

Information about the materials on display

1. This sketch was made by Catherine Frere, daughter of the British High Commissioner Sir Henry Bartle Frere. It depicts the Zanzibari expeditions members, including women, recruited by British explorer Henry Morton Stanley. While the Zanzibari women are identified in Stanley's book only by their husbands' names, their own names were recorded in this sketch. It was made when the expedition party visited the government house at Cape Town in November 1877, having crossed Africa from east to west during a journey lasting a thousand days.
- 2.-5. In her fieldwork on Rapa Nui (Easter Island) in 1914-15, Quaker ethnologist Katherine Routledge relied heavily on Juan Tepano, a respected figure on the island who had previously served in the Chilean military. While he is not mentioned by name in the paper which she read to the RGS in 1917 (a fate, which he shares with Katherine as her paper was published under the name of her husband, Scoresby), it is clear that Tepano was her most important informant. With his mother Victoria Veriamu (probably the oldest woman living on the island at the time), he provided valuable information about cultural traditions on the island. Although she may not have considered Tepano a social or intellectual equal, he was credited by her with primary responsibility for the success of the expedition.
- 6.-9. The ambivalence of the British over recognition of the geographical work of non-European explorers such as Nain Singh is particularly clear in a scathing contemporary review of the Schlagintweit brothers' account of their scientific expedition to India and High Asia published in 1861. Apart from a large number of servants and porters, the Schlagintweits employed 22 Asian interpreters, collectors and scientific observers. The local knowledge and especially the linguistic and cultural expertise of these people was an essential resource, without which the explorers could not possibly have conducted their expeditions or acquired such a rich set of collections.

The story of the "Pundits" and their secret missions on behalf of the Survey of India—undertaken with the aid of prayer wheels (in which maps were hidden) and rosaries (whose beads were used to count paces)—became emblematic of the success of British domination over the borderlands of the British Empire. However, their exploits were only recognised in a manner which emphasised their role as instruments of British policy.

There were exceptional cases when the labours of Indigenous people were recognised by the RGS. In 1877, the RGS presented a gold medal to Nain Singh, originally from the Kumaon region of the Himalayas, for his contributions to the mapping of central Asia and Tibet; regions which were virtually inaccessible to British travellers during this period. Sarat Chandra Das, who took the photographs displayed here, was another pundit engaged in the mapping of Tibet. He was also a scholar of Tibetan language and culture.