THE PROFANE NAMES OF THE SACRED HILLOCKS

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In analysing and interpreting the non-Sanskrit words encountered in the Sanskrit inscriptions of ancient Nepal (A.D. 464-879), four interrelated hypotheses have provided the main conceptual framework in my work (Malla, 1981; Malla, 1983a: and Malla, 1983b):

a. the non-Sanskrit words in the running text of Sanskrit inscriptions provide valuable evidence for prehistoric tribal-Hindu ethnic contacts;
b. mostly, these words belong to the Tibeto-Burman languages, basically, to proto-Newari from which the present-day Newari has developed;
c. in the course of the Hindu political-cultural domination by the Licchavis (A.D. 464-879), the Thakuris (A.D. 880-1200), and the Mallas (A.D. 1201-1769), the tribals were Hinduised or Sanskritised; and
d. in the process, different species of tribal toponyms were Sanskritised, including the name of the country itself.

In the present paper we present some more evidence in support of our hypotheses. We look at the names of the hillocks, this time. The hillocks, like the water-sources, the rivers, and their confluences, are susceptible to veneration as sacred cult objects. The sanctification of the hillocks and mountains is a form of the veneration of high places. Mountains have been considered a seat of gods in most religious mythologies of the world. Mount Tabor in Palestine, Mount Fuji in Japan, Wu Tai Shan—the five-peaked mountain in China, Mount Kailash in South Asia, Chomolungma-Mother Goddess of the Valley, and Mount Olympus in Greece are each held in reverence in myth and religion of the land. Some of them enjoy a regular pilgrim traffic to, around, and up the mountain, especially to the summit. The mountain-cult often leads to the construction of religious structures,

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either on mountains themselves as elevated sanctuaries, or on their foot, slopes, or in the immediate neighbourhood. The four most revered Vaiṣṇava shrines of the Nepal Valley are all situated on the hillocks or on their foot. The most celebrated Buddhist shrine—Svayambhū—too is situated on a hillock. Because of such high religious-cultural potency of hillocks and mountains, their names are equally susceptible to linguistic and cultural annexation by organised and formal religions.

Most names of the hillocks in and around the Valley may have been just graphic or descriptive in origin, with little or no implications in terms of religious semantics. As evidence for this hypothesis we submit a list of 16 toponyms (in Appendix A)—all found in ancient Sanskrit inscriptions of the Nepal Valley and its environs, dated between A.D. 506-705. These toponyms have some common formal features. For example, co, gum, gum-co, or rhi-co as the common morphemic finals in the nominal compounds. A Sanskrit-Newari lexicon, Amarakośa dated NS 501/A.D. 1381, defines the Sanskrit word kūḍa/shikha (peak) as gum-co. Some Tibeto-Burman languages of Nepal have comparable cognates, e.g. Kaire has chwang, Khaling has cong, and Jirel has cu-cog. For hill or mountain, modern Colloquial Tibetan has ri. All these data indicate that the 16 ancient toponyms are actually names of the hillocks—forested or otherwise. Secondly, they are all nominal compounds of Tibeto-Burman roots/stems. Thirdly, they represent early forms of Newari. In support of these contentions, we submit a list of hillock names in modern Newari which clearly retain the roots/stems co, gum, or gum-co.

Cangu, Icaingu, Sâmhagum, Jâmâco (Nâgârjun). Phûco, Theco, Holco, Chilaño, (pâhâno), Miguco, Nâtalâco, Palâkhaco (Palâncok)

Our hypothesis that most non-Sanskritic toponyms in ancient inscriptions of Nepal are Tibeto-Burman and proto-Newari seems to have disturbed some historians of Nepal. For example, Regmi has recently written:

Whether the son-Sanskritic names are of the Mongolian (sic) family of languages or they belonged to a different family? What is the standard by which to judge their character? The mere fact of familiarity and identity both in the positive and negative sense is not enough. One must judge them by the structural pattern and meaning of the linguistic form concerned. But here none of the words we have
mentioned show characteristics of Mongolid strain by structure or meaning.

(Regmi, 1983:265)

This categorically negative conclusion of the noted historian of Nepal is worth analysing for several reasons. In the first place, Regmi doesn’t seem to be aware of the distinction between the two English words Mongolia (i.e., of Mongolia, a country in Central Asia) and Mongoloid (an anthropological abstraction, a racial type). Secondly, he is sadly confused between Mongolian-Mongolid (race) and Tibeto-Burman (language-family). Thirdly, he talks about “Mongoloid strain” in structure or meaning, or about the structural pattern and meaning of the linguistic form concerned without identifying either in anyone of the nearly 250 non-Sanskrit words found in ancient inscriptions of Nepal. Finally, it was Regmi himself who, in a paper entitled “The Antiquity of the Newars of the Kathmandu Valley”-published in 1948 in the Journal of the Bihar Research Society Vol. XXXIV: pp. 49-59, wrote the following:

We have definite linguistic and archaeological proofs for the existence of (the Newars) as early as the fifth century A.D. by a reference to the Newari names in the inscriptions, which are maintained intact up till today. The various names like gum-vihāra, etc., are pure Newari derivatives. The language of inscriptions being Sanskrit, it may be inferred that Newari was thrown into background as up till now it is.

Why the vintage Regmi suffered a volte-face so late in the day is something that need not detain us for the moment.

II

The second part of the paper is focussed on the Hindu-Buddhist annexation or transformation of the tribal Tibeto-Burman/Newari names of the two most sacred hillocks of the Valley. The most sacred Buddhist monument-site of the valley is located on the hillock of Svayambhū, (west) as it is so-called today. The hillock of Caṅgu in the east is the most holy Vaisnava monument-site in the Valley. In as inscription located in the site, dated NS 492/A.D. 1372 the hillock of Svayambhū is called sā-mha-śikhara (cow-body-hillock). Tibetan sources call this monument sing-kun. Sā-mha-gum is also attested in the Sanskrit text of the famous 14th-century Nepalese chronicle—the Gopākarāja-vamśāvalī (folio 26b:line 2). The loaded Sanskrit
name padmācāla-śikhara occurs in an inscription dated NS 533/A.D. 1513, to be followed by Gosringa and Gopuccha in other texts. The process of the transformation of the Tibeto-Burman Sā-mha-gum (a hillock resembling a reclining body of the cow) into Padmācala, Gosringa, and Gopuccha is explained in a Buddhist text. In Svyambhū Purāṇa—a version dated NS 778/A.D. 1758 (folio 2b: lines 1-3, verses 49-52) the following explanation is offered:

O Jinaśrī, Listen. There is a mountain called Gopuccha, situated in Nepal, along the northern Himalaya. With the passing of each aeon, the name of the mountain also underwent changes. In the Satya Yuga, it was called Padmagiri. In the Tretā Yuga, it was named Vajrakūta. In the Dwāpara Yuga, it was known as Gosringa. In the present Kali Yuga, it is called Gopuccha. The inhabitants of Nepal have their own name for it, and they call it Sā-mha-gum.

Clearly, the religious conception of the sequence of four ages has provided a handy framework to hold and justify each of the Sour names, assigning by implication the non-Sanskrit name to the most inferior of the four ages, i.e., the Iron Age. In the Śrī-Lankan Māhāvamāa, too, the island is said to have four different names in four ages. This extract from the Buddhist text is a most powerful piece of evidence to show how the profane or mundane tribal toponyms are annexed and sanctified by the ideologues of organised and formal religions.

In many ways, the Buddhist text offers a far better explanation for the name of its monument-site than the Vaiṣṇava commentary on the hillock name caṅgu(m). In the Gopālāraja-vaṃśavali, there is a curiously belaboured passage—doubtlessly an interpolation—which seeks to interpret the Vaiṣṇava hillock-name:

Śrī Viṣṇutūrthanārāyaṇa, founded initially by King Viṣṇugupta with the desire to conquer enemy’s lands, is called Ye-Caṅgum (Ye = south). Then Caṅgum Nārāyaṇa was founded because there was famine. Then there was affluence. This is called Yo-Caṅgum (Yo = west). The Viṣṇunābha was founded to produce wealth (gold). There was a shower of gold among those who founded it. This is called Yañ-Caṅgum (Yañ = North). Then Śrī Caṅgum Nārāyaṇa was founded by those longing for offspring. This is Wañ-Caṅgum (Wañ = East). These four are called Caṅgum.

The Gopālāraja-vaṃśavali folio 30b: lines 1-3
The chronicler gropes for a culturally convincing explanation for the hillock-name, but clearly fails to do so. In Mānadeva I’s Caṅgu Inscription, dated Śaka 386/A.D. 464, the hillock is called dolādri (Skt. dola = a swing, hammock; adri = hillock, a swinging hillock, a hillock which looks like a hammock, or an unstable hillock). Vajrācārya (1973:19) has offered a convincing interpretation of the Newari name for the hillock where he wrote, “In Newari the name caṅgum means a hillock which looks like a swing.” Here again Regmi writes a gloss of the word in which the second sentence contradicts the first one:

How the name Caṅgu came to be applied is not known. It is obviously a translation of Dolādri, on which Nārāyaṇa takes his abode. The Dolā, i.e., swinging is an act of Viṣṇu in the rainy season for a seasonal frolic.

(Regmi, 1983:3)

However, later on in the same book, Regmi hastens to make a confessional remark. The last sentence, in particular, reminds us of Nepāla Māhātmya (II:3)

The present name Caṅgu is still obscure in meaning and all that we have said is just a guess work. I have found that my view agrees with that of Dhanavajra in interpreting the meaning of Chaṅgu. One meaning offered is that there was a forest of Champaka trees which the Newaris call Chaṅśiṅ (sic).

(Regmi, 1983, Addendum)

III

A less colourful transformation of the tribal hillock names is exemplified by a classic in modern scientific cartography. In the most reliable maps of the Nepal Valley, all hillock-names have been “Nepalized”-- annexed to Nepali forms, so that all Tibeto-Burman co-s (hillock) have been conveniently converted into somewhat absurd Indo-Aryan cok (Skt. catuska = a square, a courtyard) See Appendix B. A hillock known as theṅco in A.D. 506-633 (TB theṅ = lower co = peak) has been converted into Thānkot (thān = a place, after Skt. sthīna) kot = guardroom, a police station, a military courtyard) after the rise of the Gorkhali military power in the 18th-19th century. Compared with such prosaic transformations of toponyms, the reincarnation of sū-mha-gum as svayambhū or as padmācala (lotus-hill) is nothing if not a metaphysical conceit.
References


### APPENDIX A

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<th>Name</th>
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### APPENDIX B

The “Nepalized Names” of the Hillocks

- Dahacok
- Jānācok
- Khālcok
- Dālincok
- Ghumarck
- Halcok
- Kiwācok
- Nalincok
- Pākhācok
- Pulcok
- Sāṅgācok
- Talimcok
- Tancok
- Tāsincok

Source: *The Kathmandu Valley Maps*. Munich: Association for Alpine Research.
APPENDIX C

Sanskritisation of the Place-names of the Valley

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