Gordan Djurdjevic


In this work Gordan Djurdjevic continues the project started in his dissertation—cum—monograph *Masters of Magical Powers: The Nath Yogis in the Light of Esoteric Notions*. In *Masters of Magical Powers* Djurdjevic argued for the heuristic value of the terms “esotericism”, “occult”, and “magic” as analytical categories for analyzing South Asian Yogic and Tantric systems as well as broader cross-cultural phenomena. While this position isn’t completely novel—Hugh Urban argued similar points in 1998—Djurdjevic contributed a valuable work to a growing subfield still in its infancy. In this latest book, *India and the Occult*, Djurdjevic focuses on a series of key figures in modern British Occultism who have cast a huge influence on the history of twentieth century New Age, neo-Pagan, Occultist, and NRM milieu. By focusing on their appropriations of South Asian spirituality, Djurdjevic illustrates a case study of ‘esotericism [as] a valid means of cultural transfer’ (p. 119) in action.

The book itself consists of a series of relatively self-contained chapters treating representative figures of the early twentieth-century British occult milieu. The majority of the chapters are expanded versions of conference papers, some of which have previously been published elsewhere. In the introduction the author provides a preliminary discussion of his aims in this book, introducing key terms, arguments, and the book’s scope. The first chapter outlines the theoretical and methodological frameworks; here Djurdjevic defines his use of the terms esotericism, magic, and the occult as useful regional and analytical categories for evaluating Indian traditions of Yoga and Tantra. With this in order he proceeds to his treatment of their appropriations by British Occultists.

The next two chapters discuss Aleister Crowley and his use of Yogic and Tantric themes in his own magical practices and metaphysics, with particular emphasis on borrowings and structural similarities between his Sex Magick and Tantra. Chapter Three takes a more theoretical approach, exploring formal similarities between the usages of sexual fluids by the Nath Siddhas and Crowley’s Sex Magick.

In Chapter Four Djurdjevic treats Dion Fortune, discussing her utilizations of South Asian concepts despite her many ambivalent remarks on these same traditions in her written works. Chapter Five covers the life and works of Kenneth Grant, and is one of the more productive chapters in the work. Djurdjevic surveys Grant’s eclectic and at times idiosyncratic interpretations of South Asian traditions, and sheds crucial light on understudied aspects of this influential occultist and his works. Chapter Six discusses the traditions and disciples
stemming from Dadaji Mahendranath, the Western-born Nāth practitioner and magician and his influential contemporary disciples Michael Magee, Mogg Morgan, and Andrew Chumbley.

Djurdjevic’s treatment of this understudied area of modern occultist studies is highly commendable, and his phenomenological lens admirably unpacks these occultists’ engagement with South Asian spiritual discourses. The chapters on Crowley and Fortune present an in-depth and straightforward history of how the kabbalistic Tree of Life, sexual energy, and magnetism were used to interpret yogic and tantric practices and illustrate particularly straightforward examples of Faivre’s “doctrine of concordance”. Furthermore in Chapter Three—a comparative chapter on the formal similarities between Crowley’s and the Nāth’s sexual alchemy—Djurdjevic broaches intriguing theoretical territory. After discussing the key links between the two traditions, Djurdjevic addresses the issue of whether these ideas of sexual energies proceed from an “ideal form” originating in the human experience ‘unconstrained by the necessity of historical transmission’. While in the interests of space Djurdjevic leaves this subject undeveloped, it merits further study, particularly from a Cognitive Science of Religion (CSR) approach.

In particular the chapter on Kenneth Grant is a tour de force, addressing the understudied South Asian influences in his theories and metaphysics, filling an important gap in occultist studies. While Grant’s influential works are well-known for disseminating the “Left-Hand Path” in modern Occultism, less well-known is how indebted his metaphysics was to South Asian influences. Djurdjevic’s analysis expertly untangles the ways in which the eclectic elements of Grant’s work, e.g., H.P. Lovecraft, the Drakonian current, etc, are indebted to a non-dual metaphysics informed by Buddhist and Advaitan thought. This chapter is a worthy addition to Grantian studies, and expertly illustrates some of the more creative ways South Asian metaphysics has been used by Western occultists.

Furthermore, Djurdjevic’s chapter on Dadaji Mahendranath’s followers sheds crucial light on these important lineages of Western-Eastern syncretism, providing a springboard to a discussion of broader themes and issues regarding the nature of appropriation and the validity of cross-cultural dialogue and exchange. Throughout the book Djurdjevic addresses this open-question regarding the “authenticity” of these appropriations of Yoga and Tantra. Responding to Hugh Urban’s remarks on Crowley’s ignorance of “real tantra” (p. 57), Djurdjevic emphasizes that these deviations are endemic to cultural diffusion itself, and provides instructive examples from Indian religious history to prove his point. Yogic and tantric practices have been appropriated and re-appropriated across sectarian lines throughout Asian history, especially