

A TIBETAN NAME FOR EVEREST

By T. S. BLAKENEY

1. With regard to Professor Odell's remarks in *A. J.* 69. 290, I have discussed this matter further with Mr. Creighton of the Permanent Committee on Geographical Names, and have also had the assistance of Mr. Hugh Richardson, who took the trouble to inspect photographic reproductions of the original permits¹ issued by Lhasa for the first three Everest expeditions, in case any misinterpretations have been made in the past—a point pressed by Professor Odell in *A. J.* 65. 239.

2. One great difficulty pointed out by Mr. Richardson concerns how travellers have represented in writing the sounds they have heard. Thus, Kempson, *Everest: the Unfinished Adventure*, p. 287, on the basis of the pilgrims' guide-book given to the 1936 Everest expedition by the Abbot of Rongbuk, writes that 'the best-known local name for Mount Everest is Chomo-langma'. This he claims agrees substantially, though not syllabically, with the 1921 Lhasa permit's form of Chha-mo-lung-ma (thus written by Kempson, but see below, para. 4). To take the third syllable only, what *sound* is intended by 'lang' and 'lung' in these two instances? Does the former represent 'a' as in 'sang', or is it the Indian short 'a' as in the English word 'hung'? As we shall see, a number of travellers have written this syllable as 'lung', but without distinguishing between varied pronunciations of 'u', as in such words as 'put' and 'hung'.

3. As Tilman has pointed out (*Two Mountains and a River*, p. 51), the natives inhabiting an area containing great mountains are likely to be too uninterested to name individual peaks; if one *does* get a name, it is liable to be given different ones in different areas, 'so that the early and possibly ignorant traveller is given two names, both of which he probably takes down wrongly'. This, of course, notes Tilman, is a godsend for linguists to practice their science by alternative spellings or interpretations of the name.

4. Mr. Richardson, in addition to inspecting the early Lhasa permits, has also seen the 1936 pilgrims' guide-book.² It is impracticable to reproduce Tibetan (or Chinese, for that matter) symbols in the *A. J.*, but Mr. Richardson's conclusions may be summarised as follows:

Put into the simplest form for English readers, the original documents

¹ These are in the possession of the Royal Geographical Society.

² Kindly lent me by Mr. Kempson.

show Lhasa in 1921, 1922 and 1924 as referring to 'the snow mountain Bya-ma-lung (pronounced Cha-ma-lung, with the 'u' as in 'put'; hereafter, in this article, the pronunciation-form will be used). In one other document for 1922, an alternative version is given, Cha-mo-lung. In Ruttledge's book, *Everest* 1933, p. 61, the passport for that year is shown as having the form Cha-ma-lung; the passport for 1936 was printed in a Tibetan grammar by Sir Basil Gould and Mr. Richardson, and it, too, uses the form Cha-ma-lung. In addition, Mr. Richardson says that in 1935 Sir Charles Bell left notes which showed his opinion to have been that the mountain was locally known as Kang-cha-ma-lung ('kang' meaning 'snow').

5. Thus the evidence seems conclusive that the customary form in use in Lhasa in those days was Cha-ma-lung (the 'u' as in 'put'). The Rongbuk guide-book form would be pronounced Jo-mo-lang-ma, with the 'a' of 'lang' short, as in the word 'hung'; see para. 2 above. Kempson's statement that these two forms agree substantially, if not syllabically, is invalid; the words may sound not unlike to English ears, but in Tibetan there is no correspondence between the two.

6. As regards the meaning of the Lhasa form, Cha-ma (or Cha-mo, for that matter) means 'bird', and might mean 'hen bird', though the latter is not a usual form. 'Lung' (with the 'u' as in 'put') may be used to indicate a general area, but also means a broad river valley, though not, it may be noted, a high, narrow valley such as one finds among mountains. In a letter on the files of the P.C.G.N., written by Sir Basil Gould in 1936, and intended for *The Times*, but not in fact published, he interprets the Lhasa name to mean 'Land of Hen Birds'. Mr. Richardson recommends caution in attempting such interpretations, though willing to agree that the Tibetan Government's name *might* mean 'Bird Land'.

7. Mr. Richardson concludes by saying that the official documents clearly show that the Tibetan Government of those days regarded Cha-ma-lung as indicative of a mountain massif; the name refers, not to a particular peak, but to a snow-mountain area.

8. In *A.J.* 69. 144, Mr. Creighton drew attention to two other usages of recent origin:

(a) the present Chinese name, used by the Communist régime in Peking since 1953 or so, is: Chu-mu-lang-ma (pronounced Ju-mu-lang-ma).

(b) the Russian version, in the Russian-Tibetan Dictionary issued in 1963 by the Buriat-Mongol Research Dept. of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, based on what *they say* is the Tibetan name, is: Jo-mo-lung-ma.

It would seem, therefore, that both Chinese and Russians tend to favour a form that agrees with that in the Rongbuk guide-book, and

with what has been reported by other travellers (see paras. 15 and 18 below).

It should be observed that both (a) and (b) above are represented here according to the Wade-Giles system of transliteration, used both in the U.K. and in the U.S.A. The Chinese use their own system, which in strictness should give the first syllable of the term in (a) as 'Zhu', and not 'Chu'. There is no warrant, however, in either system for the attempted introduction by Chinese mountaineers (see *A.J.* 66. 36-7) of the form 'Jolmo-lungma', a term that would seem to show that the Chinese who use it are not familiar with their own system, let alone ours.

9. No doubt to the ordinary English reader, the Chinese and Russian forms will probably look and sound like variations in spelling and pronunciation of the official Tibetan form (paras. 4 and 7 above) or of the Rongbuk guide-book form, or of both. But Mr. Richardson observes that no Tibetan would confuse Cha-ma with Cho-mo (pronounced Jo-mo), since not only is 'Cha' represented in Tibetan script by a quite distinct symbol from 'Cho', but the pronunciation is also quite different. Nor would a Tibetan be likely to confuse 'lung' as used in the Lhasa permits and 'glang' which was used in the Rongbuk guide-book (Kempson, *op. cit.*). Nevertheless, adds Mr. Richardson, anyone not familiar with Tibetan might easily mistake the pronunciation.

10. In addition, Mr. Richardson points out that Tibetans were prone to tell travellers what they thought would please them (this habit, of course, is not confined to Tibetans). Moreover, when they attach names to mountains, they do so to the mountain as a whole, to the massif, and not to individual summits. This, too, is not unknown elsewhere; Monte Rosa, for example, is by now simply a collective name for a host of triangulated points, each bearing an individual name.

11. One may also keep in mind the likelihood of local pronunciations that do not agree with the apparent spelling of a name. This is not at all confined to Tibet, or to mountains; one has only to think of such improbable (local) pronunciations as in Norfolk, 'Stewkey' for Stiffkey, or 'Windham' for Wymondham; or in Gloucestershire, of 'Cicester' for Cirencester; or, across the Atlantic, of 'Arkansaw' for Arkansas.

In the case of Everest, as Kempson pointed out, a local name for the mountain had come into use, although, as we have seen (para. 5 above), not in conformity with the usage of Lhasa. Since Sir Sidney Burrard's Professional Paper (No. 26), *Mount Everest and its Tibetan Names* (1931) has often been referred to by other writers, it has seemed worth while to look again at it, as representing a high authority on the matter, if not the last word.

12. Burrard's paper was a review of Sven Hedin's book, *Mount Everest* (1926), and a particular point made by the latter was that the

name found by the 1921 Everest Expedition, of Tshomo Lungma (so spelt by Sven Hedin) was virtually identical with the name Tschoumou Lancma³ printed in D'Anville's map of Tibet in 1733, based on information obtained by Jesuit Fathers in Peking in 1711-1717. Sven Hedin also pointed out that the estimated position given to the mountain in this map agreed with notable accuracy with the geographical position of Everest on modern maps. In addition, D'Anville's map showed a group of mountains to the west of Everest, which he called Dsarinpou, and which Sven Hedin identified with Tsering, the Tibetan name of Gaurisankar as found by Morshead in 1921. Burrard agrees that the Gaurisankar identification is sound, but will not admit that the same holds good in respect of Everest.

13. Burrard's paper is an elaborate piece of special pleading for making a special case for the use of 'Everest'. He agrees (p. 10) that the word Chomo is common in the Everest region; that it means Goddess; and he goes on to add: 'When the word Chomo has come to be prefixed to numerous mountain names in one locality, its original religious significance must be lost (as is the case in English with "Goodbye"), and its geographical meaning can hardly be more than that of our word "Mount"'. This would seem to be admitting that Chomolungma was, after all, the name of a mountain, but Burrard gets out of this by reference to Sir Charles Bell, who said he had never heard, in Lhasa, of Chomolung or Chomo-lungma; but he (Bell) adds, 'People would be very likely to change Cha-mo (the form Bell said was used in the permit for the 1921 expedition—but cf. para. 2 above) into Cho-mo, for the latter occurs in mountain names such as Cho-mo Lha-ri or Chomo Kangkar'.

14. Here Bell, too, seems almost to be admitting the case he is arguing against, but he seeks to avoid that by saying that 'lung' means a district, particularly a district with valleys, and Burrard, accepting that, declares 'the name Chomo Lungma must be applied to an undefined mountain district' (see para. 7 above).

15. What Burrard does not dispose of fully is that, whatever may have been the case with people in Lhasa, locally around Everest the name Chomolungma was in use, and there was abundant testimony to that effect. Bruce, *Twenty Years in the Himalayas*, p. 25, in 1909 had found the name being used by Sherpas; Kellas (*G. J.* xlix. 28 (1917)) also knew the name; Howard Bury and Mallory had found it was so in Tibet in 1921—they even heard of Chomolungma I and II, corresponding to Makalu and Everest. And subsequent visitors to Everest found

³ Professor Odell had himself drawn attention to this in the *Alpine Journal* (1925, vol. 37, p. 196: the ref. is wrongly given by Burrard as *A. J.* vol. XL, May 1929). Professor Odell had had his attention drawn to the point by Sven Hedin. At that time, Professor Odell agreed that Chomolungma was the Tibetan name for the mountain; D. W. Freshfield in 1922 (*A. J.* 34. 301-3) also agreed.

Chomolungma in use; variations of spellings were bound to occur, according to a listener's acuteness of hearing and understanding. As Bruce pointed out (*op. cit.*), a man not acquainted with the Tibetan language may easily confuse a name's pronunciation; he instances how his Sherpas had called Makalu 'Kamalung'. The surveyor, Natha Sing, who visited the Dudh Kosi headwaters in 1907, called Everest 'Chholungbu' (Burrard, p. 10), which sounds like a further example of Bruce's contention.

16. Neither Sir Charles Bell nor Sir Sidney Burrard ever visited Everest, so it may not be possible to regard them as final authorities on what the locals called the mountain. Burrard (pp. 13-14) tries to disparage the early eighteenth century identification on the grounds that mistakes were made as regards the precise position of 'Tshoumou Lancma', and (p. 15) that the early map showed a range of peaks, not a single mountain. This last seems quite invalid reasoning, when one considers how many mountains are grouped around Everest; apart from immediate satellites such as Lhotse (with its nos. II and III), Nuptse, and Changtse, there is a whole cordon of other peaks—Pumori, the Lingtreng peaks, Khartaphu, Kamachangri, Pethangtse, to say nothing of the giants such as Cho Oyu, Gyachung Kang, Chomo Lonzo, and Makalu; these names come instinctively to mind when thinking of Everest and its locality. It would be carrying pedantry to fantastic extremes to expect that Tibetans would have developed a system of detailed nomenclature such as has only lately arisen in much-frequented places like the Alps. As pointed out by Tilman (para. 3 above), primitive peoples who hold mountains in reverence are not necessarily concerned with their summits; we have already noted (para. 7 above) that it is the mountain in its entirety that matters, as one sees with the most sacred of all Hindu-cum-Buddhist mountains, Kailas. The pilgrim there makes a circuit of the mountain; he does not seek to climb it. As for strictures on the 1733 map, to be only half a degree or so out at such an early date is, as Sven Hedin observed, very creditable, and when one recalls the amount of detailed correction there has been in late years of Survey of India maps, Burrard is not justified in being censorious.

17. So inconsistent is Burrard about 'Everest' that (pp. 16-17) he urges in one breath that the general principle should be adhered to, 'faithfully to record the popular nomenclature without interfering with it', and, in the next, that Everest should be an exception. Yet he strongly objects to such 'spurious names' as Lhotse or Nuptse, and thinks they 'are more objectionable than a straight-forward English name'. Indeed, Burrard makes it pretty clear that what really influences him in favour of such a 'straight-forward English name' as Everest is that it is the highest peak in the world; one can hardly doubt that he would have argued differently had the mountain been of lesser elevation. This is

made clear by his acceptance of Sven Hedin's claim that D'Anville's map correctly indicates Gaurisankar—a mere 23,000-footer. Burrard even falls back on the plea that 'Everest' is a euphonious name, which is really no argument for the breaking of the Survey's rule; it is the giving of personal names at all that is the issue, not whether they are cacophonous or not. Would Burrard have stood out for a breach of the rule had the name involved been Buggins or the like?

18. As will have been seen, Sir Sidney Burrard dealt with the name phonetically rather than linguistically. On this basis, we have the term 'Chomolungma' in substantially the same form from both the north and south of the mountain. Tilman (*Nepal Himalaya*, p. 227) confirms Bruce in saying that this name is given by the monks to the massif that Europeans have come to differentiate as Nuptse, Lhotse and Everest. Colonel J. O. M. Roberts, in a recent letter, informs me that he has enquired of two intelligent Sherpas of Solu Khumbu, what they used to call the mountain we now name Everest, *before* British climbers arrived there in 1950. Without hesitation, they said Chomolungma. On doubt being expressed about this, they stuck to it and said that this was the local name and had been handed down from father to son long before anyone had thought of climbing the mountain. They added that Chomolungma was recognised and distinguished from other mountains by the plume blowing from its summit.

19. Taking Burrard's point, that 'Chomo' when frequently used loses its religious significance, and simply means 'Mount'; and having regard to the word 'lung' indicating a valley region; then Chomo-lung (ignoring the suffix 'ma', which it may be added does not occur in any of the Lhasa documents) suggests that the local inhabitants (disregarding linguistic niceties) may have given the name to signify the mountain above the valley, just as the best-known Alpine peak is the peak above the pastures (Matterhorn), or its neighbour (Monte Rosa) the peak of glaciers. In this sense, as Kempson points out, Chomolungma is a very suitable name, since the mountain does dominate the Rongbuk valley and was referred to in that way in the pilgrims' guide-book to the spot.

20. The commonsense view would seem to be that expressed by W. H. Murray, *The Story of Everest*, p. 2, that, whether or not Lhasa had a name for the mountain as distinct from its locality (and we know—para. 7 above—that they had not), the local people had given it a name, Chomolungma (to use the spelling most often employed by British travellers) and this, however it may be translated, is an excellent and appropriate name. It is not difficult to see that the distinctions in the pronunciation between the syllables 'cha' and 'cho', 'ma' and 'mo', may become blurred, especially to people unacquainted with Tibetan. No doubt the name 'Everest' is well established by now, but this is not to say that a local name is not also established; we can hardly dispute

the right of the local inhabitants to choose a name of their own coining, and this, Lhasa or no Lhasa, is what they seem to have done. The existence of alternative names is not unknown elsewhere; we have only to think of 'Matterhorn' and 'Le Cervin'; or 'Magallanes' and 'Punta Arenas'.

21. The R.G.S. map of the Mount Everest Region (1961) employed the name 'Chomolungma' for the mountain mass inclusive of Lhotse, and 'Everest' for the highest peak itself. In view of Mr. Richardson's comments, it might seem better if the spelling of the first was amended, either to 'Chamalungma', so as to conform to the original Lhasa designation; or to 'Jomolungma', which would bring it into closer conformity with the Rongbuk guide-book form, and also with the present Chinese and Russian usages.