This paper presents some methodological reflections concerning the contribution of cultural anthropology and linguistics to the documentation and analysis of oral traditions. These methodological reflections were fundamental to the research into oral traditions in the Tibetan-speaking areas of Northwestern India as carried out mainly by Veronika Hein (see following paper) and to a small degree by myself (cf. Jahoda in press and forthcoming). This is preceded by a short discussion of August Hermann Francke’s and Giuseppe Tucci’s pioneering research in Spiti and upper Kinnaur in the first half of the 20th century and their respective methodologies.

Oral traditions in Spiti and upper Kinnaur are passed on mainly in Tibetan language, i.e. in the local Tibetan dialect of the area. These oral traditions include songs, stories, epics, tales, founding legends and other kinds of oral texts of different length as well as statements by religious persons or lay people, also trance-mediums, that contain social, religious, political, historical, etc. knowledge or transport a certain Weltbild and appear mainly in contexts defined by special religious, social or other criteria.

Due to the cultural, religious and ethnic diversity characteristic of Spiti and upper Kinnaur both in the past and present, the oral traditions also feature non-Tibetan as well as non-Buddhist influences. It has, of course, been one of the goals of the Oral Traditions project and the co-operation with the Interdisciplinary Research Unit to recognise and identify these influences or at least to establish criteria.

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1 Hein conducted her research as member of the FWF research project “Documentation of oral traditions in Spiti and upper Kinnaur, Himachal Pradesh, India” (together with D. Schüller, director, and C. Huber), Phonogrammarchiv, Austrian Academy of Sciences. This project was affiliated with the FWF Interdisciplinary Research Unit “Cultural history of the Western Himalaya”, University of Vienna, of which the author is a member.
that may lead to their identification. Field research in recent years has proved that, contrary to the views held by Francke and Tucci, it is difficult to define and sometimes impossible to identify these elements or relate them with any certainty to cultural or religious traditions or languages known from other regions or earlier periods, e.g. Bon, Zhang zhung, etc.

How can we describe Francke’s and Tucci’s methodologies and research concepts regarding the oral traditions of these areas?

Francke’s occupation with songs etc. was not founded on an interest in oral tradition per se but was related to his efforts to identify the pre-Buddhist religion of Tibet, in his earlier articles often equated with a form of Bon religion which, in a later major publication (Francke 1923) he termed gling chos (after Ge sar of Gling). In his view, in Western Tibet and Ladakh, original elements and traces of this pre-Buddhist religion could still be found mainly in the folklore i.e. the Ge sar epic, gling glu (songs related with figures of the Ge sar epic) and wedding songs. A further category were songs performed during harvest festivals. Therefore, nearly all the festivals of the ‘Old Tibetan religion’, another designation he used, were in his view associated with the Ge sar epic.

His research method regarding these songs was based on versions in Tibetan script written down for him by local scribes. Therefore, information regarding the ethnic or linguistic affiliation of the singers is often missing in his publications, as is a description of the festivals, the social context, etc. This was also the case with the songs of the Shar rgan festival in Pooh in upper Kinnaur, which in his view were of great importance “with regard to the study of the pre-Buddhist religion of Kanawar as well as of Tibet in general” (Francke 1914: 21).

Tucci’s expedition to Spiti and upper Kinnaur in 1933 set out “to gather together manuscript, artistic and epigraphic material” (Tucci and Ghersi 1996: ix) in order “to complete and verify the conclusions reached by Francke” (ibid.: x) concerning the ancient Buddhist culture of the area. During his short stays in villages, he also collected “the manuscript renderings” of songs (e.g. praises to local gods) and hymns. These songs and hymns, as well as cults preserved as part of annual festivals, or thanksgiving ceremonies for the birth of the first-born son were identified by him as remains of ancient beliefs “which