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- 1
- 2 <https://archive.org/help/audio.php?identifier=spaceofconsciousness>
- 3 For the *Mining Imagination* workshop, I took the opportunity to compose a piece that revisits some older recordings of mine, recordings I made while doing ethnographic research at the Hindu temple of Chidambaram, Tamilnadu, in South India (Karel 1997). Over a period of several months, I spent much of my time in this temple, participating in the multisensory nature of Hindu ritual or *puja*, talking with people I met there, and seeking to understand something of the lived experience of sound for participants, especially with respect to the overwhelming resonances of the two large bells rung during the six daily *pujas* at the main shrine. For *Mining Imagination*, I presented this sound piece first thing in the morning, as an introduction to our day together; I hoped it might allow us to enter an imaginative space, a space of relation, of semiotic play, of devotion, of connectedness, of wholeness, of engagement, of repetition, of wellness, of coolness.
- 4 Meaningful experience is firmly emplaced and embodied at the temple of Chidambaram. The temple is most famous as the site where Śiva, as Naṭarāja, the Lord of the Dance, performs the Cosmic Dance of Bliss, the *ānanda tāṇḍava*. Here, in the tradition of Śaiva Siddhānta philosophy reflected in the *Tirumantiram* of Tirumūlar, a Tamil text from about the 11th century CE (cf. Weiss 2009:58), Śiva is identified with *nāda*, or primordial sound.

He is Supreme Light of Cit [consciousness]
 He dances the Dance of Bliss;
 He is Nada that is 'Aum' [Om]
 He dances the Dance of Beauty;
 He dances in the Golden Hall;
 He dances in Golden Tillai [Chidambaram];

He dances the Dance Wondrous;
Who can ever know him?
(Tirumantiram verse 2723)¹

- 5 Chidambaram is also one of the five major Śiva temples in South India which are each associated with one of the five elements; Chidambaram represents *ākāśa* (aether, space, or sky).² The five elements are associated with the five senses, and act as the gross medium for the experience of sensations. The basest element, earth, created using all the other elements, can be perceived by all five senses – hearing, touch, sight, taste, and smell. The next higher element, water, has no odor but can be heard, felt, seen and tasted. Next comes fire, which can be heard, felt and seen. Air can be heard and felt. The fifth and most subtle element, *ākāśa*, is the medium of sound, but is inaccessible to all other senses.

"Siva is Nada (Sound). Sound (Nada) is the attribute of Akasa (ether). Of the five elements, the fifth element, ether (Akasa) is the medium through which sound is transmitted. So the determined goal of Nada – Nadanta – is the Cosmic Dance of Nataraja, who represents ether, among the five elements. He dances in the universe and in the Cit akasa (soul)." [Natarajan 1994:253]

- 6 The five elements are further each associated with a material of the body, as I was told (without even having to ask) on my first evening in the temple by a group of young men who would become my friends: earth is flesh, water is blood and fluids, fire is body heat, air is breath, and *ākāśa*, being empty space, is all the openings and pores of the body. As blood flows through one's veins, so does *ākāśa* pervade one's body and the whole of the universe – and one is never more aware of this permeability as when sound fills all of space and all of one's being.
- 7 There are two etymologies to the name Chidambaram, not mutually exclusive. One is that it comes from the Tamil *cirampalam*, meaning 'Little Hall', after its humble beginnings probably before the beginning of the last millenium as a thatched hut near a sacred pool in a dense forest of Tillai trees. The name of Chidambaram is also interpreted as the Sanskrit *cit* (consciousness) and *ambara* (space or sky): the Space of Consciousness. As Margaret Trawick puts it in her poetic 1978 dissertation from the University of Chicago, *The sacred spell and other conceptions of life in Tamil culture*, "All of this has merged over the centuries to mean the space within the heart, which is the space of consciousness, and which also is a small place, but open and 'empty' like the sky, and common to all creatures" (Trawick Egnor 1978:14). The famous central shrine of the temple has come to be known as the Cit Sabha, or Hall of Consciousness; it is the site of Śiva's dance.
- 8 Siva too, capable of taking the form of *ākāśa*, is all-pervasive, infinitely subtle, becoming manifest only when invoked *through* sound, as into the *murti* [image/form] with the recitation of mantras, or as sound, as Om, as *Om nama śivāya*, indeed as the sound of the great bells.

The Lord is in our heart,
As Om is He there,
As Fire is He there,
As Order is He there,
As Space [*ākāśa*] in body is He there,
He, the One Being.
(Tirumantiram verse 2804)

- 9 The body symbolism/iconicity of the physical structure of the Naṭarāja temple is widely known among devotees and was frequently mentioned to me during my research. R.N. Natarajathina Deekshithar, a hereditary temple priest who served as my main teacher

that summer, has written that the 20,600 golden tiles of the roof are the breaths that a person takes in a day, the 72,000 iron threads with which they are attached are the veins in the body, and the nine *stūpas* atop the Golden Roof are either the nine bodily orifices, or nine goddesses (*śaktis* or *mātrikas*), or both (cf. Deekshithar 1997:20). The five pillars on the front of the Cit Sabha “are identified as the five senses” (Natarajan 1994:133). The five silver-covered steps which lead to the feet of Naṭarāja are known as the *pancāksara* (five-syllable) steps, because it is by chanting the five-syllable mantra *nama śivāya* that one can attain to the Lord Śiva (cf. Deekshithar 1996:70) – and the *pancāksara* is often to be heard.

Letters 'Na' and 'Ma' to commence,
 Letter 'Si' in centre,
 Letter 'Va' intoned in breath regulated,
 Together with 'OM' at beginning of all,
 If you even once chant thus,
 The Lord of 'Ma' (Maya)
 Will in your heart be.
 (Tirumantiram verse 976)

- 10 In talking with people about their experience of sound, my fieldwork came to focus on the sound of two very large bells rung during the main *puja* or worship ceremony, five times per day. In the accompanying sound piece, we approach an experience of the bell sound, but mediated as this experience is, we do not arrive there. We might start to think about this sound by taking up the physicality of it, the emergent resonances of certain overtones, and the architectural space of the huge stone temple in which it reverberates – and this piece momentarily hones in on the most prominent resonances through filtering, using sharp band-pass EQs, reducing.
- 11 But through my daily visits to the temple and conversations with devotees, priests, musicians, and others, it quickly became apparent that for worshippers, the sound is multivalent and exists in a highly elaborate, and widely-shared, network of significations which strongly influence the ways in which it is experienced at a phenomenological level, and which had to do more with place than with space. Priests told me that first of all the bell sound serves to summon and to establish a connection with the deity; in a favored metaphor, it was like a telephone line over which their chanted *mantras* travel; or like an electrical line, which when switched on activates the deity. For devotees, at the most basic level hearing the bells is an indexical sign of the deity's presence, calling them from other parts of the vast temple complex. Once at the main shrine, the bell sound blocks or masks outside sounds, the hectic sounds of the street – air horns, motors, and so on – which can be considered harmful, disturbing, 'heating' the body; the bell sounds, in contrast, are calming, 'cooling' the body. A physician in the Siddha system of Tamil medicine described this in holistic terms, saying that the bell sound is at once “cooling the brain, cooling the *ātma* [soul], cooling the mind, cooling the organs.” Others talked about how the great sound can defuse 'hot' emotions such as anger; it can displace one's own thoughts of mundane problems, and focus the mind on the deity.
- 12 Simultaneously and at another level, the immense sound one is immersed in and pervaded by is identical with the deity. Echoing the equivalence between Śiva and *nāda*, people spoke of the bell sound as equivalent to *Om*kara, to the syllable Om. It's not that it resembles Om; in Susanne Langer's terms, it's doesn't represent *Om*kara, but rather actually *presents* it. Emplaced in the temple of *ākāśa*, the bell sound is Om is Śiva.
- 13 This sound piece, '*Space of consciousness (Chidambaram, early morning)*', is a single-take recording (with the exception of the aforementioned transformational intervention, near

the end) which represents an early morning walk from the Star Lodge, at the corner of East Car Street and South Car Street, up East Car Street and left onto East Sannadhi, towards the temple entrance. I pause (2:30) to slip off my sandals in front of the home of the priest R.N. Natarajarathina Deekshithar, and continue on down the street and through the Eastern gopuram, or tower-gateway (3:45). After crossing the open temple courtyard, I enter the massive stone temple complex (4:30), the voices of human visitors and of resident bats echoing in the long, reverberant passageways (6:00), and make my way through to the central Cit Sabha, open to the sky. Here I stop to listen to the daily devotional singing of the widow, dressed in white, who has sung to Śiva nearly every morning for twenty years. Her singing ends, and then begins the morning *puja* or worship ceremony for Śiva Naṭarāja begins: an awakening. At the signal of a silver bell ringing out from the central sanctum as silver lamps alight with flaming camphor are brought before the *murti*, the woman pulls a chain to shake a rack of bells which jangles, and devotees – usually young men, perhaps students from Annamalai University across town – begin to rock the large temple bells, tugging with all their strength at the ropes, and the clappers inside them swing and begin to strike more and more steadily. The interplay of the strikes of the two bells remains rhythmically indeterminate, each swinging and striking independently, although the upper harmonic partials that are sounded by the combination of the two bells remain constant, emerging, it seems, from empty space. The central stone temple area open to the sky is filled with sound – the sound is *Om* – which then displaces all other sounds.

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NOTES

1. Translations from B. Natarajan (1991).

2. Four of these are in Tamilnadu, and one is in Andhra Pradesh. In addition to the Tillai Naṭarāja Temple in Chidambaram, the other four *pancabhūtasthalas* are Ekāmbareswara Temple (earth) in Kanchipuram, Jambukeswara Temple (water) in Thiruvanaikaval, Arunāchaleswara Temple (fire) in Thiruvannaṁmalai, and Sri Kalahasthīswara Temple (air) in Kalahasthi, Andhra Pradesh.

ABSTRACTS

The small city of Chidambaram, Tamilnadu, is home to an ancient and massive temple complex, at the center of which is the famous site where Śiva, as Naṭarāja, the Lord of the Dance, performs the Cosmic Dance of Bliss, the *ānanda tāṇḍava*, in the Hall of Consciousness. The temple is specifically associated with *ākāśa* (aether, space, or sky), the fifth of the five elements which is known as the medium of sound, and Śiva Naṭarāja is celebrated here with sonorous practices that include the ringing of two large temple bells. The sound piece published here, 'Space of consciousness (Chidambaram, early morning)', represents the situatedness of the temple complex within the city, the main shrine at the center of the temple, and finally the immersive sonic and semiotic resonances of the large bells. The accompanying text describes a network of embodied meanings implicated experientially in sound.

La petite ville de Chidambaram, Tamilnadu, abrite un groupement de temples anciens et imposants, au centre duquel siège Śiva, ou Naṭarāja, le maître de la danse cosmique du bliss, le *ānanda tāṇḍava*, dans l'espace de la conscience. Le temple est exclusivement associé avec *ākāśa* (l'éther, l'espace ou le ciel) le cinquième des éléments connu comme le dispositif sonore et Śiva Naṭarāja est célébré avec des pratiques sonores et le retentissement de deux immenses cloches appartenant au temple. L'extrait sonore publié ici

"Notes sur l'espace de conscience, (Chidambaram, à l'aube)" révèle le positionnement exact des temples par rapport à la ville, à l'autel principal en lien avec le centre du temple et finalement la résonance de l'immersion sonore et sémiotique des grandes cloches. Le texte d'accompagnement décrit un réseau de sens matérialisés expérimentalement en ondes sonores.

La pequeña ciudad de Chidambaram, Tamilnadu, acoge un antiguo templo, en el centro del cual se halla el famoso sitio donde Śiva, como Naṭarāja, el Señor de la Danza, performa la Danza Cósmica de la Felicidad, el *ānanda tāṇḍava*, en el Salón de la Conciencia. El templo está específicamente asociado con *ākāśa* (éter, espacio o cielo), el quinto de los cinco elementos que se conoce como el medio del sonido, y Śiva Naṭarāja es venerada aquí con prácticas sonoras que incluyen el sonido de dos grandes campanas del templo. La pieza sonora publicada aquí, "Espacio de la conciencia (Chidambaram, temprano en la mañana)", representa la ubicación del templo dentro de la ciudad, el santuario principal en el centro del templo y finalmente las resonancias sonoras y semióticas inmersivas de las grandes campanas. El texto adjunto describe una red de significados corporalizados implicados en la experiencia del sonido.

INDEX

Mots-clés: ethnographie sonore, hindouisme, Inde, son, audio

Palabras claves: etnografía sónica, Hinduismo, India, sonido, audio

Keywords: sonic ethnography, Hinduism, India, sound, audio

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