Abstract

It has long since been established that the modern children's game of snakes and ladders originated from the Indian game of gyān caupaṛ (game of knowledge), but it has rarely been asked how gyān caupaṛ itself originated, and what exactly constitutes it. The present thesis tells the story of gyān caupaṛ based on nearly 150 unique and mostly unpublished game charts and several little explored secondary sources. The majority of the game charts derive from Vaiṣṇava and Jaina communities in 19th-century western India, though a few reach back to the late 18th century. The thesis argues that the charts developed from tantric drawings of the subtle body used for purposes of meditation and visualization, and only later acquired the properties of a formal game system. Other influences can be traced back to the 12th-century Chinese game of xuanfo tu (table of Buddha selection) and the 15th-century Italian game of gioco dell’oca (game of the goose), but gyān caupaṛ itself does not appear to have been invented before the late 17th or early 18th century. The game charts consist of a sequentially numbered and inscribed grid diagram overlaid with snakes and ladders forming connections between individual squares. The representational value of the charts changes according to the world-views of the different religious communities in which they appear, but they all share a common concern with questions of cosmography, karma, and religious practice. The design is remarkable for its close integration of game mechanics and theme, and while it is possible to reconstruct the rules by which the game was played, little can be said about the uses to which it may have been put beyond that of mere play. Plausible suggestions include education, divination, and self-exploration, but, as evidenced by the later history of the game, such uses have long since fallen away, leaving only the innocent fun of a purely abstract game system.