

A Cheetah in a Camphor Tree Grove: Etymological Notes on Indo-Iranian Words for Camphor

Leonid Kulikov

(Université Catholique de Louvain / Ghent University)

“I’ll take spots, then,” said the Leopard; “but don’t make ‘em too vulgar-big. I wouldn’t look like Giraffe—not for ever so.”

“I’ll make ‘em with the tips of my fingers,” said the Ethiopian. “There’s plenty of black left on my skin still. Stand over!”

Then the Ethiopian put his five fingers close together (there was plenty of black left on his new skin still) and pressed them all over the Leopard, and wherever the five fingers touched they left five little black marks, all close together. You can see them on any Leopard’s skin you like, Best Beloved. Sometimes the fingers slipped and the marks got a little blurred; but if you look closely at any Leopard now you will see that there are always five spots—off five fat black fingertips.

“Now you are a beauty!” said the Ethiopian. “You can lie out on the bare ground and look like a heap of pebbles. You can lie out on the naked rocks and look like a piece of pudding-stone. You can lie out on a leafy branch and look like sunshine sifting through the leaves; and you can lie right across the centre of a path and look like nothing in particular. Think of that and purr!”*

Rudyard Kipling; *How the Leopard got his spots*.

* To be precise, leopards do not purr: among big felines, only cheetahs do. – LK.

Abstract: This paper focuses on the etymology of Indo-Iranian words for camphor, particularly on Skt. *karpūra-*, briefly referring also to Gr. κέρβερος “Cerberus”. I argue that this form (of non-Indo-European origin) was modified due to secondary re-etymologization under a group of phonetically similar words with partly similar meanings (“spotted, dappled” etc.), some of which may refer to cheetah.

Keywords: Indo-Iranian, Cheetah, Camphor, Etymology

The words for camphor in European languages (Medieval Lat. *camphora*, Gr. καμφορά, Byz. Gr. καφουρά etc.) are commonly (and plausibly) explained as going ultimately to an Austronesian (Malay) form *kapur*, through the intermediary of Indo-Iranian forms such as Middle Persian *k'pwl* /*kāpūr*/ and, subsequently, Arabic *kāfir*, whence also Persian *kāfur*.

A minor problem about this scenario is posed by the Old Indo-Aryan form. Unlike its (Middle) Iranian cognates, such as Middle Persian *kāpūr*¹, the Sanskrit form *karpūra*² exhibits the consonant *r* before *p*. Mayrhofer (KEWA I:175)³ adopts Gonda’s (1932, 23-24, 34) account for the emergence of *-r-* by the influence of Austroasiatic prefixed words in *kar-/kam-*, which, however, does not look very convincing. Indeed, it is unclear why the original form should have been adapted to these Austroasiatic forms of relatively minor significance.

In order to explain the insertion of *r*, it is appropriate to remind that Cl. Skt. *karpūra* “camphor” is not infrequently grouped with a plethora of similar OIA forms referring to a variety of quite different, yet somehow interconnected objects. These words,⁴ some of which are only attested by ancient Indian lexicographers (L.)⁵, include forms both with initial *k-* and with initial *ś-*.

¹ On the use of camphor in Persian cultural context and its mentions in classical Persian poetry, see, for instance, A‘lam 1990; Grami 2013, 42-45; “Camphor in Medieval Persian Poetry” 2022.

² Attested from the Classical period onwards, e.g. in Atharvaveda *Paṛiśiṣṭas* (19.3.2 *sita-candana-karpūram* “Arabian jasmine (?), sandal and camphor”), *Suśruta* and *Pañcatantra*. On camphor and its use in Ancient India, see, in particular, Donkin 1999, 80ff; Prasad et al. 2008; Rabiul et al. 2011; McHugh 2014; Chauthaiwale et al. 2021, 85, 87.

³ “...wahrscheinlich austroasiatisch, vgl. khmer *kāpōr*, čam *kapū*, mon *khapuiw*. Aus dem Nebeneinander der austroasiatischen Präfixe *kar-*, *kam-* und *ka-* erklärt sich das Verhältnis von *karpūra*: neugr. κάμφορα, nhd. *Kampfer*, engl. *camphor* (usw.): neugr. καφουρά, italien. *cáfura*...”.

⁴ Often compared by etymologists to Gr. κέρβερος.

⁵ The status of such words is not always clear, but at least for some of them one may assume that they could exist in some Old (Middle?) Indo-Aryan dialects different from “Standard” Sanskrit.

The former group includes a plethora of forms, all following the pattern *karBUra-*, where *B* stands for *b*, *p* or *v*; *U* – for *a*, *u* or *ū*. These are *karbura-* “variegated, of a spotted or variegated color”⁶ (Cl. Skt.); “sin”; name of a Rakṣas; “curcuma” or “Zingiber zerumbet” (all – L.) (also *karbu-* (Yājñavalkya-Smṛti 3.166) “variegated, spotted”, probably the truncated form of the preceding); *karbara-* / *karvara-* “sin”; tiger; “hing spice, Asafoetida” (extracted from rhizome or tap root of *Ferula*, also known as “devil’s dung” in several languages; of dark amber color when dried) or the leaf of this plant (?); name of a Rakṣas; *karbūra-* name of a Rakṣas; “curcuma”; a kind of venomous (speckled) leech; “gold”; a yellow orpiment (all – L.), etc. The only Vedic form in this quite large group is *kārvara-* (homonymous with Vedic *kārvara-* “deed”, attested a few times in the RV and AV), which occurs once at AVŚ 10.4.19, in a context where it must refer to a certain speckled (? thus Mayrhofer, EWAia I:318) species of fish.⁷



FIGURE 1. Caucasian Shepherd Dog⁸

To the latter, smaller, group, attested from early Vedic (RV) onwards, belong *śábalá-* “spotted, variegated” (referring to one of Yama’s two guarding hell-dogs) and *śárvar[a]-* (on which see below).

Elsewhere (Kulikov, forthcoming) I have noticed that the majority of these forms, in spite of great variety of meanings, refer to some spotted or dappled objects or beings, not infrequently of brownish or yellowish color. The visual pattern (spotted/dappled + brownish/yellowish) prompts a common origin, a Wanderwort that could be the source for at least some of Indo-Iranian forms listed above as well as of Gr. κέρβερος “Cerberus”.

⁶ This term is also used to describe the color associated with the Capricorn (Weber 1853: 278), commonly represented as an aquatic monster, often with the body of a (spotted) antelope. – I would like to thank Audrius Beinorius for his comments on Capricorn in Indian astrology.

⁷ There are several species which might fit such a description, e.g. brownspeckled grouper; see Fig. 4.

⁸ By Pleple2000 - Own work, CC BY-SA 3.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=1253046>

This hypothetical Wanderwort could originate in a proto-form from a non-Indo-European language (or a group of historically related proto-forms in a few genetically related languages). I argued that a good candidate may be the Proto-North-Caucasian form reconstructed as **čərbV* (*/*bərčV* (~ *č*)) (NCED 341), denoting a breed of dog,⁹ perhaps close to what we know today as the Caucasian Shepherd Dog (Fig. 1).



FIGURE 2. A prince in a chariot with a hunting cheetah, with an attendant running behind, by an unknown Persian (Moghul) artist.¹⁰

The phonetically unusual quality (hushing or palatalized affricate) of the initial consonant may, incidentally, account for the variation of the initial stop may be responsible for the variation in the initial consonant in Indo-Aryan forms (*k-* / *ś-*). Another variation, *r-* / *l-*, may be due to the intricate developments and, occasionally, the merger of these two sonants in several North Caucasian languages.¹¹

In Kulikov (2009, 150n27; forthcoming), I argue that the RVic *śárvar[a]-* (once attested in the feminine form *śárvarī-* in a hymn dedicated to the Maruts: *té syandrāso n_aókṣāṇó_a ti śkandanti śárvarīḥ* at RV 5.52.3ab), traditionally rendered as “night”, must

⁹ See, in particular, Avaro-Andian **čiba* (~ *-o*) “bitch”: Chamalal *čiba*; Tindi *čiba* etc.; Lezghi **p:arč-* “snoop”, Tabasaran *barči* etc.

¹⁰ <https://www.bonhams.com/auction/18950/lot/322/a-prince-in-a-chariot-with-a-hunting-cheetah-an-attendant-running-behind-mughal-17th-century/>

¹¹ Incidentally, contacts of Proto-Indo-Iranians with one or several such (North Caucasian?) languages may have triggered the eventual collapse of this phonological opposition in Indo-Iranian languages, where *r* and *l* entirely merged in Iranian and partly merged in Indo-Aryan, especially, probably, in Western Indo-Aryan.

rather be understood, after Böhlingk/Roth (PW VII:105) and Grassmann (1873, 1386), as “die bunten Thiere der Marut(s)”; Uhlenbeck’s (1898-1899, 305) etymological dictionary gives “bunt, scheckig” as the main meaning of this word. More specifically, given that Maruts



FIGURE 3. “Majnun in the Wilderness”, from *Khamsah* by Nizāmī (part of a fragment with pairs of cheetahs (right low corner) and leopards). Dated AH 1004/1595-6 (after Sims-Williams 2015)

are likely to be associated with cheetahs (or leopards; see Kulikov 2009), RV 5.52.3ab may tentatively be translated as “they [sc. the Maruts] cover / mount the śarvarīs = female spotted animals (?) [= female cheetahs (?)]”. In formal terms, both groups of variants can be reconciled with the alleged Greek parallel form κέρβερος (originally meaning “(spotted?) dog” (?)).¹²

¹² Cerberus is not necessarily, but may be, spotted; cf. its representation on an Apulian kantharos of ca. 350 BCE (Ex J.M.E. collection, New York), which I cannot unfortunately reproduce here for Copyright reasons; the reader can be referred to the URL <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/489977634441001338/>. The former requires reconstructing the initial simple velar (*k-), while the latter (older?) variant suggests the initial palatovelar *k̑-. This latter solution, accepted in earlier scholarship, is eventually rejected by Mayrhofer (EWAia II:609).

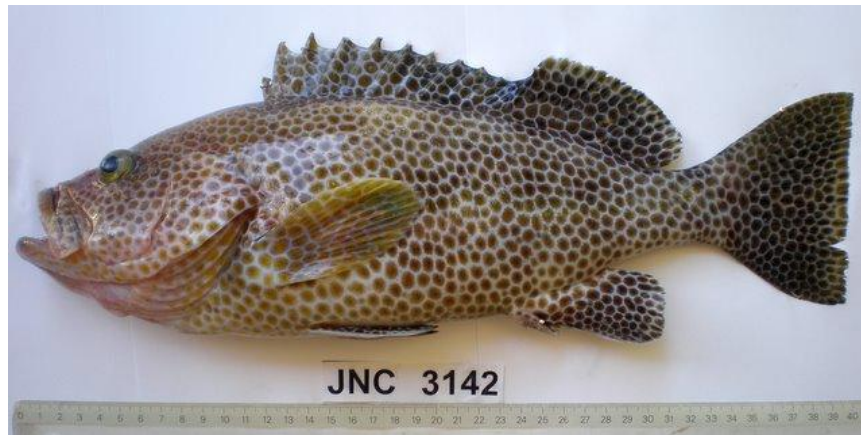


FIGURE 4. Brownspotted grouper¹³



FIGURE 5. Hing spice (Asafoetida) and Ferula plant¹⁴

This may give a clue to the explanation of the Old Indo-Aryan word for camphor, *karpūra-*, as opposed to its Iranian (and other) cognates. It seems that the form *karpūra-* (← **kapūra-*?) could be modified under the influence of other members of the *karBUra-* family, not only due to their formal similarity but, presumably, due to somewhat vague, yet not neglectable, semantic parallelism. The word under study may refer, presumably, not

¹³ By Jean-Lou Justine - Own work, CC BY-SA 3.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=25458804>

¹⁴ <https://www.indiamart.com/proddetail/ferula-asafoetida-13072725597.html>

only to the substance (essence) proper, but also to the plant from which it is obtained¹⁵, i.e. camphor tree (also known as camphor laurel or *Cinnamomum camphora*). This plant, which at first glance has nothing to do with the spotted dogs or cheetahs, has an interesting peculiarity: its new leaves start out a rusty red, but soon turn dark green. This gives to the tree a remarkable, even unique, motley or speckled color pattern, which, in addition, may appear brownish (← red + green) and, to some extent, even resemble the spotted brownish pattern of cheetah's skin. Both formal and semantic similarity¹⁶ could eventually have triggered the secondary re-etymologization of this word as a “cheetah-colored tree” (?) and, subsequently, the emergence of the secondary medial *-r*, thus giving rise to the actually attested form *karpūra-*.



FIGURE 6. Curcuma rhizome, sections and powder (after Abdel-Hafez et al. 2021, fig. 1)

Abbreviations

AV: Atharvaveda

AVŚ: Atharvaveda, recension Śaunakīya

EWaia: Mayrhofer 1992-1996

KEWA: Mayrhofer 1956-1980

NCED: Nikolayev and Starostin 1994

OIA: Old Indo-Aryan

¹⁵ Or, to be more precise, to a variety of species of tree commonly associated with this name; for taxonomy of camphor see Yang et al. 2022.

¹⁶ Notice also that some words of the *karBUra-* family (in particular, *karbara-* / *karvara-* “hing spice, Asafoetida” and *karbūra-* “curcuma”) refer to substances prepared from a plant.

PW: Böhtlingk and Roth 1855-1875

RV: Ṛgveda

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