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## Nataraja, Mysteries and More...

by [Drs. Liesbeth Pankaja Bennink](#) [1]

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(click on the small image for full screen image with captions.)



Fig. 1

The rooms of the new Asian Pavilion of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam[2] are light and white and spacious, and in a way, one could say, a bit austere [figure 1]. The austerity can be understood as intended to prevent distraction from the experience of the art as the centre of attention. But all the beautiful objects here would originally have been part of large complexes, buildings, pavilions, shrines and temples, where every surface and space would have been covered and filled with beautifully designed and executed reliefs, sculpture and painting, where there would have been a multitude of colours and sounds, music and dance, chanting and scents. Here we are far removed from this context and in this clean space there is nothing that reminds us of the original meaning, except the objects themselves.

At the centre of the first room an exquisite Nataraja[3] dances his Cosmic Dance. As one enters it draws one's eyes and attention. The balance, harmony and dynamics of his still movement, captured with his locks flying wildly, have made the image of the Divine Dancer one of the most recognised Indian icons [figure 2]. [4]



Fig. 2

Right opposite the Dancing Shiva in the centre of the Asian pavilion we find another Nataraja. This one is tiny, just 10 centimetres tall, exhibited in a glass case, not drawing the attention of the larger masterpiece.[5] The divine dancer is frozen in the same movement, left leg raised, hands holding the same gestures and attributes [figure 3].



Fig. 3

At first glance the two divine dancers appear to be the same. But careful observation reveals a few obvious and some less obvious differences. Where the larger Nataraja's locks are spread sideways from his head, reflecting the sculptor's intention to suggest the wild gyrating movement of his dance, called Ananda Tandava, Wild Dance of Bliss, the small Nataraja's locks fall on his shoulders and down his back, suggesting a much softer, quieter movement. Two diminutive figures sit at his feet, accompanying his dance with percussion instruments. The one on the proper right plays on what looks like a pot, the one on the proper left is holding cymbals. Less obvious differences can be found in the divine dancer's headdress.

These differences represent a mystery that has not yet received much attention. As Coomaraswamy pointed out in the essay with which he launched the Dancing Shiva to international fame,[6] Shiva's dance has many forms and aspects, but much has been lost with time. This article will examine and clarify some of the significant iconographical differences between these two Natarajas.

The larger Nataraja in the centre of the room was undoubtedly cast about a millennium ago in South India for worship in a particular temple, where he would have been housed in a small shrine with a curved roof, part of a larger temple complex. He was offered daily worship and taken in procession once a year. Covered with sandal paste, jewellery and silk, he was the object of the devotion of a town or village [figure 4]. For the worshippers he would have represented the Nataraja of Chidambaram.



Fig. 4

There is only one place that can be called the Home of the Dancing Shiva and that is the sacred city of Chidambaram, in Tamil Nadu, India [figure 5a, 5b]. In the large and ancient temple that is the heart of the city, Shiva as Nataraja is the presiding deity and is worshipped here as the Cosmic Dancer dancing in the Golden Hall. All other bronze Natarajas found in temples all over South India have been inspired by the deity of this temple, Nataraja dancing the Ananda Tandava, the Dance of Bliss.



Fig. 5a



Fig. 5b



Fig. 6

All Natarajas are considered to be replicas of the Nataraja of Chidambaram. This temple has been the object of many publications and documentaries. [Z] And it is implicitly assumed by all publications that the Nataraja under worship here is essentially the same as all bronze Natarajas. His dance is called Ananda Tandava, Dance of Bliss. It reflects five cosmic activities, or Pancakritya, Creation, Preservation, Dissolution, Obscuration and Salvation. Dancing on his right leg, trampling Ignorance in the form of a dwarf called Apasmara, he raises his left in a flowing movement, offering deliverance and bliss to his devotees. The hands hold a damaru (small hour-glass drum) and fire, make a gesture of protection and direct the attention to his raised foot. He wears snakes as jewellery, flowers and feathers in his hair, and his dreadlocks fly away wildly, reflecting the wild gyrating motion of his dance. The crescent Moon and the river Ganga find refuge in his hair [figure 6]. [8]

Although it is assumed all the murtis (sculptures) [9] in this pose are essentially the same, the more informed devotee can tell you there are a few significant differences between the Nataraja who is the presiding deity of the Chidambaram temple and the Nataraja exhibited here as centre piece of the Rijksmuseum's Asian pavilion. It is actually the small Nataraja with the falling locks that is a replica of the Chidambaram Nataraja, not the larger one with the flying hair. The differences between the two Natarajas reflect myth, doctrine and tradition.

The Chidambaram Mahatmya is the main source for the mythology of the temple. It recounts how Shiva first danced in the Daruvana, a mythological forest, and later on earth in the Tillaivana, which was originally a mangrove forest and later came to be known as Chidambaram. [10]

### The Cosmic Dance in the Daruvana

The origin of Shiva's Ananda Tandava derives from an ancient myth found in many variations in early scriptures. In the Chidambaram Mahatmya, the official sthala purana of the Chidambaram temple, this myth takes a definite form and is connected to the mythology of Tillai, the original name of this sacred city.



Fig. 7



Fig. 8



Fig. 9

The scriptures tell how a community of unorthodox rishis or seers lived together with their wives and families in the Daruvana, the Daru forest where they practiced austerities and lived a pious, but heretical, life. Shiva and Vishnu visit the ashram of the rishis in disguise. In the various versions of this myth different reasons are given. Some scriptures say it is to test them, some say to teach them devotion and

surrender, some say to challenge their essentially atheistic philosophy. Shiva took the form of a naked mendicant, dancing wild and with abandon, completely confusing the wives and daughters of the rishis. Vishnu followed as the dancer Mohini, seducing the rishis and diverting their minds from their spiritual path [figure 7, 8, 9].

After some time the rishis realise they have been deceived and react with a powerful ritual, a yajna or fire sacrifice. From this magical fire they conjured several fiery attacks upon Shiva. First a tiger appeared from the flames and jumped on Shiva. Shiva stripped off its skin and tied it around his hips. Next a ferocious cobra appeared and attacked Shiva, who simply wrapped it around him as an ornament. Lastly a terrible dwarf, Apasmara[11], jumped from the fire and charged towards Shiva. With his large toe Shiva crushed its back, and as it lay prostrate and writhing, He stepped on its back and commenced His dance. The eight corners of the earth shook, and Adishesha, the Worldsnake, and River Ganga trembled with fear [figure 10, 11]. Shiva dances the Ananda Tandava with his jata or locks flying, decorated with snakes and dressed with a tiger skin. At this point the rishis realised their mistake and surrendered to the Supreme Shiva.



Fig. 10



Fig. 11

Thus in all majesty Shiva dances his dance in the museum pavilion in Amsterdam. Ever since the publication of Coomaraswamy's article "The Dance of Shiva" this form of Nataraja has received much scholarly attention,[12] even in the context of popular cosmological thinking like the Tao of Physics by Fritjof Capra or the work of Carl Sagan.[13] Much has been written about the art-historical background and cosmological and spiritual meaning of this image. It is often used in all kinds of illustrations and found on movie sets, in hotel lobbies, and is sold as a souvenir to innumerable tourists.[14] Even in spite of, or maybe as the result of, all this attention some important aspects of this artistic masterpiece and spiritual beacon are given scant attention. It is to these little recognised and mysterious aspects that this article is intended to direct attention.

The Chidambaram Mahatmya continues with another story, that of Shiva's Dance in Tillai.

### Shiva's Dance in Tillai



Fig. 12

Adishesha, the world snake on who Vishnu rests in his yogic sleep, felt Vishnu suddenly become very heavy. He asked Vishnu the reason for this. Vishnu replied to Adishesha it was due to the happiness he felt at remembering witnessing Shiva's Ananda Tandava during their visit to the Daruvana. Adishesha was inspired and wished to witness the Cosmic Dance for himself. He started a long and arduous spiritual practice to achieve his goal. Shiva answered his devotion and directed Adishesha to Tillai, a mangrove forest with a sacred pond in the heart chakra of the world. This is the only place on earth with the right stability and strength to be the stage for Shiva's cosmic dance. Adishesha is born on earth as the rishi Patanjali and at long last reaches the Tillai forest. Here he meets another rishi, Vyaghrapada, the Tiger-Footed, who is also waiting for the arrival of Shiva Nataraja [figure 12]. While they wait they worship a Shiva Linga which is situated on the southern bank of the sacred pond, the Shivaganga Tirtha.

At the appointed time auspicious signs announce the arrival of Shiva. Vyaghrapada and Patanjali who waited for such a long time are joined by gods and rishis, and by 3000 munis, and all are full of expectation. When five tones sound from Heaven Shiva arrives and commences His Ananda Tandava, the Dance of Bliss. Overcome with emotion all those present tremble and many fall on the ground. Nataraja asks Vyaghrapada if he has any

other desire. Vyaghrapada answers it is his wish Nataraja should dance here forever for all humanity. The Lord grants this wish and continues to dance his dance in the Golden Hall till the present day [figure 13].



Fig. 13

**Nataraja, Sabhanayaka**

Almost every temple in South India with some standing will have a bronze Nataraja as part of its sculptural and iconographic program, often housed in a shrine that is a replica of the Sabha with the golden roof of the Chidambaram temple, in recognition of the fact that it is from this Sabha that the South Indian presence of Nataraja has its origin. For the most part these Natarajas represent the type with the flying hair. Shiva's Dance is almost invariably seen and described with this characteristic attribute. It is therefore assumed by researchers and the general public alike the presiding deity of the Chidambaram temple, officially named Sabhanayaka, or the Lord of the Hall, reflects the same iconography and attributes.



Fig. 14

But it is the small Nataraja with the falling locks exhibited in the Rijksmuseum in a glass case right opposite the large Nataraja with the flying locks that is an actual representation of the Dancing Shiva of Chidambaram [figure 14]. As photography of murtis under worship in the Chidambaram temple is strictly forbidden we must rely on other images to deduce how the Nataraja of Chidambaram is portrayed.

The Shiva dancing with his locks flying is so well known that the Nataraja whose hair falls down on his shoulders receives little attention.[15] However the Nataraja in Chidambaram can be distinguished from the majority of Dancing Shiva murtis through several significant characteristics, which will be enumerated below.

These differences have not been noted in any of the publications about Nataraja or the Chidambaram temple as far as I know. The common features of these two forms of Nataraja are the position of the body and limbs, four arms with attributes, circle of flames, dwarf under the standing foot, decorations in the hair (crescent moon, cobra, River Ganga, datura flower), long flying sash, and the cobra across the wrist. Both are considered by theology and doctrine to be depictions of the Ananda Tandava, the Dance of Bliss.



Fig. 15

Then what is the mystery or the reason behind the differences we list below?

Exact replicas of the Chidambaram Nataraja like the small murti in the Rijksmuseum are rare compared to the larger Nataraja with the flying hair. This may be the reason why these differences have hardly been noticed. They reflect important theological concepts, and can also be observed in many illustrations found in the Chidambaram temple [figure 13, 15]. The differences can be described as:

Chidambaram Nataraja [figure 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21[16]]



Fig. 16



Fig. 17



Fig. 18



Fig. 19



Fig. 20



Fig. 21

- His hair locks (jata) are falling on his shoulders and down his back
- Decorations in his hair are
  - one datura flower.
  - one crane feather.
  - hair knotted on the left side in a kudumi
- Two figures playing instruments are sitting at his feet.
- The human skull is not present in the hair [17].

#### Other Natarajas

- Locks flying sideways suggesting centrifugal motion
- Human skull among the decorations in the hair
- Fan shaped crown of crane feathers [figure 22]

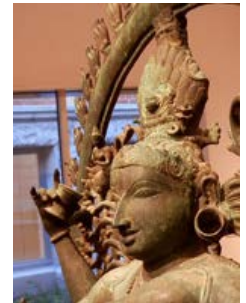


Fig. 22

#### Shiva's Jata: Ananda Tandava and Shanti Kuttu

Ananda Tandava, Dance of Bliss, Cosmic Dance, the Dance of the Five Activities, these names and descriptions represent a unique iconography and reflect the complex theology of the ancient temple of Chidambaram. All are used to refer to both the Nataraja with the flying hair and the Nataraja whose hair falls down on his shoulders. It is this difference in Shiva's locks that reflects the essential and very significant theological difference between the Nataraja in Chidambaram and other Natarajas. There is one name that can only refer to the Nataraja whose hair falls down, the little used Shanti Kuttu, meaning Dance of Peace. Shiva's dance in the Golden Hall of Chidambaram represents the end of the dance, the completion, the perfect stillness, when his hair falls down and all movement ceases. The doctrine and tradition of the Chidambaram temple explicitly states the Nataraja here represents the conclusion of the dance, portraying the divine stillness which implies all cosmic movement. The divine dancer's hair falls down: this is the 109th movement which transcends all 108 movements or karanas that preceded it.[18]

#### Datura Flower



Fig. 23

Two flowers are connected with Shiva. One is the Kondrai, Cassia or golden shower. The other is Datura (Metel) [figure 23].[19] The Chidambaram Nataraja wears one blue datura flower in his hair. This associates his dance with the area of shamanistic spirituality and ritual trance. Datura is a very poisonous plant with strong hallucinogenic but also medicinal properties. Little is known of how it was used in India in the past. The Vamana Purana states the plant originated from Shiva's chest, it is mentioned in Ayurveda for the treatment of various ailments, and it is still used today by yogis and sadhus who smoke it in combination with cannabis.[20] There is one anecdote reflecting its use as part of a devotional as well as scholarly act. The story is told of how the great 16th century scholar Appayya Deekshita drank a hallucinatory decoction made of the juice of the leaves of the datura plant to test his devotion to Shiva. He instructed his students to watch him and note down everything he said in his trance. The result was a poem of fifty verses called Atmarpanastuti which has as subject surrender to Shiva.[21]

There is another mysterious aspect to the datura flower. Although it is clearly part of ancient Hindu and Asian traditions and medicine, it is originally native only to the Americas, where it is traditionally part of tribal shamanistic and initiatory practices.[22] This would imply pre-Columbian contact between the Eastern and Western hemispheres. Recent research indicates it may have been brought from the Americas to Eurasia as long as 3000 years ago.[23] The close association of this powerful hallucinogenic from the Americas with Shiva as Nataraja raises many questions and possibilities about the background of his tradition and the nature of his dance. It strengthens the yogic associations, as yogis and siddhas have often sought to strengthen or stimulate their practice through (al)chemical means.

#### Crane Feather

In the literature some confusion exists as to what kind of feather Nataraja wears in his headdress, peacock or crane,[24] Both temple tradition[25] and textual reference from the Mayamata[26] unequivocally state Nataraja wears a crane feather. As to the reason behind it, there is not much information to go on. The tradition explains Shiva conquered a demon in the form of a crane.[27] No further information could be found so far.

Internationally cranes are associated with the sun, and with longevity and auspiciousness. They are held in high esteem for characteristics such as intelligence, sagacity, consistency, wariness, and sociality, and of course for their dancing. Crane dances are associated with death rituals, and with entering and exiting the labyrinth of the Minotaur. Cranes are thought of as carrying souls to the next world.[28]

Within the Indian traditions a few reference to the crane exist. There are two stories from the Mahabharata involving a crane. One is where a Crane Yaksha challenges the Pancha Pandavas to answer his riddles, successfully answered by Yudhishthira.[29] The other tells about Bhima defeating Bakasura, the Crane Demon that terrorises the city called Ekavrata.[30] One of the Dasamahavidhya goddesses is Bakalamukhi, 'with the face of a crane'. [31]

### The Kudumi and Advaita

The Ananda Tandava is such an iconic image, just taking it in generates a sense of aesthetic completeness and fulfilment. In one movement the whole essence of the cosmos is reflected. The power of this representation of a divine cosmic dance is reflected by its universal appeal.[32] It can be found all over the world and has been used in Hollywood film sets and on book covers. Somehow this image IS what it represents. And this is exactly the essence of the Chidambaram temple's tradition. It is a Vedic temple rooted in the principles of Advaita, or non-dualism.[33]

This has often been challenged by outsiders but it is at the core of all ritual and representation. It is most visibly symbolized by the way the hereditary priests called Deekshithar (initiated ones) wear their hair when they are performing the rituals. Keeping it long, with a tonsure all around the rim and knotted in a bun or kudumi on the left side of their head. This is explained as representing the unity of male and female within themselves and reflects the advaita principle of their tradition and theology [figure 24].



Fig. 24

Uniquely the Nataraja in Chidambaram also wears his hair on the left side in a kudumi. [figure 12, 19]. This reflects the essential unity between Nataraja and the priestly community, as well as the principle of advaita. Tradition tells us that once the 3000 munis or yogis were requested by Brahma to perform a Vedic fire ritual or yajna in Brahma's heaven. Upon their return all present were counted but only 2999 could be accounted for. Great was the confusion, when a voice called from the Golden Hall and announced He, Nataraja Himself, was the 3000th Deekshithar.

### Accompanying His Dance

On the occasion of the six yearly ritual ablutions called abhishekam it is possible to see Nataraja without dress, flowers or ornaments. And only the Deekshithars have knowledge of the details of this murti, and no photographs can be taken.[34] But through some of the artwork found around the temple otherwise invisible details can be observed. [figure 13, 15] One of the details described and explained to me by the late Raja Deekshithar are the two accompanying musicians sitting at his feet.

Not much attention has been paid to the musical accompaniment of Shiva's Dance. The fact that the Chidambaram Nataraja murti has two accompanists sitting at his feet is not mentioned in the literature. But both in the visual art and the mythology we find various descriptions and depictions of the musical accompaniment of Shiva's dance.



Fig. 25



Fig. 26



Fig. 27

The earliest Dancing Shivas, found largely in central India, depicted in the cave art of Aihole, Badami and Ajanta, show the Divine Dancer flanked by a seated drummer. He plays a set of two or three large elongated drums, of which one or two are standing and one is lying down. Such sets of drums are not now known as part of musical accompaniment of dance. [figure 25] In the early representations from Eastern India, in present day Orissa, the Dancing Shiva is also accompanied by a seated drummer playing three drums, two standing and one lying down. [figure 26, 27]

In the Mayamata, a treatise on architecture and iconography, Shiva's dancing form is described as accompanied by an anthropomorphised Nandi, Shiva's sacred bull, playing the vadyam or mridangam, the two-faced drum carried in front of the torso. In the Thiruthalinathar temple in Tirupattur, we find a clear example of this. Nandikeshvara playing the mridangam accompanies a stone Shiva Nataraja with 16 arms, dancing a dance called Gauri Tandava in the local temple tradition, exactly as described in the Mayamata, where it is called



Fig. 28



Fig. 29



Fig. 30

Also in the earliest known Dancing Shiva relief in southern India, in the Seeyamangalam cave temple constructed under Mahendravarman Pallava I, 600-630, the divine dancer is accompanied by a person sitting on a stool playing a standing drum [figure 29].

In one of the temple towers of the Chidambaram temple we find one single representation of a drummer playing standing drums. Otherwise standing drums are quite unknown in the South Indian music tradition [figure 30].

Other kinds of accompaniment are described in various local traditions. The female saint Karaikkal Ammayar is represented as an emaciated figure playing the *talam* or cymbals while seated at Nataraja's feet. Her story is first connected with another of Shiva's dancing forms, the *Urdhva Tandava* as featured in Thiruvallangadu. In a dance contest between Shiva and goddess Kali, Shiva is victorious by performing the *Urdhva Tandava*, a dance with his foot pointing to the sky. The *talam* is a musical instrument consisting of two cymbals made of different metals and specifically used, till today, for the accompaniment of dance [figure 31, 32].[36]

In Chidambaram a similar tradition exists concerning a dance contest between Kali and Shiva. Kali originally being the presiding deity of the Tillai Forest, challenged Shiva. They danced and Kali accepted defeat after Shiva performed the *Urdhva Tandava*. The goddess withdrew and now resides in a temple outside the boundaries of the city. Here the divine dancers were accompanied by Vishnu playing the *vadyam* or two-faced drum and Brahma the *talam*, or cymbals.



Fig. 31



Fig. 32



Fig. 33

Not far from Chidambaram, in the Shiva temple of Theerthanagari, a village in Cuddalore district, the Nataraja under worship is also accompanied by two figures. Here the temple tradition identifies the musicians as Brahma, playing the five faced drum (*Pancha Mukha Vadyam*), and Vishnu, blowing the conch. The dance is identified as the *Sandhya Tandava*, the dance Shiva performs on Mount Kailasha at the time of sunset. Shiva dances for Parvati, who also accompanies him by giving the rhythm for his dance [figure 33].[37]

A very significant aspect of the mythology surrounding Shiva's dance in southern India is found in the texts collectively referred to as Sangam literature. These are the earliest known texts in the Tamil language. Here several divine dances performed by Shiva are described. Shiva is sometimes dancing as the hermaphrodite, as male and female. Three of Shiva's dances are mentioned by name. *Kotukotti*, *Pantarangam* and *Kapalam*. The *Kotukotti* dance, meaning 'fearsome time measurement' according to Professor Zvelebil, is associated with the destruction of demons and evil in general.[38] The *Pandarangam* dance is associated with his conquest of Tripura, the three demon cities. The *Kapala* dance is danced by Shiva after his decapitation of Brahma, when he dances with the skull as a begging bowl until the sin of Brahmicide is expiated. In the descriptions one element stands out: always Uma Devi, his consort, accompanies him, beating the time.[39]

Today's living tradition hasn't got much to say about the two small figures sitting at Nataraja's feet, accompanying his dance. The one on the proper right plays on what looks like a pot. The other one plays the *talam*, the pair of cymbals that even today are the most important instrument for accompanying traditional dance. Umapati Shivachary Deekshithar mentions the playing of the *Kutamula* drum and the *Golden Talam* in the *Koila Purana*, his recounting of the mythology of the Chidambaram temple in Tamil. The commentator and the living tradition identify the players as Banugopa and Banasura, two great names among the asura, or demons, the traditional enemies



Fig. 34

of the Hindu gods. But it has not been possible to find any explanation as to their presence or role. This remains a mystery for now [figure 21, 34].[40]

The Kutamula drum finds mention only very rarely as a drum with a pot-shaped resonator [41] but in fact looks very much like what today is known as a ghatam. The ghatam is an earthenware pot baked especially to be used for playing music. The traditional potters who specialise in making ghatams know how to make the pot in such a way it has a specific clarity and tone. It is created through a special process and formed of a special clay to which copper particles have been added to give a clear and metallic quality to its sound. Playing it is a great art which requires special dedication. Till today it remains a popular instrument for accompaniment as well as solo performances. Further research would have to establish whether the kutamula drum and the ghatam are actually one and the same instrument.

The figure on the left plays an instrument consisting of two cymbals known as talam. Talam is the word for measure in Karnatic or South Indian music. Because the two parts are made of different metals and because of how it is played, it can produce several sounds. The dance masters who direct the dancer during the dance performances use this instrument to direct the dance. The rhythms of the footwork are played, and the basic count, the talam, is indicated with this instrument. The dance master is called the nattuvanar, the action of playing the talam during a dance performance is called nattuvangam.

### Karotimalaya, a garland of skull

The texts and the tradition describe Nataraja wearing a garland of skulls in his hair.[42] The Chidambaram Nataraja does not wear a human skull in his headdress.[43] This feature is generally seen in almost all other Nataraja murtis, even with some in which the locks of the jata fall down. [44] It has not been possible to find any explanation as to why Nataraja does not wear the human skull in his hair in Chidambaram.

### Mysteries and More...

Although for the devotees, and from the point of view of myth and doctrine as it is understood today, Shiva's Ananda Tandava is always and eternally the Dance of Bliss in Chidambaram, careful observation and research identify many variations in iconography and mythology. This was already observed by Ananda Coomaraswamy in his famous essay.[45] We may never know all the details of the worship of Nataraja in the past, or even the present. The worship of Shiva dancing the Cosmic Dance of Creation and Transformation is as alive today as it was in the long past. It may mean different things to different people. For the devotee it signifies salvation and release from rebirth. For the physicist it refers to the Quantum dance of particles.[46] The subject fascinates and inspires many; and much remains to be discovered.



Fig. 35

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Liesbeth Pankaja Bennink combined her history study at the Rijksuniversiteit Utrecht (The Netherlands) with her training as Bharata Natyam dancer under Smt. Rajamani Knols (Amsterdam, Mumbai, Bangalore). After accomplishing her Arangetram in 1981 and her graduation in 1983 she performed and taught for many years in The Netherlands and abroad. Seeking a deeper understanding and knowledge of Indian dance in the context of the ancient traditions in which it is rooted she found a scholar and master who could open up this world to her in the person of Raja Deekshithar. He was a researcher and a scholar, member of the traditional community who are the custodians of the Shiva Nataraja temple in Chidambaram, India. They commenced a collaboration that lasted for many years and only ended with his sudden death in 2010. Together with his sons she intends to carry Raja's legacy forward. She can be contacted at [liesbethpankaja\[at\]gmail.com](mailto:liesbethpankaja[at]gmail.com)

### Footnotes

1. Although I, Drs Liesbeth Bennink, am the author of this article, it is in its essence the outcome of my long time association and collaboration with R.N.Natarajarathina (Raja) Deekshithar (1949-2010). The preservation and continuity of the tradition of the Chidambaram Sabhanayaka temple was his life's goal and of great concern to him. Lack of support and sponsorship of the traditional scholarship that formed the foundation of Indian (temple) traditions in the past decennia are leading to a great loss of knowledge and understanding. I am forever grateful for the time I was able to spend with him. This should have been his article. I would also like to express my thanks and appreciation to Raja Deekshithar's son Kandhan Raja Deekshithar and uncle M.N.Sivaraja Dixitar who have been offering their knowledge and advice through many discussions and communications.

2. Rijksmuseum means National Museum. The museum recently underwent a major renovation that was completed in 2014. The Asian



Pavilion was one of the new additions and was designed by Antonio Cruz and Antonio Ortiz, the architects responsible for the renovation. <https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/renovation/the-renovation>; <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rijksmuseum> (retrieved in 20-9-2015)

3. Nataraja literally means King of Dance. This is the name generally used for the Dancing Shiva. The official title of Nataraja in Chidambaram is Sabhanayaka, the Lord of the (Golden) Hall.

4. [https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/search/objecten?p=1&ps=12&title=nataraja&ii=0#/AK-MAK-187\\_0](https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/search/objecten?p=1&ps=12&title=nataraja&ii=0#/AK-MAK-187_0)

5. [https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/search/objecten?p=1&ps=12&title=nataraja&ii=1#/AK-MAK-189\\_1](https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/search/objecten?p=1&ps=12&title=nataraja&ii=1#/AK-MAK-189_1)

6. Coomaraswamy, A.K. *The Dance of Siva, fourteen Indian essays*, New York 1918

7. For example: Younger, Paul, *The Home of Dancing Sivan: The Traditions of the Hindu Temple in Citamparam*, Oxford 1995; Smith, David, *The Dance of Siva: Religion, Art and Poetry in South India*, Cambridge 2003; *Chidambaram Home of Nataraja*, Marg Publications, New Delhi 2004, Editor Vivek Nanda (etc).

8. Kulke, Hermann, *Cidambaramahatmya*, Wiesbaden 1970. The mythology of the temple is extensively discussed. But can also be found explained in countless other publications. See note 5. All the following mythological references pertaining to the Chidambaram temple are based on the oral tradition and can be referred in the existing literature as quoted.

9. The word murti means tangible or material form. Used to refer to an image embodying the divine form.

10. Kulke 1970.

11. Apasmara means epilepsy or unconsciousness. He represents ignorance.

12. Coomaraswamy, A.K. *The Dance of Siva, fourteen Indian essays*, New York 1918

13. Capra, Fritjof, *The Tao of Physics*, London 1975; Sagan Carl, *Cosmos*, New York 1980

14. <http://i-nataraja.tumblr.com> (retrieved 18-9-2015)

15. Zvelebil, Kamil V., *Ananda-Tandava of Siva-Sadanrttamurti*, Chennai 1998, p. 26. Also the Tanjore Palace Museum informs the visitor this type of Nataraja represents the beginning of the dance. This does not reflect the living tradition or the textual doctrine.

16. This Nataraja murti is part of the collection of the Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient in Pondicherry, India. I would like to express my thanks for the kind permission to use the photographs I was allowed to make in 2011 <http://www.efeo.fr/base.php?code=227>

17. Communicated during various discussions over the years by my friend the late Raja Deekshithar (1949-2010), and recently confirmed through discussions with his uncle the great scholar and Sanskritist M.N.Sivaraja Dixitar and Raja's son Kandhan Raja Deekshithar.

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33. As opposed to most other South Indian temples, whose doctrine is based in texts called Agama which have a Dvaita or dualistic doctrinal background.
34. The Deekshithars strictly prohibit the photography of murtis under worship in the Chidambaram temple.
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41. *Encyclopedia of the Saivism*, volume 1, p 60
42. *Mayamata, traité sanskrit d'architecture*, éd. critique, trad. et notes, 2 vol., Pondichéry, Institut français d'indologie (PIFI, 40), [version angl. en 1985 et 1994]. p.348-349:
43. This is a definite attribute, or lack thereof, of the Chidambaram Nataraja. Personal communication of M.N.Sivaraja Dixitar on several occasions in the past years.
44. For instance one in the bronze gallery of the Chennai Museum. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/301202/4993574354>, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/301202/4992974217>
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