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On the Etymology of New Persian *malang* 'Intoxicated; Unorthodox Dervish'

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Abstract: This brief article discusses the etymology of the New Persian word *malang*, which has been widely borrowed into Indian languages. First its semantic range is established as encompassing the two basic meanings 'intoxicated, drunk' and '(unorthodox) dervish', then a derivation from a Bactrian loanword into early New Persian is proposed, connecting it with the Indo-Iranian root **mad-* 'to be/become intoxicated'. The article thereby adds another lexical item to the list of Bactrian borrowings into New Persian and makes a contribution to the documentation of the Bactrian lexicon, as the presumable Bactrian source word is so far unattested in the known documents and inscriptions.

Keywords: Bactrian; etymology; loanwords; Persian

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The New Persian word *malang* seems to be relatively rarely used in present-day Iran and it is not listed in the standard etymological reference works like Horn (1893), Hübschmann (1895) or Ḥasan-Dūst (2014). It is, however, still well-known in Afghanistan, whence it has spread into many languages further east, especially within a Ṣūfī religious context.

In Steingass's (1892) dictionary, *malang* is defined as "A man barefoot and bare-headed, ecstasied; a religious enthusiast". Dehḫodā (1931) rejects the meaning 'naked from head to toe' (*sar-o-pā berahne*) and some others given by the *Farhang-i Rašīdī* as a "mistake" (*ġalaṭ*) and claims that 'drunk' is the only meaning of the word, citing also the collocation *mast-o-malang* with *mast* 'drunk'. The rejection of 'naked from head to toe' as a basic meaning of the word is likely correct, and also applies to the further misunderstanding as 'barefoot and bare-headed', that has found entrance into Steingass's (1892)

dictionary. This gloss probably entered the lexicographical tradition as an attribute to the meaning 'religious enthusiast' (vel. sim.), describing an unorthodox mendicant who walks about naked (a type of behavior that is historically well-attested for transgressive Ṣūfīs). In a similar way it appears in the *Maǧmaʿu l-Luġāt* of the *Qāmūs-i Kabīr-i Afġānistān* (Kabīr 2023), an online dictionary of the Persian of Afghanistan, which gives the following meanings:

> "A. mendicant (*faqīr*), drunk, tipsy (*sarxuš*), Sufi, inebriated (*maḫmūr*), (mystically) selfless (*bē-ḫud*), intoxicated (*mad-hūš*), (mystic) lover of God (*ʿāšiq-i Ḫudā*), gnostic (*ʿārif*), dervish, glad (*tar-damāġ*), *qalandar*
>
> B. persons without means (*bē-sar-u-sāmān*), barefoot and in need"

As in this latter source, the reference to (unorthodox) Ṣūfī mendicants is primary also in the borrowed forms in Pashto, Panjabi and Hindi/Urdu though additional meanings derived from this sense are also attested there:

- Pashto *maláng* – 'dervish, mendicant fakir; ascetic; careless person; in love'[1] (Aslanov 1966)
- Panjabi *malāg* – *n.* 'fakir, Muslim mendicant'; *adj.* 'carefree, indifferent to life' (Singh, Singh Gill & Joshi 1994)
- Hindi/Urdu *malang* – 1. 'a Muslim ascetic (esp. as in a state of trance)'; 2. 'a careless or inconsiderate person'; 3. 'a tall, robust man'[2] (McGregor 1993)

Papas's (2020) entry in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (3rd edn.) defines *malang* as "a word used in the Indian subcontinent and Afghanistan for a type of transgressive, if not antinomian, Ṣūfī" (Papas 2020: 117). He also offers a more precise description of the lifestyle of a *malang*:

> "*Malang*s often use hashish (smoked in a chillum pipe, drunk in a *bhāng* potion, or eaten in *pakoṙā* fritters), not to become passive but to strengthen their mystical experiences. They wear their hair long and wear women's dresses and heavy jewels (anklets, bangles, rings, and earrings). They dance and cry out with feminine voices, in order to transgress social or sexual norms and to make themselves the brides, even the prostitutes, of God. Often from poor backgrounds, malang dervishes, rather than entering into what they consider vain Ṣūfī discussions and theories, favour a spiritual life based on revelations during dances, drug hallucinations, and dreams." (Papas 2020: 117)

Papas (2020: 117) notes that "[t]he etymology of the word and the origin of the group are uncertain. Coming perhaps from Hindi or Persian and attested

[1] Transl. from Russ. "1) *derviš; niščenstvujuščij fakir*; 2) *asket*; 3) *bespečnyj čelovek*; 4) *vljubljonnyj*".

[2] The fourth sense 'a large white bird' is only attested lexicographically and may be erroneous or otherwise go back to a separate etymon.

since at least about 1008 [AH] / 1600 [CE], *malang* seems initially to have denoted certain members of a Ṣūfī group called *Madāriyya*; the scope of the term then broadened to individuals and communities comparable with respect to socio-religious practices."

From the point of view of semantic change, it is most likely that the meaning 'unorthodox Ṣūfī' developed from the more basic meaning 'drunk, intoxicated', especially since the religious practice of *malang*s prominently includes the consumption of intoxicating substances. This is also suggested by the collocation *mast-o-malang* mentioned by Dehḫodā. The origin of the term in Persian (rather than Hindi), on the other hand, seems assured based on the geographical distribution of the primary and secondary sense ('drunk' in Iran, but mostly 'dervish' and senses derived from it in India). The transmission of only the Ṣūfī sense into the Indian languages fits well into the historically attested sociolinguistic situation, in which Islamic concepts were transmitted to India via the medium of Persian.[3]

As for the date of first attestation, Papas's (2020: 117) dating to "at least about" 1600 CE probably relates only to the meaning 'dervish', since in the meaning of 'intoxicated' it already appears in much earlier works. A search in the *Ganjoor* corpus of classical Persian poetry gives a verse attributed by lexicographical works to the 10th – 11th century poet Labībī as its earliest attestation:[4]

zi ǧā ǧast čūn ātaš-ē bē-dirang dil az bāda-yi ʿišq mast-u-malang
He jumped from the place like a fire without delay,
the heart drunk and intoxicated from the wine of love.

Ever since Henning (1939), it has been acknowledged that the lexicon of New Persian contains a component of borrowings from Iranian languages once spoken further to the east, which may have entered the literary language in the early stages of its development in Ḫurāsān. After the discovery and edition of the Bactrian documents (Sims-Williams 2007 etc.), which resulted in a much better understanding of the Bactrian language, Lurje & Yakubovich (2017) were able to correct Henning's (1939) assumption that an unattested Sogdian dialect with the sound change **d* > *l* was the source of New Persian words that have this development. Instead, these words can more

[3] The alternative derivation of Hindi *malaṅg* in the sense 'a tall, robust man'/'stout-bodied man' from the Vedic hapax *mālaṅga-* 'epithet of a hornless goat', which is endorsed by Turner (1962-1966: T. 10089) based on Sharma (1959/1960; *non vidi*), is hardly convincing in itself and also does not account for the other senses of the word. The alleged Hindi variant ***mālaṅg* quoted there, which would need to be primary for the etymology to work phonologically, is not recorded by McGregor (1993), who also doubts the etymology ("?") and rather sees the source of the Hindi word in Panjabi, whence it may in fact have been transmitted. Much more likely is the assumption of a semantic development 'ascetic, fakir' > 'stout/robust man' in Hindi.

[4] https://ganjoor.net/labibi/abyat/sh74

straightforwardly be explained as borrowings from Bactrian, which shows **d* > *l* as one of its most characteristic features (cf. Kreidl 2021 for details and chronology).

I would like to argue that the word *malang* has to be added to the list of such borrowings from Bactrian. The shared Indo-Iranian root **mad-* 'to become intoxicated' (Cheung 2007: 253; Mayrhofer 1996: 299–300) is a likely source for a word with the basic meaning 'drunk, intoxicated' (cf. also the collocated New Persian word *mast* 'drunk' < **mad-ta-*) and *malang* could easily derive from this root if it is a Bactrian word with the typically Bactrian sound change **d* > *l*. It is also worth noting that a word from the same semantic sphere – Persian *mul* 'wine' < Bactrian μολο 'wine' – is already established as having been borrowed in this direction (Lurje & Yakubovich 2017: 324). Another point that speaks in favor of an origin in Bactrian, and against, e.g., a derivation from Pashto, which also shows **d* > *l*, is the suffix *-ang*. Nouns or adjectives ending in *-ng* (written ⟨-γγο⟩) are quite frequent in Bactrian, resulting in all cases where the *n* of a stem or primary suffix came into contact with the *k* of the frequent **-ka-* suffix after the syncope of the preceding vowel. Thus there is ⟨-αγγο⟩ < **-āna-ka-* (Sims-Williams 2007: 187), ⟨-ηγγο⟩ < **-aiṇa-ka-* (Sims-Williams 2007: 213), ⟨-γωγγο⟩ < **-gauṇa-ka-* (Sims-Williams 2007: 207), ⟨-λαγγο⟩ < **-dāna-ka-* (e.g. in βαγολαγγο 'temple, sanctuary'; Sims-Williams 2007: 200) etc.

A formation with the middle participle ending **-āna-ka-*, one of the sources of Bactrian ⟨-αγγο⟩ /-āng/, would be a very plausible candidate for the origin of *malang*, since intoxication is a typical middle voice activity, involving an action that affects the subject. The root **mad-* is attested with middle voice inflection, at least in some cases, both in Old Iranian and in Old Indo-Aryan. The short vowel in the second syllable of the Persian form can be explained with the Persian-internal sound change *āng* > *ang*, which is attested in some early New Persian texts (Lazard 1963: 182; Bernard 2025: 59–60, 65).[5] Based on the geographical origins of these texts, Lazard (1963: 182) attributes the change to the dialects of eastern Afghanistan. One of the works in question, the geographical treatise *Ḥudūd al-ʿālam*, was written in Guzgan, i.e., specifically on the territory of Bactria-Tokharistan. This makes it plausible that the sound change applied in the Persian dialects that were in contact with Bactrian and that the word **malāng* > *malang* was then transmitted from these dialects to other Persian-speaking regions.

A Bactrian word *μαλαγγο 'drunk' is not attested in the surviving Bactrian documents or inscriptions, but – if the etymology is correct – its former existence can be assumed based on the Persian word. Its attestation in Persian from the 11th century onwards is not too far removed from the latest surviving writings in Bactrian and allows for the assumption of transmission

[5] I owe this crucial observation to a comment from an anonymous reviewer.

into the Early New Persian of Bactria-Tokharistan and adjacent regions. The narrowing of its meaning to 'unorthodox dervish' may have come as late as 1600 CE in association with the Madāriyya order, a time when the Bactrian language was most likely long extinct.

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