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***Catalogue of Lepcha Manuscripts in the van Manen Collection* by Heleen Plaisier. Kern Institute Miscellanea 11. Leiden: Kern Institute 2003. ISBN: 90-9017656-X, paperback, 72 facsimiles, price: €30, 260 pp.**

Reviewed by Mark Turin, Ithaca

This catalogue offers a detailed description of the 182 Lepcha manuscripts in the van Manen Collection, presently kept in the library of the Kern Institute of Leiden University. Johan van Manen (1877-1943), a now largely forgotten Dutch scholar, was involved in scientific exploration throughout his professional life and collected a wealth of material pertaining to Tibetology and Oriental Studies. For 16 years he served as General Secretary of the (later Royal) Asiatic Society of Bengal, and has been referred to as the “founder of Tibetology in the Netherlands” by Professor Yang Enhong (*IIAS Newsletter*, No. 19). This collection of manuscripts written in the Lepcha language is by far the largest of its kind in the world. By identifying these manuscripts, and describing their contents and external features, this catalogue renders a unique collection accessible to the wider public.

Lepcha is an endangered language of the Tibeto-Burman language family, and is spoken by upwards of 50,000 people in Sikkim and the Darjeeling district of West Bengal in India, the Ilam district of Nepal and in

south-western Bhutan. Unlike most other tribal languages spoken in the Himalayas, the Lepcha people have their own indigenous script. The Lepcha people call themselves *Róng* or *Róngkup*, ‘children of the *Róng*’, or *Mútuncí Róngkup Rumkup*, ‘children of the *Róng* and of God’, in full, and they refer to their language as *Róng-ríng*.

According to Lepcha tradition, the script was invented by the Lepcha scholar Thikúng Men Salóng, believed to be a contemporary of the patron saint of Sikkim, Lama Lhatsün Chenpo (also known as Lhatsün Namkha Jimi, 1597-1654). The codification of the written language was probably motivated by the religious activities of Buddhist missionaries. The Lepcha literary tradition can be dated back to the eighteenth century, when the Lepcha script was devised during the reign of the third chögel of Sikkim, Châdo 'Namgä' (1700-1716).

The first twenty pages of the catalogue focus on fonts, Lepcha orthography and the Lepcha alphabet, revealing the academic background of the author, Heleen Plaisier, who has been investigating the language and culture of the Lepchas since 1994. The first two chapters provide a particularly useful and level-headed overview of the competing orthographic conventions and linguistic theories held by the various scholars who have studied Lepcha, both indigenous and foreign.

The description of the catalogue itself opens with a brief introduction to the history of Lepcha literature and an overview of the contents of the different texts in the collection, followed by a commentary on the physical features of the manuscripts and related items in the van Manen Collection. These helpful schematic sketches are all that exist for the majority of the texts in the collection, thus providing an invaluable point of departure for further scholarship. Plaisier offers meticulous descriptions of the structural features of manuscripts, including helpful information on their shape and form, remarks on the paper and ink used, the identification of scribes and the date of transcription, the physical condition of the manuscript and supplementary data on illustrations and labels. In the final portion of the book, comprised of five appendices, the author provides the reader with a comprehensive list of additional works in Lepcha in the London, Vienna and Gangtok collections.

Plaisier makes an important point regarding the content of the textual corpus of the collection, demonstrating how the “Tibetan influence on Lepcha literature has been much overemphasized”:

Lepcha literature has hardly been studied at all, yet it is generally believed that an indigenous Lepcha literature does not exist. This view is based on the fact that many written Lepcha texts are translations, or rather adaptations, of Tibetan Buddhist works. (2003: 37).

Plaisier’s point is welcome: Himalayan ethnic groups and their languages and cultures are all too often portrayed as being deviant or

archaic branches of one of the “great” traditions to the north and south, and not as viable cultural entities in their own right. Particularly colourful and intriguing Lepcha tales documented in the manuscripts include “The Legend of the Ants” (Number 15), a popular story about the interactions of a holy man and an insect, and “The Legendary Origin of Tobacco” (Number 16) which deals with the demonic origin of tobacco and the negative consequences which follow from its use and abuse.

In conclusion, the *Catalogue of Lepcha Manuscripts* is both beautifully produced and affordable, a combination sadly uncommon in academic publications. The author must also be commended for the manner in which she effortlessly incorporates the Lepcha script alongside her chosen transliteration system, with the result that each salient Lepcha name or term is provided in a graceful Lepcha font. This superb catalogue can be ordered online from IndexBooks: [www.indexbooks.net](http://www.indexbooks.net).

***Gespräche mit einem Brahmanen im Kumaon-Himālaya: Diskursanalytische Transkripte und annotierender ethnographischer Kommentar* by Ulrich Oberdiek. Ethnologie 3. Münster, etc.: Lit. Verlag 2002.**

Reviewed by Claus Peter Zoller, Heidelberg

The book is a collection of transcripts of interviews that the author recorded with a brahmin from the Kumaon-Himālayas. The subjects discussed by the two neither focus on Kumaon nor do they reveal new, hitherto unknown information about India. They do present a fairly comprehensive overview of the “typical worldview” of an educated male member of the Indian middle class. Those who have spent some time in India will surely have frequent “flashbacks” when reading through topics such like the caste system, mythology, national characters, arts, etc.

The theoretical approach – not to deliver readymade products of field research but instead rather seeking to illustrate and comment on the encounter between the researcher and his partner, and on the inequalities and conflicts such encounters frequently entail – is in line with current ethnographic practice. Even though it was certainly helpful to move away from an all – too – complacent attitude of “the people of... say, they