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AS BUSINESS GLOBALIZES, SO SHOULD COUNTRY NAMES

Cultural diversity is a wonderful thing. It allows people of one country to connect with those of another. As we become more aware of countries around the globe, we learn more about each other. It is hoped that the increased exposure leads to understanding and respect. For example, we learn each other's names. People from the U.S. may do business in Egypt. The Americans may be surprised to learn that the Egyptians have a different name for their country than we do. They call their country Misr. There is a divergence of names between the local name and the world name. As business globalizes, what name should we use: Egypt or Misr?

CLEARLY, THERE IS CONFUSION

The question arises, what should we call Germany, Egypt, and China? Historians are not in agreement about the origins of these place names. It is not clear which names were initially applied by local peoples to themselves and which names were applied by outsiders. If it were clear, perhaps we could use that as a deciding factor: we could apply the oldest, indigenous name.

But then, other questions arise. Is the older name more appropriate than a newer name? Why give importance to an old name? Do the current inhabitants not have the right to choose? Which should take precedent, the old, conventional world name or the new name chosen by the inhabitants? Should the countries of the world change all their records, maps, and charts each time a country changes its name? Or, should we be content with the commonly accepted names we have used for hundreds of years?

There are additional factors that come into play in choosing place names, such as historical events, colonialism, and political issues. For example, the Chinese may be happy to have an easily recognized world name, given all the local languages and dialects they have. Egyptians might wonder if tourists would go to see the pyramids of Misr. So the question of which name to call a country is not easily answered. Given the complicated nature of agreeing on place names, formal institutions have been created to deal with these problems.

Global Business Languages (2004)

U.S. INSTITUTIONS TO DECIDE PLACE NAMES

U.S. Board on Geographic Names

One hundred years after its founding, the United States had many place name problems. Explorers went west and named things, sometimes using local names if available. Other explorers followed and renamed them. Then settlers arrived and made up their own names. This was confusing enough inland, but when ships sailed into misnamed ports that were too shallow, it became dangerous. Adding to these problems, the U.S. Post Office liked to name local offices for individuals rather than for towns or settlements (Randall, p. 72).

There was so much confusion that a group of cartographers, geographers, academicians, and officials in the U.S. government met to discuss the problem. They submitted a report in 1890 recommending a governmental body be established to deal with place name issues. On September 4, 1890, President Harrison signed an executive order creating the U.S. Board on Geographic Names. It was chartered to establish “uniform usage in regard to geographic nomenclature and orthography” throughout the government and particularly for maps and charts (Randall, p. 72).

People were brought together from Coast and Geodetic Survey, the Department of State, the Treasury Department, the War Department, the Navy Department, the Post Office Department, the Smithsonian Institution, and the Geological Survey. Their activities included exploration, surveying, map and chart production, navigation, maintenance of lighthouses, mail delivery, and diplomatic and military functions. The Board was given final authority over all these organizations for naming decisions, making it possible for the Board’s work to be implemented.

In 1906, the Board gained the right to consider new names. The Board continued to work on place name problems, with increasing emphasis on foreign names. In its sixth report, presented in 1932, the Board addressed the issue of writing systems for foreign names. It issued the first policy statement on foreign names, recommending usage of locally spelled names unless there was an existing conventional English version. One can see at this time there was a desire to continue to use traditional, English names, letting the dual-name policy continue. The policy also addressed the issue of non-Roman writing systems. It was recommended that the British Royal Geographical Society’s system for Romanized letters be used.

During the period between 1932 and 1943 work declined and the staff was reduced to two to three people. Then the U.S. entered World War II. There was sudden and intense demand for accurate maps and charts of Japan, China, and the Far East. The government discovered they lacked many place names for the big, military maps. The workforce on the Board expanded to 176. Geographers, linguists, cartographers and librarians were brought in to establish accurate and consistent place names. During this time, the Board worked closely with Army and Navy personnel to provide the necessary names for maps.

The process was more difficult because names had to be converted from Chinese and Japanese scripts on foreign maps. So Roman names had to be developed for all the place names in the Far East. This process also had to be conducted in other parts of the world, such as North Africa, the Middle East, and Russia. Place names in the Arabic and Cyrillic alphabets had to be Romanized and new maps made. By the end of the war, seven million names had been processed.

An interesting thing happened to the Board at the end of the war. Many people thought the work of the Board was over. Others thought that peace was not firm enough to warrant the closure of the place name Board. Finally, after much discussion, as the last act of Congress in 1947, the Board was continued by one vote. It seems there had been established a correlation between war and the need for a naming board.

As part of the continuance, the Board was restructured. The Domestic Names Committee and the Foreign Names Committee were created. Over the following years, representatives from other government agencies were added to the Board: from the Department of Agriculture, the Department of Interior, the Department of State, the Army, the Air Force, the Navy, the Library of Congress, the Department of Commerce, the Department of Defense (DOD), the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), and the Government Printing Office. Clearly, the need to have accurate and consistent place names was enhanced by the additional members.

To enhance mapmaking, the Domestic Names Committee was transferred to the national Mapping Division. In 1969, the Foreign Names Committee moved to the Army Mapping Service in the Department of Defense, with responsibility for making maps for military services. In 1996, the CIA, the Defense Intelligence Agency, the National Aeronautical and Space Agency (NASA), the National Security Agency, and other organization members

joined the mapping division to become the National Imagery and Mapping Agency. The foreign names staff was merged into this agency. The executive secretary of the Board moved to the U.S. Geologic Survey in the Department of Interior. The executive secretary of the Foreign Names Committee and staff are at the National Imagery and Mapping Agency (NIMA).

U.S. Department of State

The Department of State (DOS) has a great need for accurate information regarding place names. In working with foreign officials and other U.S. agencies, the DOS must be careful to use the correct place names, to avoid giving offense. A graphic presentation with a misspelling or an official introduction ceremony with a mispronunciation can cause serious diplomatic problems.

The DOS also needs current information, so it created the Office of the Geographer and Global Issues (GGI) to provide greater knowledge about other countries. Members of the GGI are on the Board to share information and coordinate decision making. Accurate names are obtained in two ways: 1) GGI and other DOS groups receive reports from foreign offices and diplomats in order to process names; and 2) the DOS attends Foreign Names Committee meetings to share information and review names with the Board staff. The process of developing official U.S. place names is an interactive and cooperative process between the DOS and the Board. It seems that over time, the DOS has garnered the ultimate authority to establish the official name. This right was given exclusively to the Board in its charter in 1890. Perhaps this represents the changing importance of diplomatic relations and the increased value of showing respect to other nations.

U.S. Intelligence Agencies

A number of U.S. intelligence agencies have representatives on the Board. It is important for them to have current and accurate place names to carry out their missions. The CIA has worked well with the Board, providing information to the staff and receiving information as well. The CIA prepares reports and maps for its own activities and shares this information at briefings. For the CIA, briefings can be daily or more often if necessary. During the briefings, Board-approved names are used. But sometimes, conventional or common names are used to make sure all members of the meeting have the same places in mind.

Sometimes the intelligence agencies and the Board try to work together on a project. In one case, an intelligence agency was able to intercept radio

messages from drug runners in the Caribbean. The drug runners were radioing their intended drop-off sites but were using local nicknames for the ports and bays. The intelligence agency asked the Board if they could recognize the nicknames. It was hoped they could provide the locations on a timely basis to the intelligence operation so that the drop-offs could be intercepted. But the Board staff did not know the local nicknames.

Other U.S. intelligence agencies work with the Board to secure proper spelling, pronunciation, and location of place names. These agencies also publish documents which must be accurate. The CIA publishes the *National Intelligence Survey*, a gazetteer of place names, and *The World Factbook*.

Policies of the U.S. Board on Geographic Names

In the *Principles, Policies, and Procedures statement for Domestic Geographic Names*, one finds *Appendix D—Foreign Geographic Names*. The basic policies for foreign names are presented. First, the policy for countries that use the Roman alphabet is “to accept as official the written forms of names recognized locally.” (Website, p. 38) This shows a significant change from mid-century when the exception was added, “unless there was an existing conventional English version” (Randall, p. 73). Perhaps this shows a change in attitude regarding what determines the place name to be used, local use or tradition.

The second policy provides for a system to Romanize names that appear in another alphabet. The third basic policy says the “Board cooperates wherever possible with foreign governments to standardize foreign names for official U.S. purposes” (Website, p. 38).

The policy statement continues by addressing the problem of conventional names, or names used by Western governments. The “Board has also approved optional use of names that are traditional (conventional) with English-speaking nations, for example, ...Jordan River (Mahr al Urdunn)” (Website, p. 38). Hence the problem continues. We can “cooperate wherever possible” with foreign governments but we still reserve the option to call the country by the traditional, “Western” name.

UNITED NATIONS

In 1955, the United Nations (UN) assumed the task of standardizing geographic names. Facing many problems with erroneous or inconsistent place names, the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) met several times. In 1967, the UN convened an international conference on Standardization of Geographic Names. Representatives from 55 countries gathered in

Geneva, Switzerland. Other international organizations attended, such as the International Hydrographic Organization and the International Cartographic Association..

They considered four main issues. The first was to examine the state of current standardization programs. The second was to establish terms needed to aid toponymic work. The third was to develop a system for translating names from one writing alphabet to another. Finally, they discussed ways to continue working on this subject. These issues have become the ongoing tasks of the UN work on place names.

The 1967 conference generated 20 resolutions to aid in standardizing place names. Resolution 4 provided a formula for countries to follow in developing standardized names. If each nation followed the formula it would allow for international standardization of names.

The UN continued to convene naming conferences, holding them in 1977, 1982, 1987, 1992, and 1998. In 1998, there were 187 participants from 64 countries, with 13 organizations involved. These conferences have produced 159 resolutions and hundreds of written reports.

A UN group was given responsibility for standardizing place names, the UN Group of Experts on Geographic Names (UNGEGN). This group implements the name programs of the UN. The experts created country groups or divisions which meet regularly to consider naming issues for their part of the world. The experts are not usually UN delegates, but have professional knowledge of the issues involved in standardizing names.

PROBLEMS

The process is not without problems. Attendance is low at meetings, which slows down the amount of work that can be accomplished. Sometimes, countries mistakenly send UN delegates instead of experts. The delegates do not have the special skills or knowledge in cartography, history, or linguistics which are necessary for the task. Some countries do not seem to have much interest in the area. The Netherlands and the United Kingdom, among other well-known countries, do not have an agency to standardize names in their own countries. This means they cannot standardize their own place names which would then lead to an international standardized system at the UN.

Some countries do not have the experts to send to the meetings. Research showed that the less-developed countries were underrepresented at the meetings. They may have more urgent economic or political needs to address. At the same time, the new countries emerging from the former Soviet Union

and Eastern Europe are preoccupied with developing their economies and are not well represented at the naming meetings.

Another problem is the many directions that discussions on naming can take. Meetings often get bogged down in political issues, minority issues, and other cultural issues. Local groups often want to maintain their local names for places and do not cooperate in selecting a nationally recognized name.

The UN objective is to have “one standard name for each named feature” (Randall, p. 85). This would reduce the confusion surrounding place names and lead to international standardization. However, it may not be feasible to achieve this goal. Hundreds of reports have been written by the naming committees, many meetings held, and still the process seems mired in bureaucracy. Another problem area is tying the mapping agencies to the naming agencies within countries. National leadership is needed to achieve the coordination necessary to accomplish a national standardized set of geographic names.

The UN is aware of these problems and has begun to take steps to address them. Beginning with the conference of 1992, they have worked to upgrade their approach. In 1995, they proposed to simplify the process. First, the objective is to have a single spelling for each geographic name. Second, each nation has sole responsibility for standardizing the names within its borders. Unfortunately, with regard to country names, the UN decided international standardization was not a realizable goal. The UN seems unwilling to attempt to establish a single name for each country, only a single spelling for each place within a country.

CONCLUSIONS

It seems there is progress over the past century of struggling with place names in the U.S. In 1932, the first U.S. foreign names policy statement was issued. It provided for usage of local names “unless there was an existing conventional English version” (Randall, p. 73). By the end of the century, the policy was to “cooperate wherever possible” with foreign governments to use a local name, with the “optional use” of conventional English names. So the progress is from using the conventional English name to using the local name, retaining the option to use the English name. Ideally, one might like to see a policy where the official U.S. name is the same as the name chosen by the citizens of a country—the local name. This would be a way to show respect for the residents of other countries.

It is interesting to note the cycle of activity at the Board. At first it was created to stop confusion domestically and keep cargo ships from running aground in misnamed bays. Foreign place names played a small role, and the first foreign policy statement was issued in 1932, forty-two years after the creation of the Board. But as war entered the picture, activity dramatically increased, going from a staff of three to 176 in a short time. Then when peace was attained, the Board was almost discontinued. It seems that during most of the last century, there was a correlation between war and recognition of the need for accurate place names. As the Cold War proceeded, intelligence activities increased. Not surprisingly, intelligence agencies were merged with the Foreign Names staff and placed in the Defense Department's imaging division. It is no accident that foreign place names ended up in the Defense Department (previously the War Department). In order to wage war, accurate place names are critical. One could see how they were essential recently in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Even the United Nations has not found success in addressing the issue of dual-name countries. They have decided not to address the country name issue. They are now focusing on the spelling of area names within countries and trying to standardize them first nationally, then internationally. Maybe this is the only workable approach right now. As countries begin to address this issue they will become more interested in addressing the issue of standardizing country names.

There is no clear-cut way to decide what to call dual-name countries, such as Germany, Egypt, or China. Even though the U.S. has an institution specifically designed to handle place name problems, it has not been able to end the confusion. It appears to be progressing slowly toward fully recognizing local names and foregoing conventional English names. For its part, the United Nations has given up dealing with dual-name issues.

In an ideal world, each group of citizens would have the same local name as the name applied externally. But as the following example shows, adapting to the whims of locals can be time-consuming, expensive, and confusing.

In the case of the former Siam, a bloodless coup deposed the monarchy in 1932. Six years later, one of the leaders of the coup, Pibul Songgram, became premier and changed the country's name to Thailand. What happened to the name during the next decade dramatizes the symbolic value of place names. In 1942, Songgram allied with the Japanese and declared war on the United States and England. A second leader of the 1932 coup, Pridi

Phanomyang, formed a militant antigovernment underground and became premier in the postwar government. He promptly jailed Pibul as a war criminal and restored the name Siam, publicly repudiating Pibul's policies. In 1947, Pibul led an overthrow of Pridi's government and back came the name Thailand (Nelson, p. 151).

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Another research question involves studying the role of business in creating a world name. Currently, firms adapt to local conditions when in-country. Should they use the local name in-country and the world name with headquarters? What should they use regionally? Could/should they be ambassadors for the local name or for the world name?

Perhaps we can continue to live with this somewhat confusing but manageable situation of dual names for selected countries. There is no pressing, endemic movement to replace the world name with the local name. Further research could investigate the feelings of the inhabitants of the dual-name countries. They could be studied to register their views on this issue. It may be that inhabitants of dual-name countries have long accepted this situation and do not attach any meaning to the fact their country has two names. They may be proud of the cultural or historical heritage of both names. Or, it could be that many inhabitants resent the fact that the world name is either old, inappropriate or created by an outside country and would like to see it discontinued.

Finally, it would be nice to call everyone by their own name, but that is a utopian notion. The English statesman and author Sir Thomas More in *Utopia* (1516) described an imaginary country with ideal laws and social conditions. Inevitably, the name comes from the Greek *ou*, meaning 'no' or 'not,' plus *topos*, 'place': nowhere" (Nelson, p. 186). In other words, a country with ideals was nowhere. Maybe in 1516 it was not possible to contemplate this, but in the twenty-first century, it may be reasonable to have the social ideal of using the names for countries which the citizens themselves have chosen.

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