

Encountering Kali in the Margins, at the Center, in the West

Edited by Jeffrey J. Kripal and Rachel Fell McDermott.

University of California Press, 2003.

The goddess Kali is usually pictured as blue or black in color, wearing a necklace of human skulls and a garland of severed arms, and bare-breasted with her tongue protruding from her fanged mouth. Although Kali is one of the images of Hinduism most familiar to Western audiences, she is much more often recognized than understood. Kali's role both as a symbol widely adopted by non-Indian groups like Western feminists and followers of the New Age movement, and also as an extremely popular object of devotion among modern Hindus makes the goddess a potentially fruitful case study for scholars interested in issues of cross-cultural borrowing and the globalization of religion. *Encountering Kali in the Margins, at the Center, in the West*, a new work edited by Jeffrey J. Kripal and Rachel Fell McDermott, presents twelve wide-ranging articles dealing with the case of Kali.

As an introduction to Kali worship, *Encountering Kali* is a mixed bag indeed. The book is divided by theme into two sections consisting of six articles each. The first group deals with Kali in South Asian contexts, and the second explores Kali in other, non-Indian situations. The first article by the late David R. Kinsley is an excellent introduction to Kali devotional practices, organized historically and informed by the structural anthropology of Mary Douglas. The second, by Patricia Dold, is a reading of the medieval Mahabhagavata Purana in which the author presents a well-reasoned argument for the survival of Kali's "terrifying" power in a text that presents what seems on the surface to be a sanitized and domesticated explanation of the image of Kali straddling her husband Siva's prone body. The third article, by Sanjukta Gupta, is a fascinating presentation of the author's research at the famous Kalighat temple in Kolkata, West Bengal. Usha Menon and Richard A. Shweder's article on Indian interpretations of the Tantric icon depicting Kali standing on Siva's chest with her tongue sticking out of her mouth is far less convincing than the first three, relying on a mixture of

anthropological and textual research tools which serves only to muddle the argument. The fifth article, written by anthropologist Patricia Lawrence, is an ethnography of South Indian Kali devotees in war-torn Sri Lanka and the role that Kali devotion plays in their attempt to deal with the massacres, relentless persecution, and frequent "disappearances" their community suffered during the 1990's at the hands of the ruling Sinhalese majority's forces. Lawrence's article maintains in a dynamic tension the larger issues of political and ethnic violence and the religious practices of small groups and individuals, marking itself as a good piece of ethnography. In a far less successful attempt, the last article in part one, written by Roxanne Kamayani Gupta, reads like a parody of ethnography. Gupta's article is a self-indulgent and rambling account of the author's experiences befriending an old woman in Varanasi with a tacked-on ending that attempts to bring the conversation back to the scholarly plane- a tall order indeed in an article that spends an entire page recounting one of the author's fever dreams.

The second half of McDermott and Kripal's book deals with Kali in non-Indian contexts. The seventh essay, written by Cynthia Humes, is a brief but useful overview of some of the representations of Kali and the traditions associated with her from an outsider's point of view. Along with the expected texts produced by British colonial administrators during the Raj, Humes includes Jain, Buddhist, and other Hindu sources. The following article by Hugh Urban deals with a more specific instance of the type of texts Humes treats generally. Focusing on the nineteenth and early twentieth century material from Bengal, Urban employs theoretical models developed by Walter Benjamin and Michael Taussig to explain the significance of Kali to the Victorian British colonists and the Indian resistance movements opposing their rule. While Urban makes a good argument and his article is a good read, his claims about the centrality of Kali seem stronger than what his sources can support. The ninth essay, by co-editor Jeffrey

Kripal, explores the relationship between the Kali and the Tantric practitioner through the lens of psychoanalysis. Unfortunately, in conflating psychoanalysis and Tantra, Kripal comes dangerously close to the kind of New Age-style syncretism that is ostensibly one of the phenomena this volume is intended to explain. The tenth article, written by Keith McNeal, is one of the high points of the book. McNeal writes about the practices and traditions of the Hindu Diaspora in Trinidad. Arguing against the scholarship that claims a single point of origin in the practices of Tamil and Telugu laborers for contemporary practices of Kali worship, McNeal attempts to portray Kali worship in Trinidad as a multi-sourced dynamic and synthetic process shaped by political, ethnic, social, and economic forces. Sarah Caldwell's article, the eleventh in the book, is a well-argued rethinking of widely accepted notions that Kali and her devotees exist on the margins of South Asian culture, using as a case study the historical development of Kali traditions in Kerala. The last chapter of the book, an article by co-editor Rachel Fell McDermott, returns to some of the author's

earlier research, done in 1991, on the ways in which Western feminists and New Age practitioners were using images of Kali in their literature. Over a decade later, McDermott is now asking questions about how Kali is being used by these groups in the age of the World Wide Web and what happens when Indian Kali devotees respond to the images and representations of Kali manufactured and consumed in the West. Citing as sources New Age and "Occult" books, Tarot card decks, calendars, and chat rooms, McDermott presents an unfolding dialogue between "the Western Kali" and her "authentic" counterpart.

Encountering Kali is useful to the extent that it presents the reader with examples of the new types of scholarship being done in the field of Kali studies, but a few of these articles fall far short of substantive scholarship. Overall, it is worth reading for scholars interested in cross-cultural borrowing and the globalization of religions, but not as an introduction to the study of Goddess worship in India or Kali traditions.

Brian Collins

The University of Chicago