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"Halman" apricot in Ladakh: Etymology and historical context

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Abstract

This article investigates the etymological and historical origins of the name of "*Halman*", an apricot (*Prunus armeniaca* L.) variety found in Ladakh, analyzing its linguistic evolution across different cultures and time periods. Drawing from old texts, local records, and regional dialects, the study traces how the fruit's name was shaped by trade, migration, religious and cultural interactions. The findings reveal that the name often stems from early spoken languages in the region of Ladakh and Baltistan, incorporating descriptive terms and adaptations from foreign tongues. Additionally, the research also highlights how shifts in pronunciation with different dialects and spelling reflect broader sociolinguistic changes. So, by dusting these obscurities, the study demonstrates how crop nomenclature preserves historical connections between peoples of different regions, offering insights into agro-based practices, folklore, and economic exchanges. The research highlights the intersection of language and agriculture, demonstrating how the fruit names of Ladakh have been serving as living records of human history, migration, and cultural exchange in the region, enriching our understanding of ethnobotanical heritage.

Keywords: Halman, origin, name, language

Introduction

The "*Halman*," a widely cherished fruit apricot variety, holds significant cultural, nutritional, and economic value, particularly in the region of Ladakh. Renowned for its rich flavor and versatility, it is deeply embedded in Ladakhi cuisine, traditional medicine, and festive rituals, making it an indispensable part of the Ladakh's agricultural heritage. *Halman* serves as a good source of nutritive compounds. Nutritionally, it is a powerhouse of essential vitamins such as Vitamin C: 21.0 ± 1.7 mg/100g, Vitamin E 4.1 ± 0.3 mg/100g and minerals like, potassium 4190 ± 20 mg/1000 g, magnesium 115 ± 9.7 mg/1000 g, iron 13.0 ± 1.3 mg/1000 g, (Girish Korekar *et al.* 2013) ^[1] while also serving as a good source of dietary fiber and antioxidants.

Historically, the greater part of the fruit was dried in the sun, thus making *Phating*, in which state it remained good for many years. People stored it for home consumption or exported it to Lassa and Tartary. As noted by William Moorcroft and George Trebeck in their travels, this traditional method of preservation ensured the fruit's longevity and facilitated trade across regions (Moorcroft & Trebeck, 1841, p. 297) ^[2]. The dried fruit became a valuable commodity, sustaining communities during scarce seasons and contributing to local economies through its exchange in distant markets, as documented by Moorcroft and Trebeck that '*they are ordinarily bartered for wool*' (Moorcroft & Trebeck, 1841, p. 357) ^[2]. This practice highlighted the resourcefulness of agricultural societies in utilizing natural methods to extend the shelf life of their produce. Beyond its nutritional benefits, Fresh *Halman* enjoys soaring demand in domestic and international markets due to its unique taste and health advantages. The first-ever consignment of Ladakh apricots exported to Dubai in 2021-22 marked a historic milestone, proving to be a major catalyst for India's fresh apricot trade in international markets. This breakthrough not only showcased the premium quality of Ladakh's organic apricots but also opened new avenues for regional farmers and global agro-trade. The successful shipment was facilitated by APEDA and Ladakh UT administration. Its popularity has spurred year-round cultivation, creating lucrative opportunities for local farmers. In Ladakh, where agriculture remains a primary livelihood, the crop's commercial success has boosted rural economies, enabling farmers to invest in better farming

techniques and infrastructure. Reports indicate a steady rise in exports, reinforcing its status as a key economic driver. This article delves into the fascinating origins of its name, tracing how linguistic evolution reflects the fruit's historical journey—from ancient trade routes to modern-day kitchens—while underscoring its enduring significance in both cultural and economic spheres.

Origin of the Word "Halman"

The term "*Halman*" is linked to a specific variety of apricot, predominantly found in the regions of Ladakh and Baltistan. Although the word is not explicitly documented in classical Tibetan language sources, the team has undertaken an effort to investigate its potential meaning and origin. This exploration involves analyzing the term by breaking it down into its components and examining them within the context of Tibetan and related Tibetic languages. This research has been conducted in consultation with Padma Shri awardee Akhone Asgar Ali Basharat, a distinguished figure from Kargil, Ladakh, whose expertise has provided valuable insights into this linguistic and cultural inquiry.

A. Possible Meaning of "Halman"

Breaking Down the Word:

Hal: In Tibetan, the word "**Hal**" (ཁལ) does not have a direct or widely recognized meaning. However, based on our study, it appears that this term is a regional or dialectal variation of a Tibetan word. The origin of this term is likely within the geographically and culturally related regions of Ladakh and Baltistan. For example:

In several Tibetic languages, including Balti and Purgi, the root "*Hal*" appears to be associated with health. For example, the term "*Halchan*," (ཁལཅན) meaning something akin to "*healthy*," illustrates this connection. Consequently, the phrase "*halchan-phating*" translates to "*healthy apricot*." Within this linguistic context, the name "*Halman Apricot*" seems particularly apt. The fruit's notably thick flesh, which retains its substance even after drying, reinforces the perceived connection between the variety and notions of robustness and well-being. This suggests a possible historical understanding of the Halman Apricot as a particularly nourishing or beneficial fruit. It has been called a premium quality apricot and villages that are known for producing Halman apricots in Kargil district are Hardaz, Karkichu, Majidas, Kharul, Hundurmal, Shilikchay, Gongma Kargil, Manjee, Batalik, Chulichan, Gurgurdo, Sanatsey, Hordas, Garkhon, Darchik, Sanjak and Dargo. Similarly, in Leh district the villages known for producing premium quality dried apricots are Dha, Bama, Hanu Thang, Achinathang, Lehdo, Skurbuchan, Domkhar Dho, Takmachik, Turtuk, Bokdang and Thang (Stobdan *et al.* 2021) [3].

Alternatively, it might be derived from Persian/Iranian or Turkic influences. The possibility that "*Halman*" originates from Persian/Iranian or Turkic roots offers an intriguing alternative etymology. In these languages, "*Hal*" frequently denotes "*condition*" or "*state*." Considering the Halman apricot's exceptional sweetness and flavor, the name might allude to the fruit's superior condition—healthy, delicious, and possessing qualities that promote well-being in those who consume it, leaving them feeling revitalized and tranquil. This interpretation paints a picture of the name as a descriptor reflecting the positive sensory experience and health benefits associated with the fruit.

Man

In Tibetan, Balti and Purgi languages "*Man*" (མང) or "*Mang*" (མང) can mean "*many*," "*abundant*," or "*good*." It is often used to describe something desirable or of high quality.

The origin of the word "*Mann* or *man*," potentially linked to Persian/Iranian or Turkic languages where it often means "*mine*" or "*my*," offers an intriguing perspective on the apricot variety "*Halman*." Considering Halman's creation in Ladakh through grafting, the name may signify a sense of possession or ownership. While apricots existed in the region beforehand, the unique "*Halman*" variety arose specifically through grafting onto existing apricot plants like "*Khantay*" or "*Ngarmo*," thus potentially representing "*my own*" specialized apricot creation.

Combined Meaning

If we combine these interpretations, "*Halman*" could mean "*good fruit*" or "*abundant fruit*," or my own "*Healthy Fruit*" (*Hal-Mang*: ཁལམང) referring to the high quality or desirability of the apricot variety.

The term "*Halman*," referring to the specific variety of apricot found in Ladakh, likely originated within the regional dialects of Tibetan-speaking areas such as Ladakh or Baltistan. Here, apricots hold significant cultural and economic value, leading to the development of unique local terminology influenced by Tibetan, Persian, and Turkic languages. Given the long history of apricot cultivation in the Himalayan and Central Asian regions, "*Halman*" likely arose to denote the fruit's importance in local agriculture and daily life, potentially coined by farmers or traders to specifically identify the Halman apricot for its desirable traits like sweetness, size, or adaptability to the challenging high-altitude environment.

The Silk Road and other historic trade routes played a crucial role in facilitating the exchange of culture and language between Tibet, Central Asia, and Persia. As such, the term "*Halman*" could very well be a product of these interactions, representing a blend of Tibetan, Persian, and Turkic linguistic influences. This linguistic evolution highlights the interconnectedness of these regions and the impact of trade on shaping local languages and agricultural practices.

B. The Halman Gift: Legacy of the Mountains

In the quest to uncover the true origin of the "*Halman*" name, a captivating piece of local lore has surfaced. We stumbled upon a story detailing the purported origins of the name "*Halman*," adding an intriguing layer to the apricot's history.

The story is quite captivating, and we've done our best to compile and document it in the following paras. It's a tale that, we believe, offers a rich context for understanding the history and appreciation of the Halman apricot. We believe understanding the stories behind the things we cultivate and consume adds a deeper layer of appreciation and connection to our community and its traditions.

It is said that in the rugged, breath taking landscape of Ladakh, where the air is thin and the mountains touch the sky, there once grows a treasure known as the Halman Apricot. Its story is not merely one of cultivation, but a legend etched into the hearts of the Ladakhi people, a narrative intertwined with perseverance, a touch of desperation, and echoes of divine provision.

Long ago, in the ancient realm of Greater Ladakh, nestled somewhere in Baltistan, our ancestors whispered of a miraculous sight. A small, strange tree lived high up on a rough, rocky mountain. It held on tightly between the hard rocks to stay alive. Its beauty was undeniable, its fruit, they imagined, held the promise of sweetness and sustenance in a land often parched and barren. Reaching it, however, proved an impossible task. The climb was very difficult, the terrain too steep, the tree seeming to mock their efforts from its lofty perch. Many tried, hearts pounding, lungs burning, but the mountain guarded its secret jealously. The *Balti/Purgi* word "*hal*," meaning "*halchas*" – *exhausting, breath coming in ragged gasps from strenuous labor* – painted a vivid picture of each failed attempt. Driven by the desire for this precious fruit, a daring, perhaps desperate, solution was conceived. With the rudimentary firearms of the time, they aimed at the sacred tree, hoping to dislodge it. The echo of the shots reverberated through the mountains as they fired upon the seemingly unreachable prize. Whether by luck or fate, their efforts bore fruit. The *Halman* sapling, battered but alive, was finally brought down from its inaccessible sanctuary. It was planted with reverence and hope, nurtured with care, and from that single, hard-won seedling sprang the *Halman* Apricot tree, now a symbol of Ladakh. The name, a legacy of that arduous quest, forever carries the weight of "*hal*" – the breathless exhaustion of the climb, the persistent yearning that drove them to such lengths.

This story of the *Halman* Apricot subtly mirrors the ancient tale of "من و سلوى" - *Mann-o-Salvaa* (*Surah Al-Baqarah* (2:57)). Just as the Israelites, lost and wandering in the harsh desert, were gifted "*manna*," a divine sustenance to sustain them through their trials, so too did our ancestors find a source of nourishment in the unforgiving landscape. In *Tafseer al-Mizan* by Allamah Tabatabai, *Mann-o-Salwa* (من و سلوى) refers to the divine sustenance provided to the Israelites during their exile in the desert where *Mann* (مَن) has been referred to as a sweet, honey-like substance that appeared like dew and *Salwa* (سلوى), quail meat sent as a blessing from Allah (*Tafsir al-Mizan*, Urdu edition: Volume 1, Pages 240–243).

The "*manna*" of the Quran and Bible (*Manna & Quail*) was a symbol of God's grace, a provision in times of hardship. In Ladakh, the *Halman* Apricot, born from a perilous journey and a daring act, became a symbol of the people's resilience, their ability to wrest sustenance and beauty from the harshest of environments. It embodies their unwavering spirit, proving that even in the face of seemingly insurmountable challenges, survival, and even sweetness, can be found. The *Halman* Apricot, therefore, stands not just as a fruit, but as a testament to the enduring spirit of the Ladakhi people, a living echo of the "*Mann-o-Salvaa*" found in their own challenging wilderness. The "*manna*" was the fruit, apricot which was so delicious, which they got after long exhaustion "*hal*". Thus, the name of the fruit came up as "*Hal-Man*, *Halman* (هلمن)".

In another narrative of the same tale, it is said that after the tireless efforts described above, the people finally discovered the plant and named it "*Al-Manna*." Over time, through the gentle erosion of language and the passage of generations, the name softened into "*Halman*," a mellower echo of its origin. Rooted in the Arabic "*Al-manna*," meaning *manna*, the name carried a profound significance, evoking the image of an edible, sweet sustenance akin to the "*mann-o-salwa*" mentioned in the Quran—a divine provision symbolizing nourishment and blessing. This name became a fitting tribute to the fruit born of such unwavering dedication and toil. Once the plant was found, it was said to

bear fruit continuously, a testament to the rewards of perseverance and a symbol of enduring abundance, as if nature itself honored the labor that brought it to light.

Conclusion

The journey to uncover the origin of the name '*Halman*' has taken us through a fascinating blend of history, language, and culture. From its earliest mentions in ancient stories and local dialects to its evolution influenced by trade, migration, or linguistic shifts, each clue has woven a richer story behind this beloved regional fruit of Ladakh. Whether derived from *al-manna* or any other shaped by historical event or cultural practice, or adapted through foreign influence or local tradition, the name carries echoes of the past that still resonate today. This exploration not only deepens our appreciation for the fruit itself but also highlights how language and heritage intertwine in unexpected ways. So the next time you enjoy a plate of fresh *Halman chuli*, remember—you're savoring not just its flavor, but centuries of history in every bite.

Through careful analysis of historical records, linguistic roots, and Ladakhi folklore, it becomes clear that the name *Halman* derives from the combination of the words "*Hal*" and "*Mann*" or from "*Al-manna*", influenced by trade, migration, and language shifts. Early references in *Ladakhi/Baltistani/Tibetan dialects* confirm its original terms, '*Hal*', '*Mann*', or '*Al-Manna*' which gradually evolved in to *Halman*. This isn't unusual—many fruits, such as orange, apricot etc., have names shaped by history. Orange traces back to Sanskrit *nāraṅga*, passing through Persian, Arabic, and Latin before becoming "orange" in English. Apricot started from Latin *praecox* (meaning "early ripening"), turned into Greek *praikókion*, then Arabic *al-barqūq*. Interestingly, in modern Arabic, *barqūq* often means "plum," while apricot is *mishmish* (شمش).

In Ladakh, local traditions have kept pieces of *Halman*'s naming story alive, showing how trade and language shifts shaped its identity. So, the name isn't random—it's a small but meaningful part of the region's history, where agriculture and language weave together into something special.

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