

## Nataraja

Since the seventh century, Cidambaram has been the center of worship of Nataraja, the captivating iconic representation of Siva as Lord of the Dance (Smith 1). Although a very well known depiction of Siva, the Nataraja image is not very widespread. Most images of Siva as Nataraja are found in southern India (Gaston 47).

The term 'Nataraja' refers to the dancing posture of Siva. There are many different dances of Siva, one hundred and eight of which are sculpted on either side of the east and west gopurams (ornate, monumental towers) of the Nataraja temple at Cidambaram (Natarajan 84). The ananda-tandava is the cosmic dance of bliss; one of the many dances of the great Hindu god. It is in this pose that Siva is primarily worshiped in both the Golden Hall and the Hall of Consciousness in the Cidambaram temple. Earliest forms of dancing Siva date back to the fifth century (Smith 1). The sculptures of Siva dancing the ananda-tandava, however, only date back to the tenth century (Kaimal 397). The ananda-tandava is the particular dance, according to Hindu mythology, that Siva performed in the Golden Hall of Cidambaram, or Tillai as it is also known, at the request of his devotees (Gaston 47, Natarajan 84).

In south India there are five sacred places, each with a linga associated with one of the five elements: earth, water, fire, wind, and ether (air). The Cidambaram temple is famous for its akasa lingam, Siva as the formless space or ether (Natarajan 2). Siva is predominantly worshiped in the form of the linga, not in an anthropomorphic form such as the Nataraja. This is what makes the dancing Siva so unique. Siva dancing the ananda-tandava is the most celebrated and beloved of the Nataraja figures. There is extensive symbolism embedded within each element of the elaborate posture. It should be noted

that, the degree to which the Nataraja images have always held this meaning is questionable. The significance of the images has likely evolved, and changed over the years, and there is little evidence surviving from medieval South India to decipher their original meaning (Kaimal 391). That being said, I believe that the following description of Siva as Nataraja is just a small insight into what the icon means to people today.

Unmai Ulakham, a Tamil text, eloquently begins to describe the ananda-tandava:

“Creation arises from the drum; protection proceeds from the hand of hope; from fire proceeds destruction; from the foot that is planted upon Muyalahan proceeds the destruction of evil; the foot held aloft gives mukti.....” (Klostermaier 162). Usually in the form of a statue, Siva has four arms and stands on his right leg. One right hand holds a drum shaped like and hourglass that symbolizes creation. The other is raised, palm up, in the sign 'do not fear' (abhaya) with a serpent wrapped around the wrist. One left hand holds fire, the symbol of destruction, and the other points downwards towards the raised foot of liberation. His hair is braided and jeweled, and the lower locks whirl in the dance (Coomaraswamy 86). His matted or braided hair refers to the ascetic nature of Siva.

Often, there is a cobra, a skull, a crescent moon, or the river goddess Ganga entrapped within his hair. Siva integrates male and female attributes by sometimes wearing a man's earring in the right ear, and a woman's in the left. He is adorned with an abundance of jewelry, and a long piece of cloth is tied around his waist. The majority of Nataraja icons will also have a third eye. Underneath Siva's right foot is a dwarf, or demon. This is to represent his victory over ignorance. Finally, Siva in a perfect balance between creation and destruction, is encircled by a ring of fire which not only represents the universe, but also consciousness.

This dance of Siva is also thought to represent his 5 activities: Shrishti (overlooking, creation, evolution), Sthiti (preservation, support), Samhara (destruction, evolution), Tirobhava (veiling, embodiment, illusion, giving rest), and Anugraha (release, salvation, grace) (Coomaraswamy 87). Siva is part of the Hindu Trinity, with Brahma the creator, Vishnu the preserver, and Siva as the destroyer. However, in the context of Siva as Nataraja, he becomes a fusion of the three. The dance of Siva symbolizes the action of cosmic energy in creating, preserving, and destroying the universe (Natarajan 86). The dance of Siva has also been called a synthesis of science, religion, and art (Natarajan 2). The legend of the Cidambaram temple incorporates the popular Pine Forest myth of Siva. It begins with Siva disguised as a handsome, naked, wandering sage. Accompanied by Sesa, and Visnu disguised as an entrancing woman, the three go to the Pine Forest to test the sages and the fidelity of their wives (Coomaraswamy 85, Smith 33). With their negative magical power, the sages were stealing the forces of creation. The rsis attempted to destroy Siva for the intrusion by means of their sacrificial fire and incantations. The first of their attempts was a tiger. Siva peeled off its skin and wrapped it around himself. The second was a snake, which also failed. Siva began to dance as Nataraja, and the furious sages set a dwarf monster upon him. Siva placed his foot on the dwarfs back, breaking it, and resumed the ananda-tandava. Sesa, entranced by Siva's dance, begs for another opportunity to behold the dance. Siva promised to dance again in Tillai, the center of the world (Natarajan 85).

Numerous legends exist surrounding Siva's many dances. One tells of a competition between Siva and Kali, during which Siva dances the urdhvatandava, the High Tandava

pose (Smith 24). Other dances of Siva include the evening dance in the Himalayas, and the dance performed in cemeteries and on burning grounds (Coomaraswamy 98).

The bronze Nataraja is housed at the innermost place in the Cidambaram temple, the cit sabha, or the Hall of Consciousness. The kanaka sabha, or the Golden Hall, is directly in front the cit sabha. This is where the rituals of worship are performed. In this courtyard there is also a shrine to Visnu, known as Govindaraja. The famous akasa linga resides in the next surrounding courtyard. The third surrounding courtyard is immense, containing various shrines, halls, and the temple tank. It has four gateways or gopurams, one leading in from each direction (Smith 5). Most of the buildings have been significantly renovated and none are older than 1070, but the existing buildings were likely built in the images of their predecessors (Kaimal 398). The cit sabha is thought to be a copy of the oldest, original shrine, which would have been built before the tenth century (Kaimal 399).

It is interesting that this specific dance of Siva has gained so much prominence over all the others. In doing so it has become encompassed by a vast amount of symbolism, and is of great significance to many people of southern India. One explanation is the prestige that was given to the Nataraja image from the tenth to thirteenth centuries by the Cola dynasty. Some scholars believe that the Nataraja actually represented a victory dance ancient Tamil warrior chieftains would perform, over the bodies of their dead enemies. The Cola kings expanded their dynasty through military aggression, therefore, it seems reasonable to suspect that the early Cola kings saw the Nataraja as a perfect emblem because of its warrior connotations (Kaimal 405). Secondly, it is thought that the Nataraja icon was catalyzed into fame by priests and kings in an attempt to attract pilgrims and bring the town spiritual prestige. Through this process a mythic identity was generated

for the icon to identify it more with Siva, and less with local, malevolent deities. It was also around this time that the name of the city was changed from Tillai to Cidambaram (Kaimal 406).

Many festivals are held at the temple of Cidambaram such as Brahmotsavam, Ani Thirumanjanam, Thai Poosam, Natyanjali and Arudra Darsanam. The bronze Nataraja and the icon of his consort are decorated with flowers and paraded around the city during the ten-day festival of Arudra Darsanam (Natarajan 137). Natyanjali is a dance festival that coincides with the auspicious day of Maha Sivaratri, the Great Night of Siva. The celebration lasts for five days between February and March, during which people come from all over India to dance at this holy site (Pintchman 194).

Although the ancient history of the Nataraja image is obscure, and the original meaning of the icon may be lost forever, it has been reborn to a new life full of legend, worship and celebration.

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