

Balti Place Names in the Karakoram

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MUCH of the eastern Karakoram lies in Baltistan, a region inhabited by Muslims who speak a Tibetan dialect. Having been converted to Islam half a millenium ago, the Baltis speak a language which is no longer intelligible to Tibetans. Racially the Balti people differ from them too, looking more like eastern or southern Europeans, some even blue-eyed.

On a reconnaissance of K2 with Bob and Gail Bates and my wife Ann in the summer of 1974, as a linguist I became fascinated with Balti names for peaks, glaciers and camping places. Names which appear on maps were in some cases fairly correctly transliterated. In others, they were so badly transcribed that until I heard them properly pronounced, their meanings were obscure. Of course time has so changed some names or the language has so developed that some original meanings have become lost.

Possibly I should use a phonetic transcription for the names which appear below, but since most of the readers will not be familiar with the International Phonetic Alphabet, I shall give the names as they appear on Karakoram maps, namely with "English consonants and Italian vowels." Difficulties arise because of different pronunciations in different regions. For instance *p*, *ph* and *f* seem to vary from place to place and are replaced in some localities with a rather strongly aspirated *h*. *Kh* is normally the guttural sound of a German back *ch*. In transliterations *g*, *k* and *q* tend to become confused. In this paper, I have placed the "map" spelling first, followed in some cases by a closer approximation of the true sound in parentheses.

We set out on our walk in to K2 from the principal Balti town, Skardu, where the Indus sweeps around the crags of the Rock of Skardu. The name comes from *skar*, which is short for *skarba* (measuring) + *rdua* (rock). The "measuring rock" is probably the Rock of Skardu, which doubtless showed the height of the water in the Indus.

Balti Names of Peaks

K2. The surveyors' designation of K2 is the official name of the world's second highest peak and has been declared such after much

discussion by the Pakistani government. *Chogori* (big peak) has no acceptance either locally or officially. Godwin Austen is the name of the glacier at its eastern foot and is only incorrectly used on some maps as the name of the mountain. It is interesting to note that a new word, *Ketu*, meaning "big peak" seems to be entering the Balti language. One of our porters looked at Masherbrum and declared it to be a *rgasha ketu* (beautiful big mountain). Other visitors to the region confirm this new word.

Broad Peak. The translation into Balti as *Phalchan Kangri* has no acceptance among the Baltis.

Gasherbrum (*rGashabrum*) from *rgasha* (beautiful) + *brum* (mountain). The initial *r* is a single tap of the tongue and should not distort what sounds nearly like an initial *g*.

Masherbrum. Our porters were in complete agreement that the name came from *mashadar* (muzzle-loading gun) + *brum* (mountain) and this was confirmed by educated Baltis. The dropping of final syllables in compound names is common. They claim that its shape with the double summit resembles an old muzzle-loader. The Raja of Khapalu, however, suggests that *masha* means "queen" or "lady" and so he thinks it means "queen of peaks". There are two other explanations which have appeared in print which are of doubtful validity. It has been suggested that it means "Doomsday Mountain" since in Arabic *Mahsher* means "doomsday". However it is highly unlikely that Arabic would appear in any Balti place name. It has also been suggested that it means "White Mountain", *burum* being "white" in Burushaski, but this seems even less probable since that is the language of Hunza and not of Baltistan. (Nor does it account for *masha*.)

Saltoro Kangri (*Tsaltoro* or *Chhaltoro Gang-ri*). It is difficult to determine the meaning of Saltoro, the valley above which this mountain rises. One informant felt it might mean the valley of *Tsal* (borax). Of course *gang* means "ice" and *ri* means "peak".

Saser Kangri: "The golden-earth ice peak" from *sa* (earth) + *ser* (gold) + *gang* (ice) + *ri* (peak).

Chogolisa (*Chhogolingsa*): "The great hunting ground" from *chhogo* (great) + *ling* (hunting) + *sa* (ground).

Skyang Kangri: *Skyang* (wild ass).

Mamostong Kangri (*Mangmotsong Gang-ri*): "Many devils ice peak" from *mangmo* (many) + *tsong* (devils) + *gang* (ice) + *ri* (peak).

Sia Kangri: "Wild rose ice peak" from *sia* (wild rose) + *gang* (ice) + *ri* (peak).

Rimo Kangri (*Ringmo Gang-ri*): "The long-glacier peak" from *ringmo* (long) + *gang* (ice or glacier) + *ri* (peak).

Skil Brum: "The peak in the middle" from *skil(po)* (middle) + *brum* (mountain).

Sherpi Kangri. *Sherpi* or *Shere* means "east", "rising", "prosperous".

Photo by H. Adams Carter

CHOGOLINGSA (Chogolisa) seen from the Godwin Austen Glacier. The name means "The big hunting ground".



PLATE 27

Photo by H. Adams Carter

Balti Porters.



The leader of the 1974 Japanese expedition to that peak, Tatsuo Inoue, writes that their porters pronounced it "Shere Gang-ri."

Chongtar. I found little agreement on this name. The Numbardar¹ of Askole said it meant a "high grazing ground." Another informant said it was a "cairn on high ground". Hamed Ali Khan felt it meant an "elevated place for ceremonies" from *cho* (leader, raja) + *tar* (elevated place).

Baltoro Kangri. There was little agreement on the name *Baltoro*. The explanation given by Burrard and Hayden² from Tibetan *dpal-gtor-po* (spreader of abundance) seems unlikely. Other explanations were based on *bal* (wool), *balto* (clay used to mix with wool to extract lanolin and dirt) and *Balti* (the people of the region). No explanation seems satisfactory.

Names of the Biafo-Baltoro Region

Biafo Gang and Biaho Lungma. The name *Biafo* or *Biaho* would seem to be the same, coming from *biafo* (rooster). *Gang* means "ice" or "glacier" and *lungma* means "valley". When I questioned the porters about the reason for the name of the valley, they told me that the many overhanging rocks under which they camp, common here, were like sheltering chicken wings. There may be some confusion with *baho* (cave).

Mango Gusor (Mango Go-ser). *Mango* appears to be a place name with no obvious meaning, but *go-ser* (golden head is from *go* (head) + *ser* (gold), probably indicating yellow rocks near the summit.

Koser Gunge (Khosar Gang). Hassan Khan Shigri, who lives below the peak in Shigar, said it was pronounced *Khosar Gang*: *Khosar* (clay pot) + *gang* (ice).

Panmah Gang: *Panmah* (archery range) + *gang* (glacier).

Korophon. *Phon* means "boulder" but the meaning of *Koro* was not clear.

Bardomal: "Troublesome place" from *bardo* (trouble) + *mal* (place or river bank). The writer agrees, having fallen some 25 feet down a small cliff when a handhold came loose in his hand. Luckily I fell onto a rocky shelf just beside the river and not into the rushing waters, where I would certainly have drowned.

Paiju (Payu). *Payu* (salt) gives this region its name. There are mineral salts which crystallize around hot springs. The name was probably first applied to the campsite, *Payu Brangsa*, from *payu* (salt) + *brang* (dwelling or camping) + *sa* (ground), and then applied to the well known peak.

¹ Headman. The word is also written "Lambardar", which I am told is a country pronunciation.

² *A sketch of the Geography and Geology of the Himalaya Mountains and Tibet* by S.G. Burrard and H.H. Hayden. Delhi: Geodetic Branch, Survey of India, 1933, page 49.

Liliwa. The camping place beside the lower Baltoro Glacier has appeared in print with different spellings: Liligo, Lilipru. These pronunciations seem far from what we observed the Baltis to be calling it, namely Liliwa. Its meaning could not satisfactorily be determined.

Urdukas (rDokas). The name of this verdant campsite has been very badly transliterated. The initial *r* is a mere tap of the tongue (as in *rgasha*) and perhaps might better not be attempted by non-Baltis. *Rdua* means "rock" and *kas* is a shortened form of *kaspa* (breaking or splitting); thus *rDokas* is "split rock". The name comes from the colossal rock above the campsite with its huge fissure.

Mandu Glacier (Mundung Gang). From *mundung* (a kind of knotty wood) + *gang* (ice or glacier). This was one of the last places where wood was available below the pass on the old trade route to Sinkiang.

Yermanendu Glacier (Yermamundung Gang). *Yerma* means "upper". *Mundung*, the rest of the name, is identical to that of the glacier which enters the Baltoro just down-glacier, despite the very different transliteration on the maps.

Trango Towers. These impressive peaks seem to get their name from a campsite of the same name. On his map, Ardito Desio records the name as "Tramgo", and it may come from *Tramga* (sheepfold).

Lhunkha. This identifies a region on the Baltoro frequently used for camping as well as the ridge south of the Mustagh Tower. *Lhunkha* means "the mouth of a valley where a stream spreads out over the out-wash plain".

Biang (Biang-a). The last campsite before Concordia. *Biang-a* means "scree" or "sand".

Doksam. This means "stepping stones over a river" from *rdua* (rock) + *sam* (bridge).

Khalkahl Gang: Khalkhal (sweet) + *gang* (glacier).

Sarpo Laggo (Serp Laggo): Serpo (yellow) + *laggo* (pass).

Karpo-go: Karpo or *kapho* (white) + *go* (head).

Krukhsun: "Triangular peak" from *kru* (corner) + *khsum* (three). *Gangchen: Gang* (ice) + *chen* (much).

Siachen Gang: Sia (wild roses) + *chen* (many) + *gang* (glacier).

Sosben (Saspung): "A pile of earth" from *sa* (earth) + *spung* (pile).

Drengmang Gang: Drengmo (bear) + *gang* (glacier).

Other recurring names

Lopsang: "wide", "open".

Brok or *Broq: "pasture".*

Brak or *Braq: "cliff", "rock face".*

Tso: "lake".

Kha: "snow".

Lukpa: "where the sun never strikes", "shaded".

Chumik: "spring" from *chhu* (water) + *mik* (eye).

Photo by H. Adams Carter

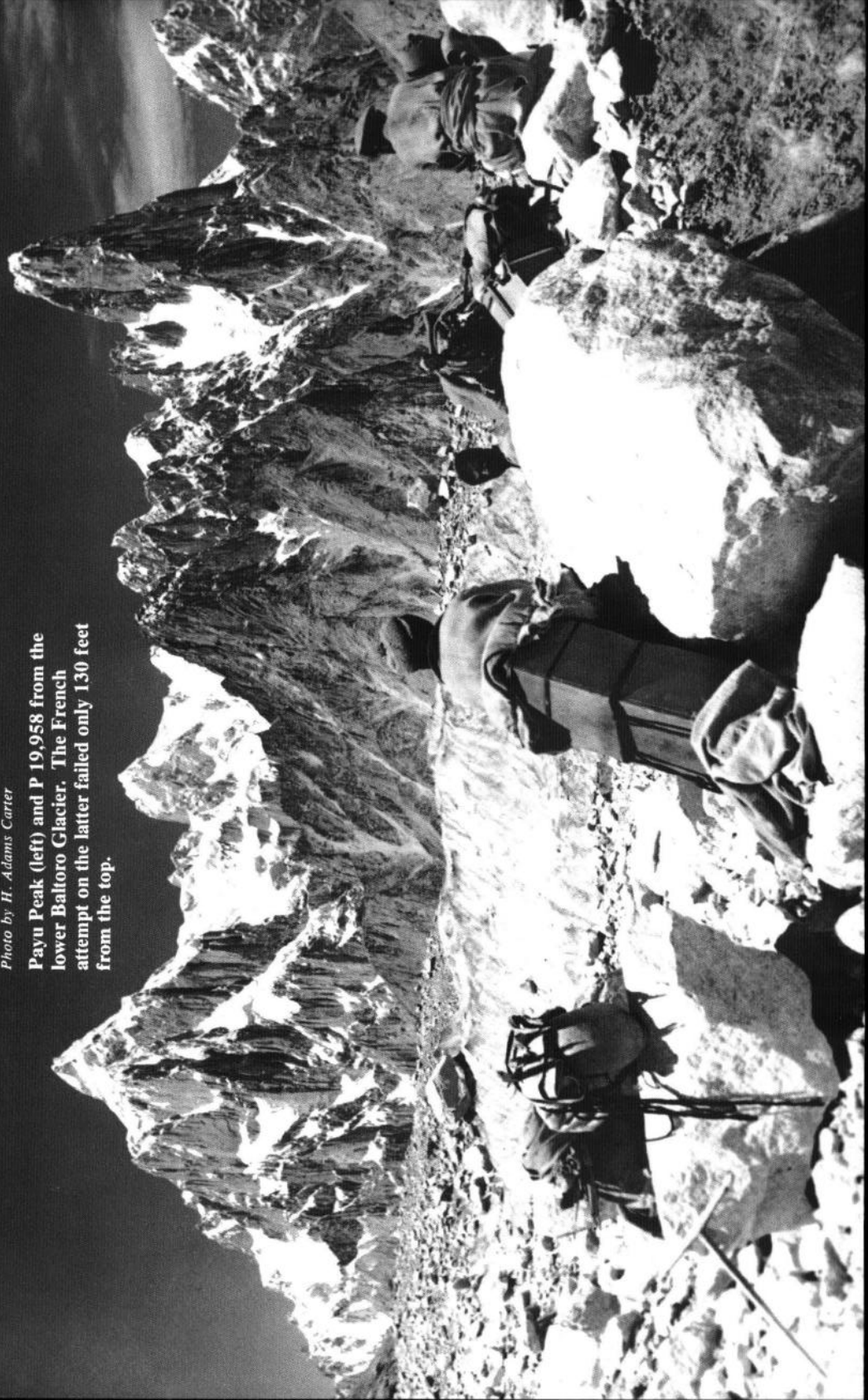
Balti porters sitting above the split in the rock which gives rDokas (Urdokas) its name.



PLATE 29

Photo by H. Adams Carter

Payu Peak (left) and P 19,958 from the lower Baltoro Glacier. The French attempt on the latter failed only 130 feet from the top.



The writer is grateful for the help of many Balti-speaking people. Of particular help were Mohammad Hussein of Satpara, the Nambardar of Askole Haji Memdi, with both of whom Major Manzoor Hussein served as interpreter, Hamed Ali Khan of Islamabad, Hassan Khan Shigri and Dr. Mohammad Yaqub Khan Wazir, both of Shigar, all of whom speak fluent English, and Sidney Schuler of Harvard University, who put me in touch with several of these.

Little seems to have been written on the subject. The best work I have found was *Place Names in Northern Baltistan* by Wilhelm Kick in *The Mountain World 1956/57* on pages 191 to 200. For the most part I have tried to avoid repeating the same material covered by this excellent article.

