
KINGS OF KARAKORAM

In praise of Karakoram mules, jerry cans and helicopters

HARISH KAPADIA

Smokin' my pipe on the mountings, sniffin' the mornin's cool,
I walk in my old brown gaiters along o' my old brown mule.

Rudyard Kipling
(*Screw-guns*)

I could not believe my eyes as I looked at the Shyok river. It's name literally meant *Shi*-death, *yok*-river, river of death. I opened my eyes wider but still could not get the entire expanse of this great river in my vision. I was looking down to the river from the Shyok village and we were about to start with a large contingent of mules on the winter trade route to Karakoram Pass. We had to cross this river about 27 times as per *Routes in Western Himalaya Kashmir & c.* (by Kenneth Mason). 'How on earth are we going to do it?' I asked myself. They assured me that as we went upstream, after three or four days, the water level would be lower.

I mounted the mule and followed the *Lamberdar*, (headman) of the village who was accompanying us. Standing on banks of the Shyok, which we had to cross, I felt hesitant and full of doubt. The *Lamberdar*, a wise man, assured me, 'this horse is named Raja (King) and he is strong, just stay on him and he will take you everywhere. Do not worry. He is the Raja of Karakoram'. Raja looked at deep and fast flowing vast expanse of water and then effortlessly stepped in. As water got deeper and deeper I held onto the hair on Raja's neck and fastened myself firmly in the saddle. Water rose almost up to my knees but not once did Raja stumble as he took me across. I had begun this great Karakoram journey.

Photos 34, 39 to 44

Mules have been the backbone of trade and exploration for centuries now as without them nothing can move in the Karakoram or Central Asian areas. Trade along the Silk Route was possible only because of sturdy mules. In fact, initially several mules were injured or died because of the rough rocky terrain here. With discovery of the metal horseshoe, which is painlessly fitted to hooves of mules, the wear and tear has reduced considerably and mules can travel long distances. This simple gadget led to much exploration, trade and spread of knowledge. No wonder a horseshoe is considered a lucky omen. Today the threshold of many an Indian house has a horse shoe hanging for good luck on the top of the door.

Slowly, I settled down to the routines of the caravan. In fact all stages on the route were fixed for areas where mules could have enough grass to eat and rest. The human capacity to travel was secondary to needs of the mules. Day after day, mules crossed the Shyok river to and fro effortlessly and true to the assurance of the *Lambardar*, as we went upstream the water level reduced. But whatever the currents, Raja would not stumble. The caravan routine, which has been the same for centuries, was simple, but methodical. In the morning, the muleteers would emerge from their igloo like white tents having had Tsampa and salty tea. Some of them would go to locate mules which had roamed all night, grazing. Sometimes, it took a long time to trace these mules. But once one or two of them had been found, they all returned very obediently, resigning to their fate of carrying loads for another day. Systematically, two persons help each other from either side to load these mules. The loads on both sides have to be equal. They do not mind a heavy load but a bulky load is generally resented. Some temperamental mules may resist their fate but once reined in, with a metal rope, which passes through between their mouth, they resign themselves to the task very quickly. Soon they are loaded and the caravan moves on. For such a large caravan, one muleteer rides in front and all other mules obediently follow. Initially, there is a mad rush to occupy places. There is jostling and hustling to be with their favourites and sometimes to be in front. The mad rush soon gives way to an orderly discipline and the mules fall in line. This middle period of the day is the best as they move fast, systematically and in a rhythm, still being fresh.

Riding on a mule is a great experience, particularly on a long journey. All early Karakoram explorers, traders and officials have always travelled on these sturdy mules. But to ride a mule for several days is an art too:



Article 16

(Harish Kapadia)

39. Jerrycan colony at Chhongtash camp. Note the army humour!



Article 16

(Harish Kapadia)

40. The historic Galwan valley, seen from Shyok valley.



Article 16

(Harish Kapadia)

41. Mules crossing the Shyok river.

“If you come to Asia you must ride”, Eric (Shipton) said.

I have gradually learnt that he is right. Along mountain paths, narrow and twisting, walking is pleasant; when endless miles of dull desert stretch round you, it is a wretched business. A good, sturdy pony will cover the distance comfortably and fast. But I never learnt to enjoy riding. Each new pony was an ordeal. They seemed to alternate between half-dying animals, moving at a reluctant crawl, and spirited ponies I could not control. No one agreed me and I began to suspect that it was not always the ponies which were at fault.

Diana Shipton in *The Antique Land*, p.19
(Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1950).

This piece was from those days of travel by Shipton and his wife Diana, when they rode mules across Karakoram Pass to Yarkand, where he was appointed Consulate General. It was considered necessary and respectable to ride a mule. The size of the mule and the quality of the saddle indicated the status of the officer.

Observing mules as part of a caravan is a great experience. As a river is approached they find the best route for themselves, they know their job and will always select the best point to cross. Even if you try, rather foolishly, to guide them to a different location, they look at you with disdain and go along the best course. As the caravan proceeds, they sometimes kick each other, sometimes kiss each other and they flirt, as some favourite mule comes near they rub against him. You have to be careful for your leg could be sandwiched between their love affairs. They push, jostle and finally sound a horn, a very peculiar mule sound. Each one of them have names, I am sure they have a love life, sometime they show anger by jerking their head so violently that you almost lose control of the reign. They have their moods. They fart, shit, piss, drink water on their way, they smell but they march on.

Another wonderful sight is that whenever there is a deep crossing, so as not to wet their shoes, muleteers with great agility jump on to a mule, over and above the load. Mules carry them across in great comfort and as they reach the other bank, muleteers jump back with same agility and walk. Sometimes when the river is in flood it may not be safe to jump on or ride a mule, but they get great support by holding on to the tail of a mule as they find a route and go across. As long as you don't let the tail go, the mule will take you across through

the most difficult and strong current pitted against his own strength, and if necessary swim across.

By mid afternoon, the caravan would take a brief rest, for which you could dismount only when the muleteer held the reins. Otherwise Raja would run away, and you would be running after him. During the second part of the journey, it would get hot and the Karakoram sun would beat down on the mules as well as the riders. Some muleteers, who were riding, literally slept on a mule, sometimes sitting and dozing off, sometimes lying back on the saddle, as if stretching themselves in a 5 star hotel. Soon one of them would start to sing and the typical nasal sound of a Ladakhi song would pick up the rhythm of the steps of the mule.

By late evening, our caravan approaches a campsite for the day, and by instinct Raja knows he will get rest, food and water. The speed increases suddenly and all of them are jostling to be there first. Once we reach the campsite the muleteers whistle and sing a tune, while unloading mules. They tell me it is to sooth the nerves of mules after a hard day's work. They pat them and remove loads systematically which are kept in a line together so that loading becomes easy next morning. The mules are checked and those, which require some attention such as replacement of a horseshoe, are kept aside. To do this, the front legs are first tied and the mule is pulled flat on the ground. Then the other legs are also tied to make him completely immobile. The defective horseshoe is removed and a brand new shiny one is nailed into its hoof, almost painlessly. The mule makes no sound, doesn't even look at it, almost as if welcoming the change. Once the procedure is over the legs are untied and mule gets up and runs to the grazing ground (which is generally near or above the camping place) to join others. The muleteers by this time have erected tents and a hot brew of Ladakhi tea is passed on to everyone. If a mule is sick, he is led back from the grazing ground, and to the camp, and a bottle of rum is literally thrust into his mouth and down loaded. They believe that this is a cure for any infection, or feeling of cold in the mule and gives him strength, after all isn't it true for us humans? I wonder whether this would make mule an alcoholic!.

Many of these mules have coloured beads, as ornaments around their necks. Tied to the beads is a small bell which keeps tingling, possibly to keep mule and the rider both awake. It is a great sight to see and hear an approaching caravan with tingling bells from afar with the dust that it brings in its wake. Mules have inspired many a poet and romantic who have written about the passing of a caravan.

Karavan guzar gaya, ghubar dekhte rahe

(The caravan (life) passed on and I
was left looking at the dust)

or to quote Kipling again:

The 'orse 'e knows above a bit, the bullock's but a fool,
The elephant's a gentleman, the battery-mule's a mule;

Rudyard Kipling (*Oonts*)

There is almost a parent-child relation between the muleteer and his mule. Of course, mules are his lifeline and an investment. Each mule may cost anything up to Rs. 50,000 depending on its size and breed.¹ It is expected that he will serve for at least 2 decades, bringing in enough revenue. The muleteers have to care for their mules sometimes giving an oil massage, feeding grains during winter months, to see that they are indoors when there is a heavy snowfall and cold, and arranging for almost 10 kg of grass per mule, per day. It is kind of a family affair and everyone in the family takes care of these animals. During summer months they are left to graze on the higher slopes for months together if they are not needed for work. The mules too on their part faithfully respond to the call of their owners. Whenever their name is shouted or a particular whistle calls, they look at their bosses and after an initial childlike resistance they submit to the wishes of their owners. The owners not only care for their wards, but love them too. They do not overload them or ride them downhill even when they are without load

1 Mule

Mule, the hybrid offspring of a male ass (jackass, or jack) and a female horse (mare). The less frequent cross between a female ass and a male horse results in a hinny, or hinney, which is smaller than a mule. Mules were beasts of burden in Asia Minor at least 3,000 years ago and are still used today in many parts of the world because of their ability to withstand hardships and perform work under conditions too severe for many other draft and pack animals. Mules are usually sterile.

The mule resembles the horse in height, uniformity of coat, and shape of neck and croup. It resembles the ass in its short, thick head, long ears, thin limbs, small hooves, and short mane. The coat is usually brown or bay. In size, mules range widely from about 12 to 17.5 hands (120 to 180 cm, or 50 to 70 inches) in height and from 275 to 700 kg (600 to 1,500 pounds) in weight. There is 'The British Mule Society' to take keen interest in its affairs!

(*Encyclopaedia Britannica*)

and a fat rider is given an inferior mule. It is common to see riding mules changed daily, so that mules are not tired and last long. Without a muleteer around, the minute a rider dismounts, the mules are likely to run away and when a mule is hungry, even a muleteer finds it difficult to control the flock and keep order. Near any major army camp generally there is a shelter where the mules are housed, rested for the night, and given a proper feed. In fact, the cavalry regiments of the old, nowadays converted into service regiments, have many mules. These sturdy army mules are used to carry weapons and dismantled artillery guns to remote locations. These army mules have specific regiments and persons assigned who care for them and are responsible for their well being. If a mule dies a premature death, a veterinary doctor is called to conduct the post mortem to understand the cause of death. Mules are part of war, travel, trade and exploration efforts and are not to be taken lightly.

Many of these mules, which are named by their owners, have names from Bollywood films. In these films heroes, heroines and villains have used horses and mules for various purposes. Often it is a brave horse that saves *izzat* (modesty) of a heroine and they are called by heroic names.² Sometimes names of historical warriors or names from Hindu epics are given. Whatever the name, ultimately the mule responds only to its owners and as a rider, even if you shout the name a hundred times, the mule will totally ignore you. And if you mix up a hundred mules with different owners, the mules and the owner would recognise each other, like a school teacher recognising his students. They seem to have a good deal of intelligence along with their stubbornness. On a long journey, a relationship, not necessarily friendly, develops between the rider and the mule :

When we rode Eric adopted a stout little black pony and I had a roan. At first I was rather pleased with my mount, he seemed willing but easily controlled. By the end of four weeks I had learnt heartily to loathe him. As usual it was probably my inability to handle a horse, but I think everyone found him lazy and morose. If he was behind his friend he would keep up a reasonable pace, but when alone he dragged and loitered and, without constant prodding, would come to a complete standstill. Only once during our trip did he gallop, and that was without my permission.

(Diana Shipton, *Ibid.* p. 154)

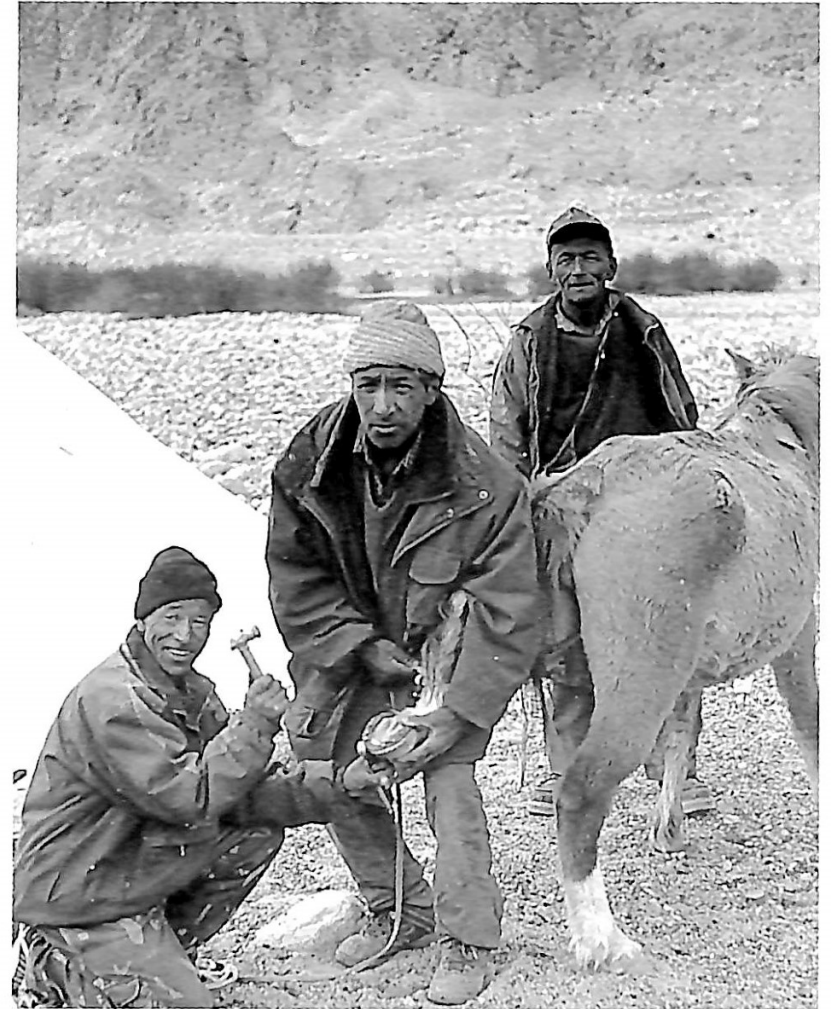
² One of the popular names used by many muleteers to name his ward, is 'Basanti' from the film *Sholay*.



Article 16

(Harish Kapadia)

42. Hiroshi Sakai crossing the turbulent Shyok river on a sturdy mule.



Article 16

(Huzefa Electricwala)

43. Changing of horse-shoe.



Article 16

(Harish Kapadia)

44. The 'jerrycan camp' at Murgo.

In the Karakoram I have experienced riding mules on several occasions. Once as I suffered a bout of malaria, the army sent a mule to carry me to their camp, but unfortunately, without a saddle. A sleeping bag was spread on a wooden frame, (which was used to tie loads) and as I mounted the wooden frame sharply bit into my buttocks. As the caravan started marching there was little that I could do but to suffer this. En route this mule would eat grass or graze, as he liked. No amount of pulling reigns, kicking in the stomach or pushing him would be of any avail. The grazing halts were so many and each so long that we felt we should actually be charging the muleteers for grazing these mules while riding. Soon we were at the camp and the soldiers were waiting to receive us, particularly the doctor to look after my malaria-ridden body. As I dismounted, my legs were so stiff that I remained standing on ground, as if I was still riding a mule, with my legs spread and my knees bent. They invited me to be seated on a chair about 50 m away. All I could do was request them to bring a stool, put it between my legs, and I sat down on it like on a mule.

As we approached camp at Chhongtash, we suddenly heard an aeroplane approaching. It circled over us and went back and returned towards us. Raja knew exactly what this meant and started running towards the left, out of the flat *maidan* that we were riding on, putting me in a deep pain with my sore buttocks. The aeroplane came back a second time, very low and there was an airdrop and parachutes opened. When the plane had come the first time around, it was a warning for us to clear the ground, which Raja certainly knew. Once the airdrop was complete Raja cooled down, even though some of the parachutes had not opened and the loads dropped like a bomb.

Once on my earlier expedition we had to wait for several days for mules to appear and were about to cancel the expedition, for without their support we could not proceed. On the fourth day in the morning as a line of mules appeared heading towards us, my friend Muslim Contractor ran and literally kissed their foreheads in great delight. As we crossed the treacherous Saser la, we could see that some of the mules had legs bleeding and were sometimes falling, but not giving up. They climbed the final slope of hard snow to Saser la in style. On one expedition, mules climbed up quite high on the Chong Kundan glacier moraine and even jumped across small crevasses. The mules had helped us to set up a high base camp and that was one of the reasons why we succeeded well. These kings hold many keys in their hands.

The mules seem to have their territories marked too. The Karakoram mules are small, but sturdy, as they walk on the edge of a trail, from

where you would be terrified to look down. But they walk on, without a care. Stronger and bigger mules from the plains were introduced in the same area, but they did not last. Some of them died of heart attacks and some of them slipped to their deaths from the edges of the Karakoram trails. In fact most of the time an invading army or a caravan had to employ almost double the number of mules than required to carry loads. It was calculated that many of the mules would die during the journey. As per the tradition for the long and important caravans, almost half the numbers of mules were expected to be sacrificed en route, before the caravan reached its destination.

Our ponies began to weaken. The day after we had crossed the Saser many of them were limping and several kept collapsing sadly and hopelessly. The men showed little sympathy and their only treatment was kicks and blows. If the animal collapsed completely, they were abandoned. Our attempt to revive a dying pony was regarded quite eccentric and in any case proved useless. I know nothing about care of horses, but the Turki methods did seem to me unnecessarily harsh and senseless. Long after the march was ended the animals were kept standing without food and water. They were either tied together in pairs, head to tail, or, as I noticed later in Sinkiang, to a tree or a post with their heads held tight and high. To any protests the men replied that these methods prevented illness and nothing would change their views.

(Diana Shipton, *Ibid.* p. 31)

On several trails, particularly in the Garhwal Himalaya, mules have carried pilgrims on their backs for journey to remote shrines like Badrinath and Kedarnath. The old, aging and unfit pilgrims have made it to these shrines only because of riding on the mules. One wonders whether any of the *punya* (blessings) these pilgrims received had been passed on to the mules? Perhaps by various acts of such piety, a berth in heaven is assured for the mule!

Many times mules like their human counterpart do not behave themselves. After cajoling, shouting abuses, pushing, pulling nothing works then the muleteer slams a stick on his back and as if an electric current has hit him, a mule starts walking. Of course, some of them may kick you with his hind leg, which can even prove fatal. After all, it is this stubbornness that has led to the saying that someone is 'as stubborn as a mule'. The mule has the strength of his father, the horse, and is as obstinate as his mother, the donkey.

The pedigree and stubbornness of mules has been the butt of ridicule, especially in politics. 'The mules of politics: without pride of ancestry, or hope of posterity'³. Benjamin Disraeli attacked the British Conservative party as; 'It seems to me a barren thing this Conservatism—an unhappy cross-breed, the mule of politics that engenders nothing.'⁴ Even religion has not spared the mules and it warns that 'Be ye not like to horse and mule, which have no understanding: whose mouths must be held with bit and bridle, lest they fall upon thee.'⁵

Riding on Raja, I finally began approaching Depsang la, a vast open plateau on which traditionally no routes were marked. In fact, in the earlier days of caravanning, the route here was marked by bones of dead mules, giving it the nickname, 'The Skeleton Trail'. Even today, you see remains of several dead mules leading up to the Karakoram Pass. The mules have made great sacrifices for the defence of this area as they made for trade in the past. On one expedition, one of the mules had died on a moraine of a glacier. As our caravan passed near it I could literally hear a pale silence falling on the mules. Their mood had changed as if they knew that one amongst them was dead and lying near by.

Jerry cans

On Depsang la, nowadays, the bones are replaced by jerry cans as markers, carried by the mules till here. These jerry cans are the other kings of Karakoram, without which an army cannot survive. These are drums, which hold about 20 litres of liquid, generally kerosene or petrol, and have a particular design and a firm locking system. They are named after 'Jerrys', a nickname for the German soldiers, given by the Allied soldiers. This is an original German design. They are sturdy and they last for long, until they literally break. Jerry cans, once emptied of liquid, kerosene or petrol, are used in several ways by the army. One can make beds out of it; place 6 or 8 jerry cans, tie them and spread a wooden sheet and sleeping bag over it, and bed is ready. Of course, as you turn at night, the jerry cans would rattle and make their presence known.

Here we had the first experience of sleeping in bunkers, on beds made of jerry cans. These crackled merrily every time you turned and dug you playfully in your back, sides and hips and other bony places. They were good reminders

3 *Memories and Reflections*, by John O' Connor Power.

4 *Coningsby*, by Benjamin Disraeli.

5 *The Book of Common Prayer*.

that oil is paramount in all our lives today. The bunkers themselves were also made of jerry cans and sandbags and were as much underground as above, merging brownly into the dusty landscape. This was the typical accommodation for army units in this area and we gradually got used to it – partly, anyway.

Aamir Ali

(‘Ladakh, 1979’, HJ Vol. 37, p.116)

I have seen boats made out of jerry cans; 6 or 8 of them tied across and 2 cans tied under, floating inside water. They float well and are comfortable to sit and row. Walls of jerry cans guard against the strong Karakoram winds at most camps; bunkers and guard posts are made of them. In some of the army camps temples are made of jerry can walls, covered by white parachute cloth. There are movie theatres, hospitals and a variety of other uses. Sometimes these jerry cans burst on an airdrop causing its contents to spill over, sometimes they are cut into half and each of the half opens to make a wash basin or a pot in which anything can be stored. And at times these half jerry cans are used as a shit pot and once full, they are covered with the other half, and unfortunately, dropped into a crevasse where they would last for a long time.

Helicopters

Mules carry these jerry cans or helicopters bring them in. Helicopters are the backbone of troops staying in the remote and high areas and they would certainly call them kings. On the high and long Siachen glacier some officers report to work flying in by the smaller versions. The bigger helicopters, MI17, are nicknamed by the army as *Devilal*, after the burly strong politician of India and smaller versions are called *Chidiya* (sparrow). The pilots who fly them, always in twos here, are experts at their craft and have established height records, by flying to high camps, avoiding enemy fire. It requires courage to pick up a sick soldier from a high camp in winter, with rotors of the helicopter running and enemy firing at you. These helicopters mean life and death for the soldiers serving at this height, for if someone is injured or, suffers from high altitude oedema, the only way he would survive is if the helicopters carries him quickly to a well-equipped hospital lower down. The helis carry mail, which brings lots of pleasure, food and fresh vegetables. The sight of these flying machines brings delights to the soldiers serving on this high glacier. Sadly they also carry the dead bodies of soldiers from remote areas, with legs neatly folded to fit within the width of the helicopter.

Once I had to travel on floor of the helicopter, after my rescue from the Nanda Devi Sanctuary. I was immobile due to injuries. The view from the floor of the helicopter was as wonderful as a view from the top. As far as views are concerned, helis give you a quick and instant *nirvana*, flying across valleys and taking you to the summits. And it can prevent a climber reaching that ultimate stage by rescuing him. In a heroic effort, a helicopter rescued Stephen Venables from the jaws of death from Panch Chuli peak. He lay immobile and there was no way we could have saved him easily. Two brave pilots did that job.

The helicopter flew in that afternoon. We were at 5600 m, which is pretty damn close to the flying ceiling for Alouettes. There was no winch, presumably to save weight, and so the pilots had to attempt a half landing. They hovered twenty feet from us and motioned their requirements. It was like trying to communicate with gods in a maelstrom. Dick lay on the collapsed tents to stop them blowing away. I clutched at Venables to stop him tobogganing down the cwm in his sleeping bag. Now that would have been embarrassing. The chopper put one skid down on the outside edge of the tent platform, the rotor tops inches from the snow, and not much more above our heads. One mistake from the pilots, and Venables and I would be salamied. A door opened, the co-pilot motioned, I pushed and Venables pulled, he landed his torso on the floor behind the pilots. The aircraft wandered slightly, the co-pilot gestured violently. In desperation Venables put his broken ankle on the skid and pushed off on it, I heaved the other leg. With a howl of pain he was in. I collapsed exhausted. The chopper wobbled uncertainly and moved off. The leg withdrew, the perspex door shut. The pilots waved and turned for home.⁶

Between three of them, mules, jerry cans and helicopters, they rule the Karakoram trails. Without these *rajas* (kings) no *praja* (subjects) can survive this harsh environment. But the supreme king amongst them, unquestionably, is the mule. They don't tell, they don't swell, they don't yell, – these Kings of Karakoram do it damn well.

SUMMARY

In praise of Karakoram mules, jerry cans and helicopters.

6 From the *Himalayan Journal*, Vol. 49, 'Rajrambha and Panch Chuli V', by Victor Saunders.