common ground. Some countries that use not only more than one language but also more than one script present special problems, delicate ones if self-conscious minorities are involved. Semantic problems have had to be dealt with from the beginning. There was even difficulty at Geneva with terms for the two inter-script transfer processes - one between two alphabetic scripts, which we have called <u>transliteration</u> and one from or to a non-alphabetic script which we have called <u>transcription</u>. Since conversion into roman letters is the really important one, we have to a degree avoided the semantic problem by using the term <u>romanization</u>, but the distinction is still important. Debate at Geneva did not produce any new definitions, but did force recognition that part of the problem lay in categories into which things did not fit well. Too many things were not wholly this nor wholly that. For example, the status of multiple languages in various countries is so heterogeneous that the group was unable to devise new and better language categories for purposes of name standardization. Nor is the "transliteration" vs "transcription" differentiation simply a matter of letters vs. sounds. In letter for letter "transliteration" we are of course very much mindful of the sounds for which the letters are symbols, and in transcription we pick as symbols our letters that already equate to or approximate the sounds being transferred.

For the letter for letter transliteration to accomplish a faithful transfer of sounds, or for precisely equivalent sound for sound

transcription to be accomplished by equating of symbols, it would

be necessary that the donor and receiver languages have exactly

the same sound stocks, that they record in their writing all the

sound distinctions made in speech, and that they present one-to-one

correspondence between sound and symbol, i.e. have only one symbol

for a sound and one sound for a symbol. If those things were so, then

the letter for letter transfer would be in fact a transfer of sounds and

the sound for sound transfer we call "transcription" would be in fact an

equating of symbols. Since languages don't have those attributes fully,

in the transfer of systems it is necessary to adopt conventions, to make

judgments, choices, compromises. In doing so advantage has been taken

of the fact that while no two language sound stocks fully coincide, all

languages do have many sounds used or approximated in other languages,

that most languages do preserve in their writing their principal sound

distinctions even though they do not preserve them all, and that most

languages have at least considerable correspondence of sound and symbol

even if none has fully one-to-one correspondence. Since languages differ

greatly in the extent to which these things are true, every combination of

languages or writing systems involved in transfers presents at least some

special problems.

Attitudes toward this problem are in one way complicated and in

another way are simplified by the fact that the written symbols not only

stand for sounds but also in combination constitute names that stand for

geographic entities, and are capable of recognition as such by eye,

irrespective of the sounds. One tends to defend the written forms of

names to which one has become accustomed, and to hesitate over a
system that produces something else. On the other hand, the importance
of eye recognition was implicit in the international consensus that the
writing can be standardized if "mispronunciation" is accepted as indeed
it must be.

National standardizers could not make pronunciation of geographic
names _precisely_ uniform within their jurisdiction even if they tried,
and international acceptors could not reproduce the pronunciations
exactly even if provided with them in unambiguous writing, but each can
make approximations.

Conventional names and other exonyms have long been part of the
toponymic behavior pattern. They still are. However, as the world
transportationally shrinks, knowledge and use of local names has grown
and spread dramatically. The UN Conference last May unanimously urged
that the phasing out of exonyms (non-local names) be speeded up everywhere.

Over a period of more than a decade, in two full-scale conferences
and six meetings of the Group of Experts, people involved in geographic
name standardization all over the world have not only arrived collectively
at these understandings, but also in the process have come to know,
respect, have confidence in and like one another. They have repeatedly
proved their ability to take an open-minded view of problems that have
sometimes been emotionally charged. The Group of Experts is acquiring
a capability greater than the sum of the capabilities of its individual
members.

In this recital of reasons why the ultimate objective is not
reached after a hundred years, and of progress registered in the last
three decades, I have hit only a few high spots relevant to the arguments

for a UN gazetteer series - the need for names, the difficulty of applying systems, the availability of a tested gazetteer series and of a group capable of setting meaningful and practical standards for a converted series. There are many things yet to discuss before the Experts even accept the idea - content, form, credits, financial support, what exonyms to include, if any, and so on. However, as long as the basic concept is useful the Experts are capable of working out the details and can deal fairly and efficiently with the UN gazetteer proposal as one step in an ongoing program.