

THE SPELLING OF TIBETAN PLACE NAMES

LIEUT.-COL. F. M. BAILEY, C.I.E.

TIBETAN spelling is extremely complicated. There are many silent letters; consonants are sometimes used solely to modify the sound of vowels, losing their own sound completely, and many letters in combination with others entirely change their own sound.

To take a few examples: Lama is spelt Blama, the *B* being silent. Chang-Ku, a wolf, is spelt Spyang-Ku, the *S* being silent and the *Py* being pronounced *Ch*. The word for Tibet is Pö, spelt Pod, the *d* completely losing its own sound but modifying the *o*. In outlying parts of Tibet, both east and west, silent letters are often pronounced, *e.g.* in Eastern Tibet the word for "wolf" is pronounced Spyangku and not Chang-Ku as in Lhasa.

If we attempt too meticulous a system we get ridiculous things like this: The Tibetan word for Sikkim is pronounced Dren-Dzong and spelt Abras-Ldzongs. The first *A* is silent but slightly alters the sound of the next letter. The *br* is pronounced *dr*; the *s* modifies the *a*; an *n* is inserted for euphony so we get Dren. In the next syllable the *L* at the beginning and the *s* at the end are silent.

In addition to the above there are several slightly different forms of the letters *k*, *ch*, *t*, *p*, and *ts*. If it is considered necessary to differentiate between these, diacritical marks must be used which, besides adding to the difficulties, are apt to be dropped in course of time with a result more misleading and inaccurate than a simpler approach to the subject would be. These diacritical marks may be necessary in a dictionary which would be used only by experts, but a thing like ξ on a map would be undesirable and in ordinary printing impossible. We should, I think, get the nearest we can to the correct sound with the use of the ordinary English alphabet, giving the English value to the consonants and the Italian value to the vowels. The more accurate pronunciation can be learnt by the traveller on the spot, or by the expert, who in any case would have to learn the meanings of the various marks in a more involved system. With the aid of the complicated system employed in the dictionaries it is possible to transliterate from the English back into the correct Tibetan spelling, but who wants to do this? Perhaps the very few experts.

The above will show the advisability of having a simple, practical system for maps and ordinary purposes used by ordinary people. Fortunately such a system already exists. In 1903 preparations were being made for the Young-husband Mission to Tibet and, in connection with these, Captain (now Sir Frederick) O'Connor, one of the only three officers of the army who had passed the examination in Tibetan, and the only one who had a fluent, colloquial knowledge, was asked to formulate a system. This he did and this system was accepted by the Government of India (including the Survey of India) and is the only recognized system for the transliteration of Tibetan names into English. Sir Frederick O'Connor's system of 1903 has recently been reprinted, and is no doubt available to those interested. There is a copy in the Society's Library.

In 1905 Mr. C. A. (now Sir Charles) Bell brought out his Manual of

Colloquial Tibetan. In this he, generally speaking, adopted O'Connor's system, but made a few alterations. I quote the following from his preface:

"A word as to the system of romanization. In this, which is believed to be as phonetic as possible, I had reluctantly to differ from the various systems of my predecessors, as none of them seemed to me to reproduce the sounds in the dialect of Lhasa, though some reproduced those in the Sikkimese and other dialects. The system followed in this book is nearly the same as that recommended to Government for official reports, etc., by Captain O'Connor, C.I.E., Trade Agent at Gyantse, and the author, but distinguishes the different sounds with greater accuracy than was necessary in the Government system."

The chief difference in this system was a compromise between the exaggerated system of diacritical marks of the dictionaries and the very simple and efficient official system. For instance, to take the different forms of *p*; the official system makes no difference, though it is noted that there is a difference of tone. Bell has *p*, *ph*, and *p'* (the latter being *b* in the official system, with a note to say it is sometimes pronounced *p*). Bell treated *k*, *ch*, *t*, and *ts* in the same way.

These three *p*'s did not, I think, improve things as far as geography was concerned, and Sir Charles Bell in his above-quoted preface suggests that his greater accuracy of distinction of sound was not considered necessary in the Government system. Therefore I suggest that we all adhere to the official system which has worked well for nearly forty years and which has never officially been displaced. Were all travellers to use the official system we should get a desirable uniformity in spelling which would avoid confusion.

Spelling of place-names in Tibet is still in a fluid state and a name may be spelt in different ways by different people, but I suggest that it be a rule that where one explorer has taken the trouble to get a name spelt in Tibetan and transliterated according to the recognized system, that name should, as a general rule, be allowed to stand. This will avoid confusion caused by constant changes. I know there may be exceptional cases: for instance, the earlier travellers may get a name spelt by a villager and a subsequent visitor may get it definitely corrected by some official who is accustomed to use another spelling in his records; in such a case the second spelling may be considered more correct and a change may be necessary; where this is done an explanation should be given.

I can see no reason against changing names that have not been spelt in Tibetan. In fact it is necessary in many cases to do so. The secret explorers of Tibet sent out by the Survey of India during last century usually spelt and pronounced the Tibetan *ts* as *ch*, e.g. Chetang for Tsetang (50 miles south-east of Lhasa).

Other complications arise which require special treatment. Letters are inserted or altered in speaking for the sake of euphony. It is difficult to formulate a rule for this. Then things are done that could only be done in Tibet! In 1913 Captain Morshead and I came to a village La-Yö-Ting. We had heard of this, but when getting it spelt the man would only write Da-Tring, emphasizing that it was quite impossible to write La-Yö-Ting, as that was only the pronunciation.

Another complication arises from the fact that the local pronunciation of a name may differ from the Lhasa pronunciation, but I have found that in most cases the Lhasa officials pronounce the names in their own way, just as in London we do not pronounce Edinburgh and Glasgow with a Scottish accent.

I give as an instance of unnecessary changes the Se La, a pass between Senge Dzong and Tawang. This pass was crossed and put on the map by Colonel Morshead and myself in 1913. The name was spelt for us as Se La (ཨ་ལ) by the monks of Tawang, who administered the district, and was transliterated according to the recognized rules. In his paper in the *Journal* for July 1940 Captain Kingdon Ward has altered this to Ze La. This is, I think, an instance of a quite unnecessary change. In neither the official system nor in Sir Charles Bell's would this be Ze La.

Note on Sir Frederick O'Connor's 'Rules for the phonetic transcription into English of Tibetan words.'

A small number of copies were printed by the Government of India Central Printing Office and issued as Paper No. 7 F.D., 12.4.1904. This paper has recently been reprinted with a slight correction but with the original date and no indication that it is not the original issue. These rules have never been on sale to the public and travellers have perhaps not always known how to obtain them from the Foreign Department or the Survey of India. It will be useful therefore to call attention to them, and to extract from them a brief statement of the alphabet's principal characteristics, to serve as a supplement to Colonel Bailey's paper.

Tibetan is written from left to right like Sanskrit and its derivative languages. The alphabet has thirty consonants, of which two are really initial vowels, or terminals to carry another vowel, or following a second consonant to suppress the sound of the first. Each consonant carries with it the inherent sound of *a*; that is to say, if no other vowel is written, a single consonant is read as if followed by the Italian *a*, or a pair of consonants is read as if the first is followed by a short *a* or indeterminate vowel.

There are four other vowels: *i*, *u*, *e*, and *o*, coming in this order in the alphabet. *I*, *e*, and *o* are represented by signs written over the consonant with the effect of substituting one or other of these vowels for the inherent *a*. *U* is represented by a sign written under the consonant with similar effect.

Seven of the consonants may be written with a *y* subjoined, fourteen with an *r*, one with an *h*, and six with an *l* subjoined; twelve may be written with an *r*, ten with an *l*, and eleven with an *s* superscribed; all these making double characters. There are also treble characters, combinations of the above; and characters written reversed right and left, which reversal sometimes affects the pronunciation, sometimes does not.

The pronunciation is governed by rules which silence certain initial or final consonants in a group of three and change their pronunciation when they are initial or final by themselves; and there are remarkable special rules for the consonant *b*. Five letters when first in a syllable of three or more characters are called prefixes and are silent, and ten letters, the former five and five more, are called affixes when last letters of a syllable of the word: one of each five is silent, the others pronounced but inaudible.—ED. G.ŷ.