

MCM 3002

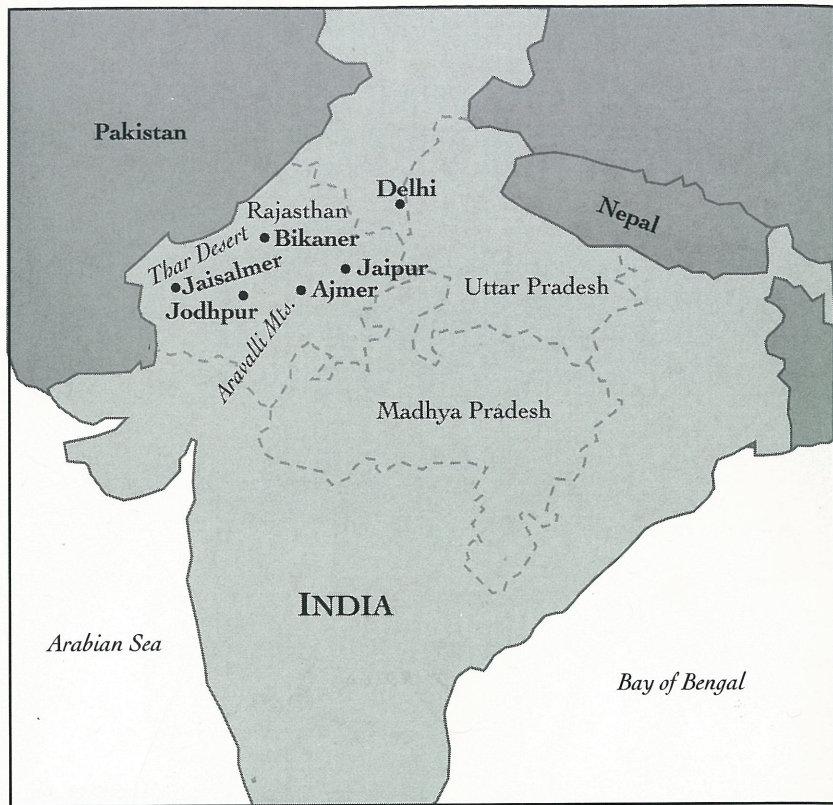
India

Traveling Artists of the Desert

*The Vernacular Musical Culture
of Rajasthan*

MUSIC OF THE EARTH





India

TRAVELING ARTISTS OF THE DESERT *The Vernacular Musical Culture of Rajasthan*

Track Listing

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1. Drawing Water,
Camel's Cry, Festival Day
Pilgrimage Song* 2:58 | 13. ARANI 3:13 |
| 2. NARA 5:04 | 14. Proclamation for the Village
Leader 2:05 |
| 3. GORBANDH (MY CAMEL'S
NECK BAND) 4:42 | 15. MEHNDI 3:03 |
| 4. CHARKA
(SPINNING WHEEL) 4:36 | 16. OHMPOORI 2:59 |
| 5. <i>Morchang</i> and <i>Dholak</i>
(Jew's Harp and Drum)
Performance 1:32 | 17. MOOMAL 2:33 |
| 6. MÖRBHAI 4:08 | 18. Narrative with <i>Dhol</i> 2:38 |
| 7. WARSHAWA
(RAINY SEASON) 4:04 | 19. <i>Bhajan</i> (Devotional Song) 2:55 |
| 8. <i>Ghoomar</i> 4:40 | 20. HANUMANJI 3:28 |
| 9. <i>Panibāri</i> 4:34 | |
| 10. HICHIKI (HICCUPS) 4:52 | |
| 11. <i>Harjas</i>
(Villagers' Prayer Song) 2:59 | |
| 12. MÖRBHAI 2:32 | |

Total time: 70:49

Non-English musical types and styles are indicated by italics. Titles are in capital letters.

**A section of #1 is mono.*

Because these are field recordings, there may be some extraneous noise despite the high fidelity utilized.

Field Notes

by Keiji Azami

The Thar Desert: A Vivid Landscape

The Thar Desert, on the western edge of the Indian subcontinent, extends westward into Pakistan from the Aravalli mountain range in central Rajasthan. It is a land of boundless sand, endless blue sky, broad horizons, burning sun, and unimaginable heat—a land where time seems at a standstill.

Since I was not in a hurry, I decided to take an overnight train to Jaipur, gateway to the Thar Desert and about 230 kilometers from Delhi. The train's slow speed was fine, but the sideways pitching was somewhat eerie, apparently due to the rails being warped from the heat. I arrived in Jaipur early in the morning to encounter a world completely different from the northern India to which I was accustomed.

In Jaipur, the most visually

striking thing was the Rajasthani women's brilliantly colored attire— young and old women draped in vivid, tie-dyed skirts and veils decorated with mica bits that glimmered under the sun. Along with these “desert flowers,” there were camel-drawn carts and the rose-pink sandstone buildings of this “Pink City” fantastically set against the white sand.

Once the capital of the Gachawa clan fiefdom, this heavily populated, medieval fortress town has a settled appearance. After a leisurely lunch, I visited Rajasthani music expert Kaushal Bhargava, who gave me a copy of the book, *The Sound of Music in Rajasthan*.

Rajasthan covers approximately 340,000 square kilometers, an area about equivalent to Japan, and has a population of over 20 million.

Literally meaning “Land of the Rajas,” this region has been, since the 8th century, a feudal battleground and the site of bitter combat against invading Islamic forces. The traces of this rise and fall are still imprinted on the hot desert sand, but this tragic, war-torn history has also given rise to many heroes, heroic epics, and beautiful legends and tales of the desert reflected in the performing arts. Even now, in the hearts of these desolate desert-dwellers, the arts play a vital cultural role.

From the top of the towering castle wall, I gazed past the light crimson-colored town streets at the endless desert, wondering why the Rajput—the Rajasthani samurai class—settled in this world of nothing but sand. Their proud descendants, having inherited this legacy, continue to foster a mirage-like culture through sand, dust, and eternity.

Desert Existence: Living on the Arid Earth

In the southeastern section of the Thar Desert, rainfall of about 500 millimeters during the rainy season enables some cultivation of barley,

wheat, cotton, tobacco, and poppies. Across the majority of the region, including the northwestern area, however, rainfall is extremely scarce, and sandstorms in April, May, and October further render the land unsuitable for farming. Aside from oasis towns, the desert is a no-man's land, except where water procurement has prevailed over the life-denying conditions. In the vicinity of Jaisalmer, for instance, incredibly deep wells tap “fossil water” (prehistoric underground reservoirs), and villages dot the surrounding area.

Circular houses constructed from kneaded cow dung are a distinctive feature of Rajasthani villages. Both the house interiors and exterior yard grounds are solidified with dung, and the people live barefooted. Inside, however, these crude, light brown abodes seemingly buried in sand are surprisingly clean and comfortable. Of course, they have no electricity and other modern conveniences.

Most of these people depend primarily on camel-raising for a livelihood. Camels, “boats of the desert,” which serve as basic transportation and provide nutritious milk

products, are thus indispensable for desert living. Bikaner and Jaisalmer in the central Thar Desert have been well-known since ancient times for their camel-trading.

Some consider Rajasthan to be the possible original homeland of the Gypsies, who later headed west to Europe (see MCM 3010). Although this may be folklore, many scattered villages exist in this inhospitable desert environment, along with numerous wandering craftsmen, peddlers, artists, and musicians. An estimated 150-200,000 people make their living this way, traveling from point-to-point in the vast desert while carrying on the roles and functions necessary for daily life, faith, recreation, and communication.

Musical Artists of the Desert: A Kaleidoscope

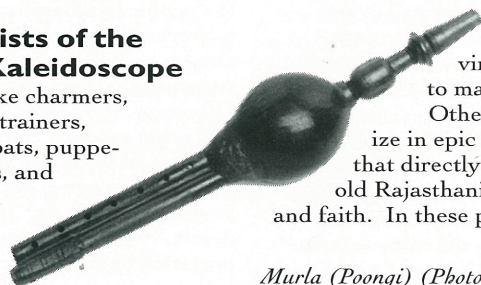
Itinerant snake charmers, monkey or bear trainers, magicians, acrobats, puppeteers, illusionists, and sideshows travel through the desert seeking performance

sites. They include the Bhopa, some of whom make their living through singing and dancing and who are among an assortment of performing art troupes organized according to *jati* (caste) and religion. The Bhopa use a wide and colorful array of musical instruments, including the *sarangi* and *ravanbatha* (bowed string instruments), *mashak* (bagpipe), whip, and hand-drum.

Typically, these Bhopa musicians move across the desert in family units with their few household goods and equipment loaded on donkeys, stopping for religious festivals where they set up temple-side altars to sing devotional songs. They also perform folk songs and dances along lake shores. In short, these versatile and

seasoned artists perform virtually anything to make a living.

Other Bhopa specialize in epic narratives, an art that directly preserves the old Rajasthani warrior order and faith. In these performances,



Murla (Poongi) (Photo: Azami)

heroic life stories, such as those of Dev Narayan and Pabooji, are recited in front of a cloth illustrated with gods and heroes in the center and detailed picture stories in the margins. A performance takes place over the course of several nights, and the sacred illustrations—never unfurled during the daytime—have an entrancing, otherworldly quality by candlelight.

The strongly religious Dev Narayan narrative is performed by several men with *jantar* accompaniment. (The *jantar* is a stringed instrument resembling a miniature *rudra-veena* *.) Melodically sparse, the performance approaches straight recitation. The Bhopa I encountered in Pushkar performed through the night in the temple courtyard, where exhausted pilgrims lay sleeping.

***Rudra-Veena.** Said to be the oldest stringed instrument of India with a 5,000 year history, sometimes called *Parvati-veena* or *Saraswati-veena* after the goddesses Parvati and Saraswati who were depicted playing the instrument; made out of gourds, with a 19 to 24-fret bamboo fretboard attached and 4 main strings and 3 side strings.

The heroic god, Pabooji, is believed to have brought animals, starting with the camel, to Rajasthan. The Pabooji story is typically narrated by a husband-wife duo: the Bhopa (husband) plays the *ravanbatha* and dances, while the Bhopi (wife) holds a candlestick, and the tale unfolds through exchanges between the two. The Pabooji narrative's song and accompaniment are considerably more musical in nature than the Dev Narayan's, and it is followed by the enthusiastic singing of additional folk songs. Reflective of military social order and ideals, the Pabooji epic has broad appeal beyond mere entertainment, since Pabooji is the guardian deity of animals. The supplementary folk songs further elicit populist support.

Through this reincarnation of heroes and gods in their performances, the Bhopa have fulfilled the role of priests. They therefore prospered under the hospitable patronage of Rajasthani nobles, who had high regard for warrior beliefs and world order. Indian independence in 1947 and the ensuing reformation of the feudal social

structure, however, dissolved the old nobility and its values and patronage. Today, the Rajput continue their grim rule over villages, but their status is a mere formality as merchant-class leaders rise in cities. It is probably only a matter of time before performance arts, such as these epic narrations, which once served an important social and psychological function, atrophy and exist in name only.

The notable folk musicians of the Thar Desert are the Langa and Manganiyar. Although they are active around different regions, they have similar repertoires. The Langa, based in the main desert city of Jodhpur, are Muslim musicians who usually live in town or on the outskirts in Langa-only communities, or occasionally in exclusively Langa villages. The Langa maintain cooperative communities by having parties of two or three performers take turns traveling while the community as a whole raises camels. The main Langa instruments are the *sindhi-sarangi* and *gujaratan-sarangi*, as well as wind instruments.

The Manganiyar are also Muslim musicians but are centered around the

provincial castle town of Jaisalmer on the western edge of Rajasthan. They live, usually as a two or three-family group, within Hindu villages on small tracts of land granted them by the *thakūr*, or village leader. They serve the *thakūr*, but derive their principal income through itinerant work. The Manganiyar normally travel in small troupes of about three or four players, although some go out solo with a *kamayacha*—the Manganiyar's favorite bowed string instrument—strapped on the musician's back.

Some say that the etymology of "Manganiyar" is "beggar," and the Manganiyar are, in fact, perceived as lower caste than the Langa. Still, the Manganiyar's accompanied narrative singing of "Moomal" in long epic poem form (track 17) differs from the Langa's simple folk song version and delivers a strong sense of traditional artistry.

In addition to these traveling musicians, the Jodhpur area also has village musicians, called *Dholi*. These Hindu musicians also live on land received from the village *thakūr*, but they serve only an upper-caste clientele. Professional musicians who

play the large drum, *ḍhol*, the *Dholi* perform in full force, *en famille*, upon a request from the *thakūr*; at such Rajput formal occasions as weddings, funerals, coming-of-age and naming ceremonies, and receptions for guests, the *Dholi* perform a truly broad repertoire ranging from devotional songs to folk music.

To the Desert: Burning Sand, Festivals, and Music

The acoustically dead desert serves as an ideal recording studio, probably because the sand absorbs sound. Still, our recording of two Langa groups in Jodhpur took place in the middle of the night to avoid city noises. Unfortunately, we had to rely only on a flashlight, and the musicians' faces and figures were invisible in the pitch dark. Placement of the *ḍholak* (drum) presented the most trouble for single-microphone recording, and balancing the loud percussion against delicate melodic instruments such as the *sarangi* proved difficult. When the *ḍholak* was moved farther away, however, the musical ensemble became disjointed, for coordination between rhythm and

melody in this type of music involves not just the auditory aspect but the visual as well. Thus, this recording literally ended in darkness when the batteries ran out.

Due to the cancellation of the once-weekly train to Jaisalmer, I hastily boarded a bus to continue my desert crossing. It turned out to be a thoughtless plan, because the heat and swinging movement left me utterly groggy by the time I arrived at my destination. Jaisalmer castle juttied up on the 360-degree desert horizon, the final stronghold against Islamic and foreign rule. There were few people in town when I arrived since it was two days before the Hindu New Year and many people had returned to their hometowns for the holiday. I then traveled to Khuri—a small village buried in the sand about 40 kilometers south of Jaisalmer—with a chance acquaintance, Bhagvan Shingh, a young man also returning home. I thus had the good fortune to be able to see and hear New Year's observances. The return of the Manganiyar to the village offered splendid recording

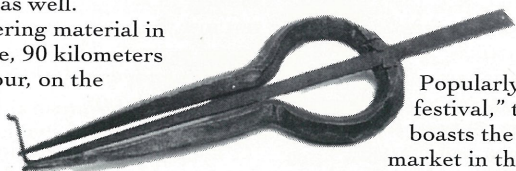
opportunities as well.

After gathering material in Samrau village, 90 kilometers west of Jodhpur, on the life of Dholi Ganesh Ram, I moved on to Pushkar via Ajmer. For four days leading up to the full moon in the Hindu calendar month of bathing, the biggest festival in Rajasthan is celebrated in the Pushkar Lake region. People with their camels flock to this lake, which is believed to have originated from a drop of holy water bearing eternal youth and life, in order to bathe and pray for happiness in the next life.

The Selections

1. Drawing Water, Camel's Cry, Festival Day Pilgrimage Song: These sounds represent the living, aural culture of the Thar Desert.

Drawing Water: A hard reality lies behind what at first seems like a sleepy desert setting: whether long ago or today, a secure water source is the fundamental factor that controls



*Morchang
(jew's harp)*

Popularly called a "camel festival," this event also boasts the largest camel market in the region. On this occasion, over 200,000 people crowded in front of the town gates in the normally quiet villages, gnawing on sweet sugar cane amid the dust and congestion and enjoying puppet theater, music, dance, and side shows. I recorded many Bhopa here, but the less-than-favorable recording environment and time constraints made careful data collection impossible.

the desert. In the villages scattered across the Thar Desert, the power of the governing *thakūr* and Rajput depends on access to the best water sources. Even where the *thakūr* resides in a fortress structure with gun ports, the Rajput's water supply guarantees their rule. The sounds here were recorded at a 90 meter-deep well. A leather bag attached to

the end of a long rope is thrown into the well and is drawn up by a camel. The man's voice signals the camel to stop; it is said that the intonation of these cries is transmitted orally from generation to generation. This well, owned by the village leader, is used exclusively by the Rajput class. The villagers' earthen well is only 30 meters deep and yields muddy water. It was unbearably sad to witness the villagers accepting this as just another condition of the social order.

Village near Jodhpur, 11/12/80

Camel's Cry: The camel, the "boat of the desert," is an absolute necessity for survival on this ocean of sand. Even a four-wheel drive vehicle is completely useless for transporting people and goods in the desert sand.

Pushkar camel market, 11/16/80

Festival Day Pilgrimage Song: The dead-as-dust desert bursts forth in a frenzy on festival days as the people, ritually cleansed of their sins, exuberantly celebrate their liberation. A group of colorfully-clad women, singing pilgrimage songs, converge from the roads leading into the dusty,

clamorous city. The women enter the temple and continue to sing devotional songs well into the late night.

Pushkar, 11/18/80

2. NARA: This devotional song is sung by Karna Bhil, a leader of thieves famed throughout the Thar Desert. According to heroic narratives sung by the Manganiyar and others, Karna Bhil enjoyed immense populist support. His individualistic method of singing while playing a handmade *nay* (vertical flute of Arab origin) was his pride. He was murdered in a revenge killing.

*Performer: Karna Bhil
Jaisalmer, 11/6/80*

3. GORBANDH (MY CAMEL'S NECK BAND): This folk song is widely sung by desert musicians—including the Langa, Manganiyar, Bhopa, and Dholi—with some textual differences. This song is especially loved by the people whose daily existence and culture depend on camels.

*My adorable camel's neck ornament,
How it sparkles,*

*what well-wrought designs;
The more I look,
the more attractive it becomes.
How elegant it appears around my
camel's neck.*

4. CHARKA (SPINNING WHEEL):
This type of "absent husband/lover
song," about a husband traveling
away for work, reflects the
harshness of desert life and is very
common.

*A husband left only channa [chick peas]
and a fake rupee
For his wife in the village —
Left things for the wife who was
left at home.
Now is the best time to see the
husband's sister-in-law:
The wife spins wool on a spinning wheel
To buy a wedding dress for her sister.*

5. Morchang (Jew's Harp) and Dholak
(Drum) Performance: The jew's
harp—which is commonly made
from bamboo, wood, or metal—
exists in every region of the world.
The one played here is iron,
yet the player easily produces an
extremely full-bodied sound,
evidence of very rugged teeth.

6. MÖRBHAI: This is a solo *algoja*
(6-holed double pipe instrument)
version of a widely-known folk
song, in which the singer confides
to a visitor about poor desert life.
Mörbbhai is a woman's name.

*As a bride I came from nature-rich
southern Rajasthan;
Here there is only sand, not even hair oil.
Please convey to my worried parents
back home that
I live in a nature-rich land.*

7. WARSHAWA (RAINY SEASON):
Another song (see track 4) about a
husband traveling away for work.

*A black rain cloud visible far in the
desert distance;
If it rains, my beloved will surely come
home to me.*

Langa Performers, tracks 3-7
(*denotes soloists):

Sindhi-sarangi: Kamyu Khan
Gujaratan-sarangi: Hamra Khan
Algoja: Kamyu Khan*
Morchang: Kamyu Khan*
Harmonium: Balu Khan
Dholak: Lal Mahmmad*
Vocal: Noor Khan
Jodhpur, 11/4/80

8. *Ghoomar:* For festivities and
celebrations, women perform
freely-choreographed dances with
graceful gestures and expressions
representing their daily lives. This
regional dance is an instrumental
version of a common folk song,
featuring *murla* (the snake
charmer's *poongi*) and the
kamayacha (bowed instrument
favored by the Manganiyar).

9. *Panibāri:* Instrumental version of a
song about the gracefulness of
women carrying water from the
well in earthenware vessels
balanced on their heads, per-
formed on *sanai* (double reed) and
kamayacha.

10. HICHIKI (HICCUPS): Another
song recalling a husband traveling
away for work.

*When my husband thinks of me, I
hiccup;
When my beloved calls me, I hiccup.
The beautiful, white sand village
Baunau on a high place,
Is my husband still asleep?
I'll walk like a doll*

*To the market where I'll meet
neighbors...*

Manganiyar performers,
tracks 8-10, from Kaamira village:
Sanai and *murla:* Penpen Khan
Kamayacha and vocal: Sakhal Khan
Jaisalmer, 11/7/80

11. *Harjas* (Villagers' Prayer Song):
For festivals and full moons,
prayers are sung through the night
in villages. This song prays to
Krishna and other gods for divine
protection from misfortune and to
be blessed by nature. Same as
bhajan (track 19).

Tanboora and vocal: Nanga Ram
Gabra and vocal: Hira Ram
Manjeera and vocal: Nanga Ram

12. MÖRBHAI: (See track 6.) *Mörbbhai*
is a woman's name.

13. ARANI: Beautiful flowers bloom
on the *arani* tree. The bride rides a
camel to her groom's village and
asks the camel to not eat the *arani*
tree in her hometown when it
returns there alone.

14. Proclamation for the Village
Leader: This laudatory narrative about the village ruler (*tbakūr*) and his relatives relates their history and achievements dating back to their ancestral gods.

15. MEHNDI: A *kamayacha* instrumental version of a widely sung folk song. At festival time, women draw variegated good luck designs (*mehndī*) on the palms of their hands. They use these *mehndī* to think of their husbands traveling away for work and to pray for their quick return.

16. OHMPOORI: Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Uttar Pradesh are known as regions of thieves. Ohmpoori was a notorious and popular thief, reputedly from the Brahman class. He was killed 35 years ago by the authorities.

17. MOOMAL: The protagonist of the famous tragic love story, "Moomal and Mahendra," is said to have been a princess living in Ludarwa, near Jaisalmer, who fell in love with king Mahendra of the Sind

Region (presently in Pakistan). This traditional tale, found throughout the Thar Desert, varies considerably depending on the specific region.

*Her beautiful glossy hair glistens
in the light —
My beloved Moomal,
come with me to my home;
Your shapely head, like a coconut,
Long black tresses as graceful as a
black cobra,
Fine, blade-like nose,
and eyes that reflect red sunlight,
Your teeth lovely like
pomegranate seeds....*

Manganiyar performers
tracks 12-17
Kamayacha and vocal:
Ramjan Ham Khan
Harmonium: Rune Khan
Dholak: Khalim Khan
Khuri Village, 11/8/80

18. Narrative with *Dhol*: Song and narration praising the god, Jogmaya.

Dhol: Balu Ram
Vocal: Kanma Ram, Sayar Ram,
Ganga Ram

19. *Bhajan* (Villagers' Devotional Song for Ganesh)
(see track 11).

Harmonium: Hira Ram

Tracks 18-19: Samrau Village, 11/12/80

20. HANUMANJI: Narrative song about the monkey god Hanuman, from the *Ramayana*.

Performer: Bhopa
Ravanbatha: unknown
Pushkar, 11/18/80



Credits:

Original Japanese Version

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Director: Masaya Murakami

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lecturer in Cultural Geography at Gakushuin University. He is currently a Visiting Professor of Musicology, Takasaki Art Center College.

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Mark Greenberg teaches Humanities and Cultural Studies at Goddard College and is President of Upstreet Productions, specializing in radio, video, and audio projects involving traditional folk music and oral history. He was the text editor and a writer for *The JVC-Smithsonian/Folkways Video Anthologies of Music and Dance of The Americas, Europe, and Africa* (available from Multicultural Media).

Editor & Translator's Note

These notes have been translated, for the first time, from the original Japanese and edited as judiciously as possible for an English-speaking audience. In translating and editing these notes, we have attempted to preserve the authors' original tone, as well as the essential information. Some references aimed at a Japanese audience have been eliminated but little else. The fieldworkers who recorded these selections represent a variety of disciplines and approaches, and this is reflected in the notes. Some, for example, are more musicologically detailed, while others present the point-of-view of an enthusiastic traveler learning about new cultures and peoples.

Translating always presents challenges, and these are amplified when the material being translated itself contains many terms from yet another language. Often, the Japanese fieldworker attempted to preserve original terms, such as the names of people and musical instruments, through direct transliteration into Japanese. Since transliteration involves capturing one language's

sounds in another's alphabet, it is subject to unavoidable inaccuracies. These are compounded when a second transliteration—as here, from Japanese to English—occurs. Some terms can be checked by using recognized authorities and references, and we have done this wherever possible by following spellings used in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (1980 edition) and the *New Harvard Dictionary of Music* (1986 edition). We also appreciate the assistance of Mr. Yuji Ichihashi, at the Victor Company of Japan, and the original writers in reviewing our work and making suggestions.

Some spellings, however, have remained problematic, especially the names of people and some places. In those cases we have followed standard Japanese-English transliteration practice and have attempted to be as consistent as possible. We have also followed Western practice, rather than Japanese, by placing surnames second.

Non-English terms are in italics.

— MG and TN