

To Nick Clinch  
- with the best wishes of  
Noel E.O.

THE SUPPOSED TIBETAN OR NEPALESE NAME

OF MOUNT EVEREST

N.E. Odell

[See additional footnote on p. 5.]



From time to time, and more especially in continental mountaineering literature, one notices the use of the word Chomo-lungma, as if it were the true and accepted Tibetan name of Mount Everest. And for this usage there is perhaps some reason, since the name is written across the Mount Everest massif on the map accompanying "The Fight for Everest" (1924), and it also appears in the form Chomo-longmo on the  $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch sheet, 'Mount Everest and Environs', published by the Survey of India in 1930, as well as on the map accompanying "Everest, 1933".

Now it will be remembered that during the reconnaissance of Mount Everest in 1921 Lt.-Col. Howard Bury reported that the name Chomo-lungma was applied by Tibetans to both Everest and its great neighbour Makalu, but that locally Chomo Uri was also used for the former peak. Moreover, in Nepal a number of years earlier General Bruce had heard the name Chomolungmo applied to Mount Everest by Sherpa Ehutias.<sup>1</sup> Other native names previously suggested, though without adequate foundation, have been Chholungbu (C'hholungbu) and Chomo Kankar, the latter having been favoured by Douglas Freshfield.<sup>2</sup> And it is perhaps needless to mention the misidentification of Gaurisankar with Everest by Schlagintweit in 1855. This has led to frequent use of the former name on German and other atlases, in spite of repeated official and other representations since the days when Capt. Henry Wood, R.E., visited Nepal in 1903 by order of Lord Curzon, and demonstrated trigonometrically that Gaurisanker and Everest were different peaks, thirty-six miles apart.

In his book, "Mount Everest" (Leipzig, 1926), Dr. Sven Hedin has maintained that the name 'Tchoumou Lancma' appears on maps of Tibet prepared from native information by French Jesuits in Peking in 1717, printed in Paris by D'Anville in 1733; and that the geographical

- 
1. "Twenty Years in the Himalaya", p.25.
  2. "Round Kangchenjunga", p.201. Freshfield later, however, acquiesced in the name 'Chomolungma', Alpine Journal 34, 300.

position of the mountains to which this name seems to apply corresponds with that of Mount Everest. Sven Hedin, in consequence, has claimed that we have here not merely a confirmation in 1921 of the discovery of the correct name of Chomo-lungma, but an anticipation of that discovery by 190 years.<sup>3</sup>

However, in 1931, as the result of representations by Sir Charles Bell, the important fact was published by Sir Sidney Burrard<sup>4</sup> that the word appearing in the official permission, given to the former in Lhasa in 1920 on behalf of the first Mount Everest Expedition, was not Chomo-lungma but Cha-ma-lung. Sir Charles has translated the pertinent Tibetan passage given him as follows: 'To the west of the Five Treasuries of Great Snow (in the jurisdiction of White Glass Fort, near Rocky Valley Inner Monastery) is the Bird Country of the South (Lho-Cha-ma-lung)'.<sup>5</sup> Now the Tibetan words Lho-Cho-ma-lung are said by Sir Charles to be short for Lho-Cha-dzi-ma-lung-pa, which means nothing more surprising than 'the southern district where the birds are kept'! Sir Charles has pointed out, moreover, that it is recorded in Tibetan history that in the times of the early Tibetan kings, A.D. 650-800, a large number of birds were fed at the expense of the king in the southern district towards the Great Snow, that the word 'lung' means a valley district, or merely a valley, and is impossible of application to a mountain; but that it is the incorrect spelling of 'cha' as 'cho' on which misidentity, misapplication and misinterpretation of the whole compound word has rested. 'Cha' means bird or birds, whilst 'cho' means Lord amongst Gods, and 'cho-mo' the corresponding feminine deity.

3. Alpine Journal 37, 196.

4. "Mount Everest and its Tibetan Names" by Sir Sidney Burrard, Survey of India, Prof Paper 26, 1931.

5. See also "Everest, 1933" by Hugh Ruttledge, p. 11 & 61; and letter by Sir Charles Bell (Times 8.viii.35) announcing his discovery that Kang Chamalung is the correct Tibetan name.

Then in 1930 Mr. David Macdonald, the British Trade Agent at Yatung and Gayantse, was told by an official of Lhasa that the Tibetan name for Everest was 'Mi-ti-Gu-ti Cha-pu Long-nga', meaning 'No line, nine lines, flying bird blind'. The full meaning suggested by Sir Charles Bell for the latter phrase is as follows: 'You cannot see the summit from near it, but you can see the summit from nine (i.e. a large number of) directions, and a bird that flies as high as the summit goes blind'. Sir Charles rightly remarks that the name was not heard by any member of the Mount Everest Expeditions, and that it could not be seriously considered without further inquiry.

Now it is of considerable interest that in "Everest, 1933" p.61, Mr. Rutledge has published a translation of the passport granted to the fourth Mount Everest Expedition by the Tibetan Government. There we find a confirmation of the word 'Chamalung' in the sentence 'to ascend the snowy mountain of Chamalung, which is in Tibetan territory, in the first month of the Water-Bird year'. Moreover, 'the snowy mountain of Chamalung' would seem to have reference, on the basis of Sir Charles Bell's findings, merely to the snowy mountain (unnamed) in the bird-country.

It appears, therefore, that instead of being in possession of such an eminently suitable and poetic word as Chomo-lungma, meaning approximately 'Goddess Mother of the Mountain Snows', for the supreme massif of which Mount Everest is the culminating point, we are left in complete ignorance even yet as to the real name in use, if one there be, in Tibet proper. Sir Charles Bell has declared that he never heard Chomolung or Chomo-lungma used in that country. General Bruce, however, seems satisfied that Chomo Lungmo is in use on the Nepalese slopes of the range; but the question arises as to whether its local significance even on that side of the mountains may not be that of a district rather than of a specific mountain or range. As Sir Sidney Burrard has shown in the Professional Paper cited above, a comparison of D'Anville's map of 1733 with the modern map suggests

the identity of 'Tchoumou Lancma' with the district, south of Makalu, in the angle formed by the Sun Kosi and Arun Rivers. If Chomo-lungma and Tchoumou Lancma are equivalent and if the historical significance of the word is that of a district used as a royal aviary, it seems not impossible that the modern Bhutia, while forgetting the implication of its ancient usage, may include both district and ranges without discrimination in the one name.

Finally, an interesting commentary on the unlikelihood of there being a Nepalese name for Mount Everest itself is provided by Col. Sir Edward Tandy in his report on the first survey of Nepal (Survey of India, General Report, 1926-27), as follows<sup>6</sup>:

'Nomenclature of Peaks. The Nepalese only give specific names to a few snow-covered peaks of remarkable aspect, but each group of snow peaks is called a Himal, or "Abode of Snow", and receives a name. Thus Mount Everest dominates the Maha Langur Himal<sup>7</sup>; Kangchenjunga the Singalila Himal; Dhaulagiri, a Himal of the same name; Gauri Sankar, the Rolwaling Himal; and Api, the Viyas Rishi Himal. Mount Everest itself, whose steep southern face carries little snow [sic!], is inconspicuous from the south, and has received no Nepalese name. It has recently been suggested that the Tibetans give Mount Everest the name of Chomolomo, but Lt. Col. Ganesh Bahadur of Nepal (officer in joint control of the Nepalese survey) considers that this name is used for the whole northern side of the Maha Langur Himal, and that it is not the name of the peak.'

It would seem, therefore, to be quite clear that no native name for Mount Everest itself is in existence on

- 
6. Quoted from "A Sketch of the Geography and Geology of the Himalaya Mountains and Tibet", by Sir Sidney Burrard and Sir Henry Hayden, 2nd ed., 1932 p.199. For a review of the latter, and a discussion of the general question of Himalayan nomenclature, see 'The Designation of Himalayan Peaks' by the Editor, Geographical Journal, January, 1935.
7. This name appears on the  $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch sheet, 'Mount Everest and Environs'. Survey of India, 1930.

either the Tibetan or the Nepalese side of the range. It would appear eminently desirable that the name Chomo-lungma, beautiful though its spurious interpretation may be, should be expunged from our maps, while Chamalung should be given its correct application to the district and not to the mountain dominating it.<sup>8</sup>

Reprinted from:

The Alpine Journal, Vol. XLVII No. 250, May 1935.

N.E. ODELL

- 
8. Professor G.O. Dyhrenfurth, in a letter dated 16.ii.66, quoting Erwin Schneider and Peter Aufschneider, has informed me that the official name for Everest in Kathmandu, Nepal, is SAGARMATHA. But this does not state whether the name is applicable to the main peak only, or to the whole group, e.g. Maha Langur Himal.

N.B. But Col. J.O.M. Roberts (ex Garkhas) informs me (1976) that Sagarmatha is only an invented word, derived from the Sanskrit = Nepalese: Sagar = sky & Matha = head. Nepal adopted it in the 1960's during arguments with China over the ownership of Everest. China responded with "Qomolangma Feng"!