

worded argument for the application of the 'fractal of matrimonial encompassment' as a key notion for making sense of and interpreting Hindu culture and society.

Building on Benoit Mandelbrot's concept of fractals, Gell's roundabout causal pathways, and Daryn's own fieldwork in the village of Thamghar in central Nepal, the author interweaves the fractal concept – 'a family of seemingly complex self-similar shapes possessing some highly unusual properties, formed by the reiteration of very simple rules, in which the whole and the part are identical in all but scale' – into the anthropology of Hinduism and Indology. On this note, pairing careful ethnography with Indological analysis is a notoriously difficult undertaking, and one which suffers no fools. A successful scholar must demonstrate mastery in both disciplines, and Daryn succeeds admirably. While Hindu rituals have long been an anthropological staple, he argues, little attention has been paid to the 'nature and principles behind their efficacy'.

Set out in nine chapters, *Encompassing a fractal world* commences with a helpful introduction to the fractal concept itself. While to the reviewer, the image of Russian-doll-like fractals, layers nested with one another, works as a way of seeing or thinking, for 'Hindus', according to Daryn, fractals are not simply imagined but literally constructed. Avoiding a reductionist mathematical structuralism, the author presents fractality as 'self-similarity within an *undivided entirety*'.

The first chapter lays out the socio-economic lives of Thamgharians, illustrating that just because people have to work together, they do not necessarily have to like each other as well; while the second addresses male-female relations in the magniloquently titled 'Encompassing the ambivalent female core'. In this community in Nepal, the insoluble bond between a husband and wife is perceived as 'matrimonial encompassment', an abstract mental image which has the capacity to become densely imbued with meaning which in fact embodies the 'template for the ideal modality of existence'. As such, then, matrimonial encompassment should be regarded as a prominent fractal image dominating the lives of the high-caste Hindu community of Thamghar.

The second section of the monograph addresses Hindu ritual and cosmology through a detailed investigation of the inner workings of Thamghar village rituals. In Daryn's analysis, the

DARYN, GIL. *Encompassing a fractal world: the energetic female core in myth and everyday life – a few lessons drawn from the Nepalese Himalaya*. xx, 295 pp., figs, illus., bibliogr. Oxford, Lanham, Md: Lexington Books, 2006. £60.00 (cloth)

This is an intricate book dealing with complex subject matter. Daryn's monograph is a carefully

*jagya*, a sacred microcosmic arena and a ritual performance which is enacted within it, realizes a 'cosmic fractal embodying the notion of matrimonial encompassment, ... the ultimate Thamgharian *modus operandi* for procreating life out of *life* without the need of recourse to and in order to avoid *death*'. The dramatic fire worship, *hom*, is the climax of the *jagya* and epitomizes its significance. Divine matrimonial encompassment thus emerges as the process by which the universe of the *jagya* comes into being, with an 'intimate notional conflation of marriage, sexual relations, gestation and rebirth' at its heart.

In the final section of the book, underwritten by a precise depiction of the agricultural cycle, Daryn illustrates how the 'prolonged and complex rice-cultivation cycle' emerges as the 'ultimate path villagers follow for rectifying their emotional landscape and social reality, in what appears as an annual regeneration of the entire community'. Tying this all together, the fractal image reflects the manner in which the community of Thamghar conceive of their whole cosmos: from the tiniest grain of rice, through the family unit of husband and wife, to the house(hold) and agricultural rituals. The fractal medium has become the message, and the fractal message the medium.

*Encompassing a fractal world* is ethnographically rich (drawing on different techniques such as fieldnotes, personal reflections, and a number of well-chosen greyscale photographs) and analytically precise (excellent and consistent transcription of local terms, augmented by a glossary). While fieldwork was challenging, with the village atmosphere characterized by 'mutual animosity, suspicion, fundamental mistrust and anxiety', the author studiously resists generalizations, describing fieldwork as rather like 'participating in a mystery play whose true plot revealed itself only at a later stage of the drama'. Unlike so much contemporary anthropology, where the researcher has neither the time nor patience to allow the ethnography to lead them, Daryn allowed his appreciation of fractals as an organizing concept for social life to emerge from the richness of his material.

One of the author's bolder assertions lies buried in a footnote: not only is fractality the basis for ritual efficacy in the Hindu world, but it may hold the key for understanding ritual efficacy elsewhere also. Perhaps others will be encouraged to re-analyse their own work in this light.

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