As we noted previously, the most common motivation for renaming is political. One of the most common reasons for a country changing its name is its newly acquired independence. When borders are changed, whether due to a country splitting or to two countries joining together, the names of the relevant areas can also change. This, perhaps, is not so much an act of geographical renaming as it is the creation of a different entity.

Another motivation is the signalling of a new political era. As a post-revolutionary symbolic change, for example, new régimes remove evidence of the deposed régimes to establish their identity. Placenames are among the first symbols of a country or dynasty to be created, altered, and distorted. One case is that of Persia / Iran. A country’s endonym is usually different from its exonym.1 For the people of Iran this issue has been very controversial: Persia was its exonym, but Iranians have been calling their country Iran for over a millennium; the name Persia evoked for them their old culture and civilisation; Persia and the name of a province of Iran (Pars) are from the same root, and thus caused confusion. As with Holland and The Netherlands, the meaning of ‘Persia’ had shifted to refer to the whole country. As an illustration of this, in Western languages all famous cultural aspects of Iran have been recorded as ‘Persian’—Persian carpet, Persian food, Persian cat, etc.

Typical examples of countries renamed following régime change or independence include:
- East Pakistan (East Bengal) → Bangladesh (1971)
- Gilbert Islands → Kiribati (1979)2
- Ceylon → Sri Lanka (1972)
- Siam → Thailand (1949)
- Portuguese Timor → East Timor (1975) → Timor-Leste (2002)
- Ellice Islands → Tuvalu (1978)
- New Hebrides → Vanuatu (1980)

Cities also have been renamed for the same reason:
- Salisbury → Harare (1982)
- Saigon → Ho Chi Minh City (after the fall of South Vietnam in 1975)
- Byzantium (under Greek rule) → Constantinople (under Roman and Ottoman rule) → Istanbul (since 28 March 1930)
- Sunda Kelapa → Jayakarta → Batavia → Jakarta (after end of Dutch rule in 1946)
- Derry (until 1623) → Londonderry
- Hanyang (1392) → Hanseong (1395) → Keijō or Gyeongseong (1914) → Seoul (1946)
- Rangoon (1852) → Yangon (1988)

The dates when places are renamed reveal a political and historical story, and none more so than the renaming of two cities in Russia:
- Saint Petersburg → Petrograd (1914) → Leningrad (1924) → Saint Petersburg (1991)
- Tsaritsyn (1589) → Stalingrad (1925) → Volgograd (1961)

In Australia we have also been busy renaming places for political purposes. Many German placenames were removed and replaced during World War I. South Australia was perhaps the most active in this endeavour, though names were also replaced in other states. The following list is representative:
- Bismarck → Weeroopa
- Hahndorf → Ambleside (original name restored in 1935)
- Hoffnungsthal → Karawirira (original name restored in 1975)
To get an idea of how common the renaming of places is in Australia, I recommend you have a look at the following website: Renamed Places in Queensland <http://www.chapelhill.homeip.net/FamilyHistory/Other/Renamed-Places-in-Queensland.html>

The most iniquitous motivation for renaming a place is a powerful and often dangerous symbol of appropriation, and the current dispute over the South China Sea is a good example of this. China has recently been building artificial islands on uninhabited reefs in the Spratly Islands in an attempt to lay a territorial claim to them. The dispute is a long, ongoing territorial dispute between China, the Philippines, Taiwan, Malaysia, Brunei, and Vietnam, all having territorial claims in the Sea. Consequently, most of the maritime features in the island group have at least six names. The Philippines’ objection to China’s claims in the region is further reflected by rejecting the name South China Sea and naming it the West Philippine Sea.

Another territorial dispute in the region involves what Japan calls the Senkaku Islands (Senkaku Shotō). China and Taiwan also lay claim to them and have bestowed their own names upon them—the Diaoyu Islands and Diaoyutai Islands respectively.

It is a troubled region. The international name for the body of water that borders Japan, North Korea, South Korea and Russia is also disputed. Objections to the name Sea of Japan were first raised by North Korea and South Korea in 1992, at the Sixth United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names. Japan, naturally, endorses the name Sea of Japan, whilst South Korea supports the name East Sea (‘East’ being the compass bearing from Korea), and North Korea, less subtly, the East Sea of Korea.

Yet another dispute in that neighbourhood concerns the Scarborough Shoal, about 200 km off the coast of the Philippines. It was seized by China in 2012 after a three-month standoff with the Philippines’ coast guard. The reef has been dubbed Huangyan Island by China.

Another dispute, in a different ocean, involves Argentina and Britain over the Falkland Islands, known by Argentina as the Islas Malvinas. The outcome of the war over the sovereignty of the islands in 1982 means that the islands are generally referred to internationally as the Falkland Islands rather than the Malvina Islands.

One final example of appropriation by naming will suffice here, and concerns Israel’s wiping Arabic and English names from road signs in Israel, East Jerusalem and the West Bank in 2009. Only Hebrew names were to be retained. The rhetoric used at the time stated that road signs would be ‘standardised’.

Renaming may be recognised locally but not internationally (especially when there are linguistic differences)—Burma / Myanmar is a recent example which has caused some uncertainty in diplomatic circles.

Jan Tent

Endnotes

1 Endonym ‘a locally used placename, or a placename in one of the languages occurring in the area where the placename is located’, e.g. Wien; exonym ‘a name used by speakers of other languages instead of a native name’, e.g. Vienna. In other words, exonyms differ in their forms from the name used in the official language or languages of the area where the geographical feature is situated.

2 ‘Kiribati’, pronounced /kiri-bas/, is actually the Gilbertese rendition of ‘Gilbert’.

