

Journal homepage: <https://jll.uoch.edu.pk/index.php/jll>**From Stars to Stones: The Cultural and Linguistic Roots of the Name 'Skardu'**<sup>1</sup>Muhammad Nazir (Nazir Bespa), <sup>2</sup>Sajjad Hussain<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of Persian, University of Karachi [nazirbespa@uok.edu.pk](mailto:nazirbespa@uok.edu.pk)<sup>2</sup>Lecturer, Department of Languages and Cultural Studies, University of Baltistan, Skardu [sajjad.sering@uobs.edu.pk](mailto:sajjad.sering@uobs.edu.pk)**Article Info**

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[sajjad.sering@uobs.edu.pk](mailto:sajjad.sering@uobs.edu.pk)**Keywords:**Toponymy,  
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Balti**Abstract**

The study of toponymy or place names tenders a rare insight into a region's historical, cultural, and linguistic heritage. The current research explores the etymology of the name *Skardu*, a city in Pakistan's Baltistan region. Historical evidences show that the name *Skardu* is a blend of elements from local culture and exotic influence, and linguistically it is rooted in Balti, an old Tibetan dialect spoken in the Baltistan region. Drawing from linguistic analysis and historical texts the current study examines the origin of the name *Skardu* from the Tibetan word *SkarmDo*, usually referred to as a *star-lit fort /valley* or *starry place*. Celestial or cosmic reference in the name is a recount and admiration of the earlier Balti settlers for the *starry sky* and its *high altitude* symbolizing it with a welcoming sign for the new settlers. In addition, the study found an influence of linguistic variations on the name, for instance, the form *Iskardo* for *Skardu* reveals the Islamic influence and a linguistic shift in the region transforming the form and pronunciation of the name. Thus, this study helps to understand the role of religious, linguistic, environmental, and cultural factors in the evolution of toponymic research. Furthermore, it highlights the significance of preserving place names as part of a nation's intangible heritage.

**Introduction**

Place names are commonly rooted in their particular regions' cultural, linguistic, and historical heritage, and the study of place names, also known as toponymy, offers valuable insights into their intangible heritage. Skardu, the headquarters of Baltistan situated in the north of Pakistan in the lap of mighty mountains, carries diverse historical and linguistic influences in its name. Its intriguing etymology has attracted locals and scholars alike as it contains features from the region's past and its long-lasting interactions with its neighboring cultures and languages. It is commonly believed that the name Skardu has derived from Balti-Tibetan words, but it has gone through various transformations and evolved to the word Skardu today in practice due to its lasting contact with neighboring regions for centuries, changes in religion, and the impact of exotic languages. The current study intends to explore and establish the root and development of the name Skardu through a thorough investigation of the factors that contributed for centuries in transforming its name.

This study examines historical books, Tibetan dictionaries, relevant texts, and a piece of multimedia evidence to discover the meaning of Skardu. The focus of this toponymic study is to understand how geographical identities or place names are curved out of cultural exchanges, historical migrations, and the natural environments or elements found in that particular region. Through an in-depth analysis of the name Skardu, the current study aims to contribute to a holistic understanding of the factors influencing toponymic evolution and emphasizes the importance of such studies in documenting and preserving the unique intangible heritage of regions such as Baltistan.

**Literature Review**

Everything that people observe in their environment has a story behind it. The world has much to offer us, but we need the vision to recognize the hidden messages to follow. For example, our ancestors' epithets to the plants, animals, and landmarks surrounding us give us our identity. Usually, we are either uninterested in their story or mostly do not feel like finding out about them. For instance, the city we live in has a name, and this could be derived from

our ancestors' observations of its surroundings and the features associated with its climatic conditions, famous crops, languages the people speak, or topography of the region. The name of a thing or place has a meaning and “[I]n many cases that meaning will lie concealed in the name’s history, but in others it will still be transparent” (Redmonds, 2007). Place names not only have their peculiar meanings, but they

...contribute to the feeling of belonging to an area and to a social group within that particular area. Whether people grow up and live in rural or in urban landscapes, they become familiar with their surroundings at an early stage and establish bonds to places. (Helleland, 2012, p. 109)

Therefore, when a study focuses on exploring the meaning of the particular name of a region or city, its results can offer a wealth of knowledge about the emotional attachment of its residents to it, and “...many facets of our past’ and even [can help] discover remote changes in population and settlement dynamics which date back to before any form of writing and written documentation was invented” (Perono Cacciafoco & Cavallaro, 2023). Therefore, studying place names can provide humanity with invaluable information about our past.

The study of a place name is called toponym derived from the topographical features of a region and the word toponym came from the Greek words *tópos* - place and *ónoma*- name (Capra et al., 2015; Daniel & Mátyás, 2023). “Toponyms are a kind of repositories of political, social, and cultural views of the society, which display certain language trends and peculiarities of word formation. Toponyms make up a significant part of the lexical fund of the language” (Kizi, 2022, p. 1). Toponyms enrich the lexicon of a language and these place names can survive for hundreds of years, they “...are among the few surviving vestiges of prehistoric human communities, and their study can help us to open a window through which we may view facets of their lives and events that happened before what is properly called history” (Perono Cacciafoco & Cavallaro, 2023). Place naming is a fascinating enterprise where one names a place for a particular reason and at a particular time, however, at times the name goes through changes owing to various reasons (Tent, 2015). Place names can be divided into two broad categories, i.e., a) natural names, and b) cultural names.

The natural name of a place is usually attributed to its “...location within its natural environment: relief, vicinity of a lake, river, creek, swamp, forest, access to water, etc., and topographically conspicuous items such as a particular tree, rock, etc.” however, “Culture names refer to the inhabitants or to the settlement itself” (Bühnen, 1992, p. 62). Place names, whether natural or cultural, may provide details about the history of that particular region or locality (Helleland, 2012), as the place names “...are descriptive of where they belong in whole or part”(Shigini, 2023, p. 145). In addition, place names are part of the cultural identity of their speakers, so any social or linguistic change that their speakers undergo it directly or indirectly affects the place names. Thus, “[T]oponyms change, in their morphology and semantics, over time exactly because they follow the path of human communication and the linguistic shifts that arise due to the diachronic evolution of languages” (Perono Cacciafoco & Cavallaro, 2023). Diachronic change in language sometimes changes the form and sound of a place name, making it seem as if it has deviated from its original title.

### Methodology

The study of place names or toponymic studies is conventionally conducted in two basic ways that is “... one concentrating on the etymology, meaning, and origin of toponyms, and one focusing on the toponyms of a region and examining patterns of these names” (Tent, 2015, p. 65). Thus, in the current study, we have followed the norms of research methods proposed by the Australian National Placenames Survey (ANPS). According to ANPS the terms qualitative or quantitative are too broad and vague, thus, ANPS “adopted the following terms to reflect and denote more precisely the two research approaches it takes: intensive and extensive toponymy (to echo the qualitative and quantitative paradigms respectively)” (Tent, 2015, p. 66). Therefore, the intensive form of research was chosen for the current study as it focuses on “...the etymology, meaning, and origin of toponyms” (Tent, 2015, p. 65). Thus, in the course of research we consulted dictionaries and books written in Tibetan and other languages, i.e. Urdu and English, to determine the etymological background of the word Skardu in the present work.

Moreover, in the course of the study, we ensured to unearth the following:

a. What does the name mean (by looking at the toponym...). b. Why was the place given that name (through a study of the toponym’s etymology and surrounding landscape use), and c. Where is the place located at (via a geographical analysis of the toponym’s location and type, for instance, whether it was a town, village, settlement, etc.) (Lim Tyan Gin & Perono Cacciafoco, 2021, p. 8)

The toponymic data gathered through historical books, dictionaries, and a video on the same topic has been analyzed to answer the question: what does Skardu mean? Which of the following is the correct pronunciation of the word associated with this region, i.e., Skardu, Skardo, or Iskardo? The major themes that emerged from the data were discussed with appropriate quotations and examples to draw answers to the questions mentioned above.

## Discussion

### Historical Books

Historians have proposed different etymologies of the name Skardu in their historical accounts, and have tried to provide logical evidence for their proposals. One of them is the renowned traveler and historian Godfrey Thomas Vigne, in his book *Travels in Kashmir, Ladak, Iskardo* dhe has described the etymology of the name Skardu or Iskardo in the following words:

He then took Masaca or Massaga, probably a name compounded with the word maha or the great, and saka or sagur, of which the word Iskardo (Sagur-do) is compounded at the present day. Sagur (the ocean) may mean the Indus or great flood. (Vigne, 1842, p. 118)

Vigne in his argument tries to propose an etymology for the name *Iskardo* for the present-day Skardu through an examination of the linguistic element from local cultural terms and the ancient languages found in the neighborhood in the past. He proposed *Sagur-do* as the ancient name for this region based on either *Masaca* or *Massaga* compounded with a term referring to *maha* or the great and *saka* or *sagur*. *Sagur* is referred to an ocean however, here Vigne used it to refer to the Indus river or a great flood.

He used the term for ocean or great flood to align the etymology with the geographical position of Skardu near the Indus river meaning the inhabitants of Skardu relied on the river for their livelihood. This etymology clearly shows the relationship of the name Skardu with its physical geography and linguistic heritage.

Another etymology of the name looks rooted in the linguistic and cultural influence of its neighboring region, i.e., Tibet, and the local traditions of Baltistan. This name might have undergone transformations due to a dual influence from two different contributors, i.e., its use by different generations for centuries and the advent of Islam in the region, for which we have historical reference. "The name Iskardo is a Mahommedan corruption of a Tibetan name Skardo, or Kardo, as it is very commonly Pronounced..." (Thomson, 1852, p. 216). Thomson explains that after the advent of Islam in the region, the natives of this land changed the pronunciation of the Tibetan word *Skardo* to *Iskardo* to adapt to the nature of the exotic languages that came as a byproduct of the religion, i.e., Arabic and Persian.

The exploration of the past through historical accounts penned down by renowned European and English tourist writers illustrates that the altered name *Iskardo* by Muslims in the region is a modification of its original Tibetan name *Skar-mDo* or *Kardo*. "Skar-mDo, pronounced Skardo, "the starry place," or "starry fort" (Cunningham, 1854, p. 320). The Encyclopedia of India reiterates Cunningham's words "Skardo is called by the Lamas of Ladak, Skarma-m Do, meaning the enclosed place or the starry place" (Balfour, 1871, p. 189). The Tibetans pronounce the name *Skar-mDo* as *Kardo*, due to a phonological technicality that the [m] is silent when a consonant sound follows it. In a similar manner, the Tibetans usually do not pronounce /s/ if it is a superscript/surmounted letter that comes above the root letters (ka, ta, pa, etc. ) there are three surmounted combinations: *ra*, *la* and *sa*, and *ga-*, *da-*, *ba-*, *ma-*, and *ah-*, are prefixes. Balti people usually pronounce these prefixes and surmounted letters in more cases depending on the letters that follow, however Tibetans usually do not pronounce them. According to Cunningham, the name *Skardo* refers to "the starry place" or "starry fort" which indicates that this name might have a celestial or cosmic connection due to the location of this city at a high altitude offering a clear and vivid view of stars at night in the sky or it might be related to its location in the lap of towering mountains that guard this city under the stars, in either way, the name *Skardo* encompasses "place" and "star" in it. A historical narrative regarding the name *Skardo* may help link this word's meaning with its root.

The capital Skardu means "star-lit place." There is also a tale about this name: Balti ancestors went over the mountains, tramped along the steep and narrow valley of the Shiquan River, and arrived here. They could not speak the local language and found themselves in a strange and new place. On that very night, they found the sky clear and starry as if it were a sign of welcome. After traveling from afar, this greeting made them happy and believe it was an auspicious symbol, So they called this place Skardu, "Star-lit Place". (McGrath, 2019, p. 94)

This story provides a unique perspective by blending the features of cultural history with linguistic analysis proposing an etymology of the name rooted in both cultural interpretation and natural observation. The story behind the name *Skardo* not only carries a significant symbolic value but also an emotional value for the Balti people who first migrated to this region.

If the interpretation of the name is analyzed from a toponymic perspective, there is a clear influence of the environmental features on the meaning of the name, i.e., the clear starry night sky. This interpretation further links it to spiritual or auspicious meaning going beyond the physical features of the land only. Moreover, the starry sky is a sign of welcome to new people who associate it with human experience and emotions as it is a common practice in indigenous societies where places are often named based on their interaction with nature out there.

Francke has his version of the story regarding the history behind this name that he took from the book "La-Dvakhs-Rgyal-Rabs" a historical account of ancient Tibet written in the Tibetan language. An excerpt from this book is also available at the beginning of the book *Antiquities of Indian Tibet* both in Tibetan and English. The excerpt is

about the temple Skar-chuil? chuñ-rdo-dbyiñs built by the Tibetan king *Sad-Na-Legs* in the Rgya province. Here Francke contemplates the name Skardo/Skar-rdo.

Skar-chuñ-rdo-byiñs, the name of the temple, means 'Little star, flying stone'; this would be a proper name for a meteor. This name may have been abridged to Skar-rdo, the name of the present capital of Baltistan. The name Skar-rdo is still understood to mean 'meteor'. (1926, p. 89)

Francke's words symbolically analyze the name Skardu linking its etymology with the Tibetan name *Skar-chuñ-rdo-byiñs* referring to 'little star, flying stone', these phrases link it to a meteor showing how natural phenomena and celestial events influence naming a place. The abridgment of the Tibetan word *Skar-chuñ-rdo-byiñs* to *Skar-rdo* (later transforming to Skardu) supports the notion that the name Skardu refers to a meteor that moves across the sky signifying both a cosmic and physical connection. The explanation of the name helped us look deeper to understand the toponymy of Skardu focusing on how the meaning was drawn from celestial imagery that represents the relationship of the region with natural or astronomical events that took place in the region in the past. Moreover, the transformation and simplification of the complex term *Skar-chuñ-rdo-byiñs* to *Skar-rdo* show the linguistic process of simplifying and adapting terms according to the evolving linguistic conditions in the region over time as the natives of the land came into contact with other languages and peoples and adapted accordingly.

In a nutshell, the name Skardu is a blend of environmental, linguistic, and cultural influences for centuries. This name is based on the Tibetan term *Skar-mDo* referring to 'starry place' which represents the conjunction of local linguistic elements and external cultural interpretations. The journey of this name from *Skar-mDo* to *Kardo*, *Iskardo*, *Skar-rdo* to becoming Skardu finally has been contributed by a number of factors, i.e., cosmic imagery, natural observation, emotional response, cultural symbolism, physical landmarks, and symbolic meaning.

#### Video Evidence

In this documentary video, Mr. Muhammad Hassan Hasrat, a renowned scholar of the region, describes the etymology of the name Skardu referring to the following sources (Afridi, 1988; Biddulph, 1977; Cunningham, 1854; Vigne, 1842). He considers Skardu as the heartland of the Baltistan region for being its headquarters. Moreover, after the analysis of the sources, he concludes the discussion favoring the definition of the name Skardu that Cunningham provided, i.e., *Skar-mDo* (Hasrat, 2024).

#### Etymological Evidence from Dictionaries

Dictionaries while explaining the etymology of the name Skardu break the word into two words, i.e., *Skar*, and *do*. The word *Skar*(སྐར་) has two meanings a) shorten form of *skar-ba* (verb: སྐར་བཞུག) measure, weight, estimate b) shorten form of *skar-ma* (noun: སྐར་མཉམ་) star or meteor (Das & Bahadur, 1902; Jäschke, 1881; Sprigg, 2002). The Tibetans pronounce *skar* as *kar* (here the /s/ sound is a superscript), however, Balti people pronounce it as *skar* as mentioned in the Tibetan dictionaries.

In Tibetan, *skar* is spelled in the same way for both types of meanings. However, there are variations in the spelling of the word 'do' and the meaning depends upon the way they are spelled in the Tibetan. In the dictionaries, 'do' is written in the following four ways;

- a. *Do* (དོ): couple, equal, pair (Das & Bahadur, 1902, pp. 639–640; Jäschke, 1881, p. 256; Sprigg, 2002, p. 51).
- b. *mDo* (མདོ): In the Tibetan writing script if [m] is added before 'do' then it conventionally means valley, vales, lowland, or home. In addition, 'mDo' (མདོ་) is also referred to as the juncture where two roads meet and the confluence where two rivers meet. However, the rule to pronounce the prefix (མ) that comes before 'do' is if the prefix comes after a consonant, it is not made part of the pronunciation, for instance, *Skarmdo*, *barmdo*, etc., however, if the prefix comes after a vowel, then it is made part of the pronunciation, like *chumdo*, etc. This word has multiple meanings, but they are irrelevant here (Das & Bahadur, 1902, p. 675; Jäschke, 1881, p. 273).
- c. *ado* (འདོ): if ah/a:/ (called *achuñ* in Balti) comes before 'do' then it means *light, radiance, or shine/brightness, clever* (Das & Bahadur, 1902, p. 689; Jäschke, 1881, p. 279).
- d. In addition to these four words, there is another similar word *rdo* (རོ) which means *stone* or weight/ weighing thing (Das & Bahadur, 1902, p. 702; Jäschke, 1881, pp. 286–287).

Now, if we combine *skar* and *do* and place them in particular formations, the following words develop.

- a. *Skar-do* (སྐར་དོ): This combination does not make an acceptable meaning, because the combination refers to *weight-couple*, and *star-couple* which is beyond conventions, thus, this combination is not applicable.
- b. *Skar-mdo* (སྐར་མདོ): Remember, མ [m] is not pronounced here. If *skar* is used in the meaning of weight then it means *weighing place or valley*, however, if *skar* is used in the meaning of *star* then this combination offers an acceptable meaning that is *starry valley* or *starry land*. This combination is quite logical and acceptable in accordance with the place name under consideration.



- c. *Skar-ado* (སྐར་འདོ): Remember འ [a] is not made part of the pronunciation of the last element in the name, i.e., *do*. Here we cannot take *skar* for weight, but if we take it to mean *star(s)* then this combination means *the light of stars* which is meaningful, but this combination with this meaning is not in practice as the name of any city or region.
- d. *Skar-rdo* (སྐར་རདོ): Some people consider this combination as the original etymology for the name for Skardu, as the combination *skar=weigh* and *rdo=stone* and call it *weighing stone* and refer to a marketplace. However, this meaning is completely illogical as in Balti, for a marketplace or trading place there already exists a place called Tshoñ-dus, a beautiful village in the suburb of Skardu city. *Skar-rdo* also means *meteor*, however, it is not the meaning we are concerned about here.

### Conclusion

The etymological study to ascertain the root of the name Skardu shows its intricate interplay of cultural, environmental, and linguistic influences for centuries. Tracing its roots to the Tibetan term *Skar-mDo* (*starry place or land of stars*) and its potential linkage to words like *Sagur* (*ocean or great flood*), the name Skardu represents not only its linguistic root, but also the cultural narratives and geographical features of the region. In addition, this name further highlights the dynamic transition through infusion and adaptation of linguistic attributes from Islam in the region in the past, showing how exotic influences and local traditions shape place names.

Evidences gathered from multiple sources helped us establish the etymology of the name Skardo (སྐར་མདོ). We found that it is the combination of *skar* (སྐར) and *-mdo* (མདོ) which means *the valley of stars* or *the land of stars*, and this combination aptly represents the meaning or etymology of the name Skardo among the different proposals by historians, scholars, and dictionaries.

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