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Exonyms

Four types of exonym

Summary**

The objective of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names to reduce the international use of exonyms is giving rise to legitimate debate in France, although such discussions are less heated than in the 1980s. At that time, the French toponymic authorities were working to apply that objective to French exonyms that were similar to their respective endonyms, in line with official recommendations eventually issued in 1993.

Since then, usage has resulted in differing outcomes with regard to the recommendations. Even prior to the issuance of the official recommendations, the tendency was to replace “Surinam” with “Suriname” and “Ammane” with “Amman”. “Tallinn” replaced “Tallin”, the spelling of which made its pronunciation ambiguous; “Lituanie” replaced “Lithuanie”, merely simplifying the spelling; but “Changhaï” became “Shanghai”, which is further from the French system of orthography.

What all these exonyms have in common is that they were borrowed from the local language, with the endonyms as adopted in their current form linked to iterations that arose as a result of similarities. However, usage has also resulted in exonyms being formed in other ways:

- In some cases, the endonym is also used as the reference point, but it is translated rather than borrowed: “Royaume-Uni” for “United Kingdom”, “États-Unis” for “United States” and “Deux-Ponts” for “Zweibrücken” (Germany);
- Some exonyms were formed in the language of use from the same etymon as the endonym itself: “Londres” is the result of the evolution in French of the Latin word *Londinium*, which became “London” in English; “Lothringen” is the German derivation of Lothaire, which became “Lorraine” in French;

* [GEGN.2/2021/1](#).

** The full report was prepared by Pierre Jaillard, President of the National Committee on Toponymy and Chair of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (France). It will be available under document symbol GEGN.2/2021/56/CRP.56, in the language of submission only, at https://unstats.un.org/unsd/ungegn/sessions/2nd_session_2021/.



- Other exonyms have no formal, etymological or even referential relationship with their respective endonyms, and can instead be explained by history: “Allemagne” for “Deutschland”, the Greek word “Gallia” for “France”, and the French exonym “rochers du Liancourt” for “Dokdo” in Korean or “Takeshima” in Japanese.

Whether they are exogenous to the language of use, as in the case of borrowed words or translations, or endogenous, as in the case of place names that emerged as a result of differing language evolutions or points of reference, exonyms are not created arbitrarily, with disregard for endonyms or local languages; exonyms reflect the historical or cultural relationship to the place in question. Any efforts to standardize place names must be respectful of such heritage, and it would be wise to allow the users of the language in question to decide whether or not to accept the proposed standardized names.
