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STANDARDIZATION OF ARABIC AND AFRICAN PLACE NAMES IN POLAND

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Short history

History of toponymic standardization procedures in Poland as applied to geographical names of Arabic and African countries starts in 1954 with the establishment of the Commission for the Establishment of Geographical Names. The task of the Commission was to elaborate and publish lists of geographical names of all foreign countries in order to achieve uniformity of their use on national scale. The following method was adopted:

a) selection of most important names for each country, including administrative divisions, important populated places and geographical features;

b) finding out existing Polish exonyms and deciding on a most correct form in case of the existence of diverging variants; the tendency was rather to extend than to limit the use of exonyms in view of their better adaptability to contexts in Polish, in which they were supposed to appear, and for the preservation of natural historical bonds with earlier Polish writings;

c) fixing orthography of newly selected and admitted names, basing mainly on the widespread international variant forms; the orthography was to follow rules of the Polish language in order to ensure their easy pronunciation by Polish readers and adaptability to Polish flexion system.

The Commission worked five years before it published in 1959 a huge volume titled *Polish Geographical Nomenclature of the World*. The names were arranged alphabetically by geographical categories within chapters devoted each to

an individual country. The whole huge volume was supplemented with extensive alphabetical index listing all approved names as well as their variant forms which appeared earlier within the national lists for easier identification of named features.

For almost fifty years the *PGNW* well served the purpose as the most reliable source of information available on the Polish market and was a helpful tool to text and map authors, editors and publishers. However, the changes in the world political structure, emergence of new states with new official languages and new policies formulated by governments deeply motivated by their national feelings were the reason that the *PGNW* was becoming more and more obsolete.

In the meantime, in the early 1970's this author published the first uniform system for the Polish transcription of names written in Arabic alphabet was, mainly for the needs of Polish cartography, but it was also quickly accepted by a wide range of authors writing on the history, politics and culture of the Arab World. That system was in contradiction to the previous practice of Polonizing French or English forms of Arab names and instead it promoted use of forms in the official language of the Arab countries, Modern Standard Arabic (MSA). The question of exonyms became acute because of the newly appearing necessity to decide what really can be considered a Polish exonym, that is a name well imbibed in the Polish linguistic and historical tradition, and what is just a recent superficial adaptation that can easily be discarded as obsolete.

The turn of the millennia marked a new era in the standardization works in Poland. New commission was organized and started new activities, first under the guidance of the Ministry of Education, later on under the Chief Office of Geodesy and Cartography. Arab and African countries became an important issue which the Commission had to face.

Colonial heritage in Africa

Situation in the toponymy of Arab and African countries is strongly marked by their colonial heritage. Most of the states, with just a few exceptions, have borders delineated by colonial powers. Those borders usually have nothing in common with the local historical tradition and do not follow division lines between national, linguistic or religious groups. In consequence, practically all states in Africa, either to the North or to the South of the Sahara, are multiethnic and multilingual, often multiracial.

Complicated demographic composition within the countries that quite recently achieved their freedom, and necessity to preserve the new national unity motivated the adoption of vehicular languages introduced by ex-colonial powers, that is their own national languages from Europe (English, French, Spanish,

Portuguese), as national languages of the new states. Such decisions to a great degree removed danger of interethnic clashes since no local language, out of several possible ones, could claim administrative priority which could easily be translated into political superiority and economic privileges. In such conditions the governments tended to pay little attention to questions of toponymy or, rather, tried to neglect the issue that might have easily transform into dispute about ethnic territories and cultural autonomy, and later on influence the political and economic life.

In recent years, more and more countries in Africa South of the Sahara decide on the introduction of local languages as official ones. First was certainly Ethiopia claiming thousands of years of cultural continuity and which for just a short period of time fell prey to Italian invaders. The official Amharic language Ethiopia is written with a non-Latin alphabet of its own, similar to Tigrinya in Eritrea. All other countries of Black Africa use Latin alphabets for their non-European local languages. The only exception is Arabic language (and alphabet), used as one of the two official languages by such countries like Chad, Eritrea, Djibouti and Somalia, while in the Comoro Republic Arabic is one of three official languages, alongside with French and Comoro.

The very confusing linguistic situation when one language has an official position and other ones are widely spoken by local population, lack of writing tradition of certain local languages, unstable rules of orthography often combined with split into several dialects when each claims either superiority or a separate status, plus lack of people trained in the matters of toponymy, meets with official policy of refraining from taking position in toponymic questions, except pronouncing verbal declarations on very formal occasions in international gatherings. The institutions and persons officially nominated for dealing with toponymic questions rarely have enough knowledge of the matter, satisfactory allocated funds for undertaking works on reasonable scale or a formal competence to influence the situation in the field of standardization and to enforce the implementation of whatever the real effects could they have.

Available documentation is scarce. Existing lists of geographical names are built on so-called traditional spellings in languages of the ex-colonial nations, not in local national languages. It is difficult to find sources of names spelled correctly and, indeed, to identify the criteria of correctness.

Arab states of North Africa

The situation in the Arab countries is more clear from the systematic point of view, although not much less complicated materially. One and the same Arabic language is official in Mauritania, Morocco (with Western Sahara), Algeria, Tunis,

Libya, Egypt and Sudan. The Arab states agreed on national standardization in the categories of the Modern Standard Arabic and on the use of one Latinization (Romanization) system. The problem is that standard documents produced with respect to these rules are not widely available; it can be assumed that in most cases they do not exist.

The everyday practice is to use traditional French names in ex-French dependencies, and all sorts of occasional styles of spelling in the other countries.

Polish experience

When the Polish Commission for Standardization of Geographical Names Beyond Polish Borders started its works, we faced the situation that available materials delivered plenty of variant Arab names - sometimes even for the most popular places. For many countries, specially in the Maghrb, but also for the Sudan, even most basic maps in Arabic were difficult to obtain or were not available at all. We decided the only possible way was to make the following by ourselves:

a)   standardization of Arab geographical names (split by individual countries), that means:
- finding available sources of information (official and unofficial maps, school and general atlases, modern manual books on geography and history, occasional citations and direct oral information),
- gathering existing form of names written with the use of Arabic letters from original publications, then fixing the spelling and vowelling of Arab toponyms by ourselves, with the use of standard dictionaries and grammars of Arabic language,
- comparison of these names with the toponymic wealth drawn from historical sources;

b) transliteration of Arab names into Latin characters, according to the so-called Beirut system (accepted by the Arab countries themselves);

c) carrying out the Polish simplified transcription of Arab toponyms for popular use.

Certain number of earlier exonyms, after discussion, was retained in Polish and admitted to further use. Historically taking those names were coming mostly from English and French sources and only underwent a process of phonetic adaptation to the Polish language. All other names are direct derivatives from Arabic, critically prepared according to strictly formulated procedures.

Names of Ethiopia are derived from sources in the Amharic language, Tigrinya names of Eritrea are also derived from source materials in the original language.

Other names, from countries using Latin alphabets, are derived as far as possible from official publications coming from those countries or from foreign publications having official endorsement of the countries in question.

It was agreed that names from countries using non-Latin alphabets (Arabic, Ethiopian and Tigrinya) should be selected in greater number in proportion to those coming from countries using Latin alphabet. The main argument was the difficulty a laymen would encounter to find appropriate sources of information as well as problems of transcription that can only be solved with the help of an expert.

Materials in form of geographical names lists were printed in book form, in provisional edition, and distributed to most important academic, media and publishing centers. Their legal status of those names is defined as recommendations, but not as obligation.

The existing lists if standard toponyms will undergo periodical revision and updating, in reference to published reviews and criticism of older lists as well as newly available materials.

The materials published in Poland, specially for some of the African Arabic-speaking countries, are at present the only existing source of standardized names of that size.