

IT TAKES THREE TO EPISTEMOLOGY

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palum telitenum pakum paruppum ivai
nalum kalantunakku nan taruven kolancey
tunka karimukattut tumaniye
niyenakku cankattamil munru ta.
(Auvaiyar, XII Cent.)

Milk, clear honey, coarse sugar and
porridge — these, all four in a mixture,
I give to you, O pure Ruby, whose
elephant head is striking because of its
swaying decorated trunk;
You, in return, must give to me the
Academic Tamil that is threefold.

“If you want to understand what a science is, you should look at what the practitioners of it do”, remarked Geertz (Clifford & Marcus 1986: 262). What actually is it that we do, today, we as Anthropologists? Fourteen years ago, in 1984, James Clifford approached this question from the “starting point of a crisis in Anthropology”

(1986: vii). Intensive discussions confronted ten scholars involved in textual criticism and cultural theory with what they considered the “heart” of “ethnographic enterprise”, that is, the making of ethnographic texts (1986: 264-5). Today, I want to continue that discussion and bring into the dialogue a partner that has harassed me almost all my life: the oral tradition of the Tamils of South India. This dialogue on epistemology, on coherence in Anthropology as a discipline, and, on exploring new possibilities in the representation of knowledge, has to be a dialogue that is mediated by me as an interlocutor for very practical reasons. However, I hope that my words will not remain the only medium nor the last.

The problem

“Milk, clear honey, coarse sugar and porridge” how do these four, whether mixed or not, relate to the crisis in Anthropology? A thorough “translation of culture” is necessary to bring out the relevance of these lines for our discussion. In *Writing Culture, The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (1986), the collection of essays that appeared two years later, Talal Asad wonders how the notion of culture, and as a result the notion of cultural translation, was transformed from the processes of learning and social heredity into the notion of a text (1986: 141). In the case of *palum telitenum, pakum, paruppam ivai...* we are confronted with the traditional beginning of the processes of learning Tamil and its heritage that a child has to go through. This stanza seems a distinct text and word by word translation into English is therefore a legitimate form. A literal translation, however, makes no sense to us. In fact, the insistence to reflect on these lines seriously may even cause uneasiness and impatience among you. Unfortunately, there is no escape: these four lines, composed by the Tamil poetess Auvaiyar in the twelfth century are to stay the central meeting ground of this dialogue. On closer scrutiny serious problems appear, even on the level of language, although this is a field where normally we feel fairly at home. In particular, what does it mean: *cankattamil munrum*, “the academic Tamil that is threefold”? In his critique of Gellner’s “Concepts and Society”, Asad

agrees that “language functions in a variety of ways” and that these ways “are of course part of what every competent ethnographer tries to grasp before he can attempt an adequate translation into his own language” (1986: 146). So, in our case, Tamil says about itself that it is *cankam* and that it is *munrum* “three”. Obviously Asad is right in warning us that languages are not equal. How does a “strong language” like English accommodate such self-definition of a “weaker language” like Tamil. Its claim that it is made up not only out of words (*iyal*) but also out of sounds (*icai*) and images (*natakam*) triples our problem of cultural translation. The demand of sound can be overcome by resuscitating prosody, set to melody and rhythm. This act takes us already one step away from what Stephen Tyler diagnoses as the textual strategies that underlie the language of science. According to him this type of language serves the purpose of adequate description as a representation of the world. At the same time science also needs language of communicative adequacy that enables consensus in the *comunitas* of scientists. All its strategies — as method — depend therefore on a prior and critical disjunction of language and world. In the end, this is the cause of its crisis, because the language of science can not reconcile the competing demands of representation and communication (1986: 123). The last demand that Tamil makes, namely language as image (*natakam*) is extraordinary and takes us ever further away from our linguistic common ground. Earlier we assumed that language functions in a variety of ways; what if language does not rest content to refer only to an object as a mental image but demands to perform that image as well? In that case language is not only speech that is uttered and heard: it transforms into a praxis of gesture and mimetic behaviour. Thus it becomes clear that Tamil handles the world, conveys information and constitutes experience in a way that is totally different from English. Asad employs Luria's term “synpraxic speech” in order to bring out the fact that, while in the field, the process of translation, the grasping that precedes verbalisation, comes with learning to *live* a new mode of life not by learning *about* another mode of life (1986: 159). This synpraxic road is the itinerary that cultural translation has to make into its own praxis in order to complete its mission. Tamil

has assigned that synpraxic method to the realm of language, defining itself as threefold: word, sound and image, or, in short as *Muttamil*.

Cankattamil munrum, as we translated earlier: the academic Tamil that is threefold. A translation that is obviously too easy. How come Academic? In terms of Western scholarship the term Academic naturally evokes the highest “symbolic capital”, the most desirable knowledge of possible knowledges. Therefore *cankam* is generally translated as “academy” and Tamil scholarship claims three such “academies”. In the context of Tamil, *cankam* occurs first in the poetry of Appar (7th Cent.) (Kersenboom, 1995: 6-7). It refers to a learned body responsible for and critically controlling the bardic output of early Tamil poets. Legends hold that the first *Cankam* hosted gods and sages, 4.449 poets took part in the course of 4.440 years; the second *Cankam* lasted 3.700 years and included 3.700 poets. Both *cankams* submerged in the sea, but the normative works *Tolkappiyam* and part of *Akattiyam* remain from that period. The legendary third *Cankam* lasted for 1.850 years under 49 kings, its 449 poets were presided by Nakkirar. The bardic poetry of Love (*akam*) and Fame (*puram*) is assigned to this *Cankam*. Historical records mention that a *Dravida Sangha* was held in 470 A.D. in the town of Madurai (Zvelebil, 1973: 45-7); they seem to provide a solid base to the tradition of Tamil Academies in the eyes of Western scholarship. However, this solid base certainly reveals a phenomenon “*canka*” but it does not justify a translation into “academy”. When applying the insight gained from synpraxic speech to a cultural translation of *palum telitenum...* in terms of the demand of *natakam* “image” most words lend themselves willingly to a mimetic translation. Milk, for instance can be demonstrated quite easily, either by its cause: the cow, or its process: milking, or its product: flowing milk. Likewise cause or effect translations bring out the communicative potential of these four lines. However, when we arrive at the term *cankattamil* we have to halt and think very deeply. How should we portray *cankam*?: as a lasting structure, perhaps as the huge temple in Madurai?; as normative body, a gathering? But, as a gathering of who, of the *auctores*, the poets? Then, how does a poet look, what does he do?;

or, perhaps of the *lectores*, the experts, to speak in terms of Bourdieu? (Bourdieu, 1990: 94-5). Again, who are the experts: Brahmins, wearing the sacred thread?, senior poets who are well-versed in the threefold Tamil? Or, is *Cankam* a centre of the authority: the kings, perhaps? comfortably seated, wearing tall crowns or protecting their subjects by means of their long arms?; or the gods? who do not blink, nor sweat, or occasionally may have more arms, several heads or a third eye? Cultural translation is not easy.

Epistemology

Argued from a structural-functionalist point of view, our problematic term *cankam* fills a meaningful slot within the larger context of the Tamil stanza. To my understanding this slot is the slot of “desired knowledge”; that type of “desired knowledge” that comes with an entire culture, rooted in language as a synpraxic ground. As Asad remarks “The knowledge that Third World languages deploy more easily is not sought by Western societies in quite the same way, or for the same reason”(1986:158). To translate *cankattamil* properly it seems that we have to descend into the imagery that portrays such acclaimed knowledge. The desire for knowledge draws us to the Academia, but whereto or to what is the Tamil poet drawn? Tradition tells us that *cankams* were held in Madurai. No architectural structure remains from that period, nor do we have any records of such large structures; probably *cankams* were indeed gatherings. The critical authority of these gatherings is contested: legends show that men and gods struggle for dominance, for the final authority to award the supreme symbol of desired knowledge.¹ Its image, the golden lotus, *porramarai*, is the image that I would like to suggest as an adequate cultural translation of the term *Cankattamil*. In terms of symbolic capital we have now entered a realm that shares the force of Western *epistemology*. What does a golden lotus “mean” on its own terms when assessed from this angle, and, what contrasts does it reveal when confronted with the kind of epistemology that underlies the textual criticism and cultural theory discussed in 1984?

The *tamarai*, “lotus”, is a widely spread image both diachronically and synchronically. All layers of documented Tamil history assign an important place to this symbol, whereas synchronically the lotus is so omnipresent that even Jesus finds himself supported by a lotus, positioned in such a way that those who visit the Church can circumambulate the statue. The content of this highly popular form evokes the principle of growth, of transformation, of cyclic return and thereby eternal presence. As a structure, the seed of the plant is pure potentiality, as a process the stem struggles from the dark, fertile mud through the life-giving water as it grows with determination to reach the daylight. The unfolding petals show great sensitivity, intelligence and colourful diversification in exploring their surrounding: after dawn when the sun rises, they open in full inviting bees to come and secure the continuation of their species in double sided transaction; at dusk they collect themselves into a closed bud allowing the entire plant its necessary rest. The imagery seems infinite: structure, process and environment double, triple, multiply *ad infinitum*. Epistemology seen in these terms is organic, flexible and pragmatic, moreover it rejuvenates itself again and again with the sprouting of each flower. The “golden lotus”, the *porramarai*, secures this underlying principle beyond decay: gold is to stay illustrious and fresh, and so is the poetry that receives this kind of recognition. Even today the golden lotus adorns the sacred tank of the temple in Madurai.

Theory as a theory of knowledge, occupies a deep layer in Western Science similar to the seed of the lotus-in-bloom. Paul Rabinow traces the fascination with *epistemology* to seventeenth century Europe. It triumphed in the nineteenth century due to the claims of German professors in philosophy who crowned their discipline to the queen of sciences, her special expertise being *universal* problems and the ability to provide a sure *foundation* for all knowledge (1986: 235). When comparing “theory” with the “golden lotus”, we wonder: how does theory look? To visualise “theory” will be difficult since its realm is the *mind*; it works, represents and judges internally (1986: 235). In short, theory is an idea and has no form. What does theory of knowledge inspire? Quoting Rorty, Rabinow diagnoses the

desire for knowledge as a desire for constraint — a desire to find “foundations” to which one might cling, frameworks beyond which one must not stray, objects which impose themselves, representations which cannot be gainsaid. In this way, modern professional philosophy represents the “triumph of the quest for certainty over the quest for reason” (1986: 234).

We examined the fillers of the functional slot that puzzled us in the stanza *palum telitenum...*: the “golden lotus” and the “theory” as to their form, imagery and critical mass, now, let us compare the two also on the level of their relationship to the experiential world. The examination of representations about “reality” and “the knowing subject” ultimately yields knowledge, bestowing “meaning” on both; moreover this “meaning” is, as Rabinow says, a knowledge that is supposed to be universal (1986: 235). Interpretations and meanings that transcend space and time probably result from those textual strategies that depend on “a prior and critical disjunction of the world”, described earlier by Tyler. In Tamil terms the examination of these representations is performed in terms of an intimate relationship between the two, that is, “reality” and “the knowing subject”. This relationship is coined as *porul*. *Porul* covers a variety of possible meanings, like “meaning (of a word)”; “property, wealth”; “thing, substance”; “truth, reality, verity”; “gold”; “a child” and, “fruit of action”. *Porul* seems to be fully embedded in the experiential world both quantitatively and qualitatively; it refers to ideas as well as to objects, it relates cause and effect as concrete realities. In short not only does *porul* accommodate “meaning” in our sense of “concept”, it refers to and at the same time is the object of reference. It can even become the object it refers to as a fruit of methodical action. Clifford asserts that “writing has been reduced to method” in Anthropology (1986: 2); in response, Tamil asserts that “synpraxic speech” should occupy this place of honour.

Method

Between the second century B.C. and the third century A.D. Tamil formalised its grammar, the *Tolkappiyam* “the old poem”. Three

chapters describe the inscription of sound, the formation of utterances and the relationship between language and the existential world. This relationship is a genetic one, and skilful use of its potential transforms “ordinary” language (*kotum tamil* “bent, crooked, unchiselled” Tamil) into an instrument of metaphysics (*cem tamil* “auspicious, red” Tamil). *Cankattamil* is such auspicious Tamil, thus it constitutes a method for integrating mankind and the universe. This is a double sided interaction that is visualised in three categories of reference. Together they form the subject matter of *porul: mutal* “first”, *karu* “seed, embryo, creation” and *uri* “peel, skin”. This theory of knowledge takes very concrete forms. *Mutal* reveals itself as the framework of space and time. *Tolkappiyam* outlines the Tamil world as a well knit *structure*, concretely present in the form of five landscapes. The inner world of *love* and the outer spectrum of *fame* bestow on these landscapes detailed horizons of recognition. The *processes* of Time are intimately related to the subcategories listed under space. Both share a triple dimension: three spaces (of gods, men and “dark forces”) and three times (of past, present and cyclic potentialis) integrate physics and metaphysics as structuring structures and processes that human life has to deal with. Life comes in the garb of *karu*, the characteristic regional features of the five landscapes: all that is born to live and die there functions as shared *environment* and shared frame of reference. “Meaning” in this context is highly articulate, concrete and interrelated. “Theory” is deeply rooted in these situational contexts; it does not emerge in the form of “foundational insights into knowledge” or as “universal validities” but it appears as *uri* “peel”, “skin”, as “embodied perspective” within these known contexts of time, space and creation.² *Uri* resembles the old position of theory as “looking while taking part in the spectacle”. No observer experiences or acts in two “skins” at the same time, or without skin for that matter, similarly, in the words of Clifford, “no one reads from a neutral or final, position” (1986: 18). The Tamil universe is, in a way, deeply and very consciously, phenomenological. Human action, cultures, traditions, form samples of situated, synpraxic speech, they are produced continuously and in doing so all perspectives interact, clash, collaborate, exchange and

change; in short, “they never hold still to have their portraits made” (1986: 10).

The methodical relationship between “reality” and “the knowing subject” is first and foremost organic, inter-subjective between sender and receiver and therefore naturally flexible. Its subjectivity is guided by application. “Meaning” as the “fruit of action” or as “child” cannot be expressed more eloquently. Subjectivity as embodied perspective is chiselled into cultural coherence through the praxis of language as three: as word, as sound and as image. The quadrilateral of Anthropology seems to reappear in the form of a triangle of praxis, with the subject right in the middle. Its coherence emerges fully from speech, from the interiorised practices that are practised by subjective speakers in a flexible praxis of communication.

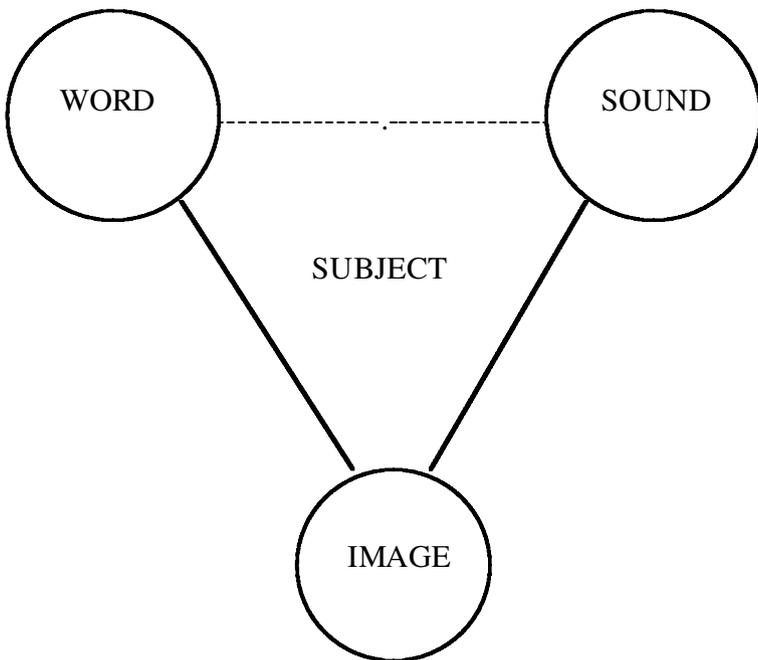


Figure 1 *Synpraxis*

A rich storehouse of Western models comes now to mind, such as *langue* (the grammatical structures of language), *parole* (its dynamic moment of application in speech), and *langage* (as the communicative environment of culture and society set in multi-sensory interactions). The threefold Tamil begins to reveal its theoretical scope and thrust only now: the language of words, the language of sounds and the language of images speak each a language of different types of knowledge. The simultaneous application of these different types of knowledge safeguard coherence, and integrate the subject into his or her surrounding. *Words*, as we saw cater to “meaning” in the conceptual sense, *sound* demands training of the human body, while *imagery* reveals great familiarity with the lived-in-world. The Tamil *iyal*, *icai*, *natakam* seem to correspond in a natural way to the knowledge of logic, of the body, and of imagination. Word, sound and image, chisel prepositional knowledge, practical knowledge and knowledge of familiarity. It is a skilfully concerted effort of the speaking subject. This is a praxis not only of discursive thought, but of discursive action as well. Rabinow points out that reasoning cannot be equated by logic. Quoting Hacking (*Language, Truth and Reason*, 1982) he puts it this way “Logic is fine in its own domain, but that domain is a limited one”. Logic is the preservation of truth, while reasoning is a style of reasoning that creates the possibility for truth and falsehood (1986: 237). Basically reasoning is a *praxis* that is public and social, combining prepositional, practical and familiar modes. Its synergy occurs in the double sided interaction of communication.

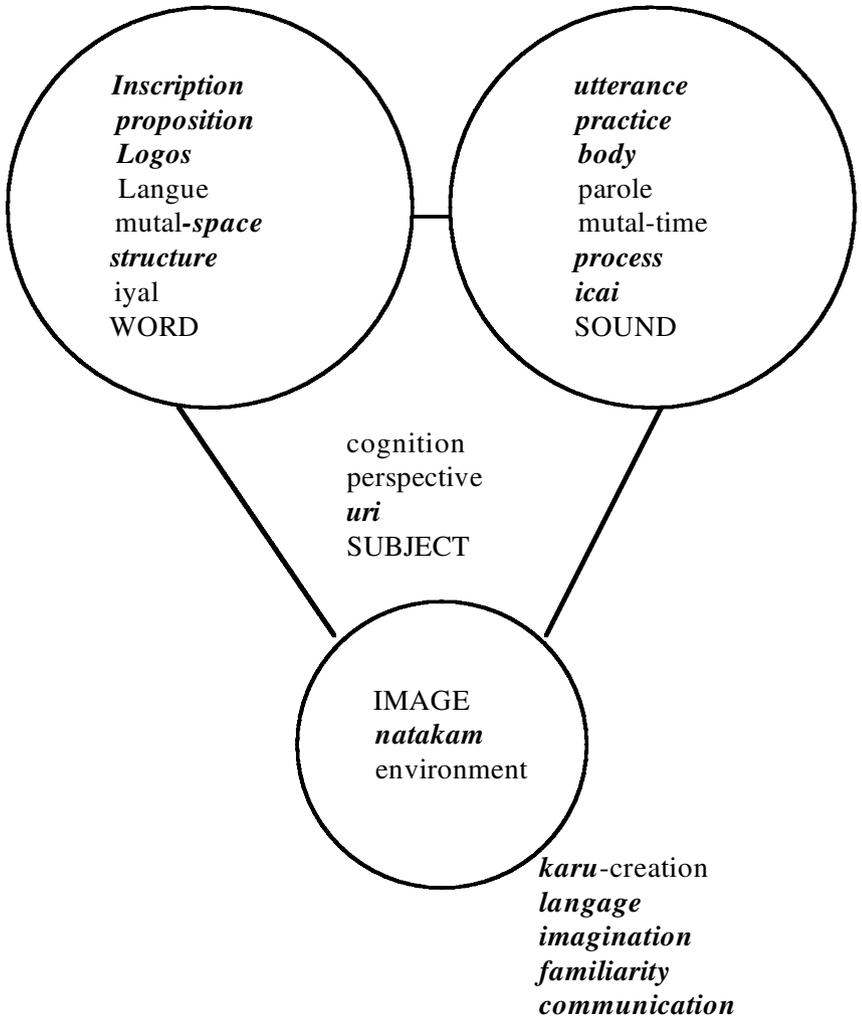


Figure 2 *Synergy*³

Representation

Translation of cultures, warns Asad, was not always so much in evidence (1986:141). His plea to transform a language in order to translate the coherence of the original, has taken now unforeseen forms (1986: 157). The pushing beyond the limits of one's habitual usage has revealed a richer life of language and of language potential that force us not only to stretch our medium of representation but to reconsider our horizons, to adjust our methodology of research, reflection and representation. Language as synpraxic speech encompasses prepositional knowledge, practical knowledge and knowledge of familiarity; it allows the explicit verbalised knowledge we embraced so tightly as well as the implicit, tacit knowledge we have scorned, ignored or reduced to "raw data". It offers all three a vehicle for self-expression and lucid articulation. The study of human society and culture through the methodology of word, sound and image, generates an understanding that is richer, more coherent and integrative. It situates the subject who forms the object of study, in his or her own phenomenological field of emergence and forces us by the very dynamism of its data that demand these three "inroads of cognition" to empathy and "reasoning with". This approach is truly dialogical, as Rabinow remarks in terms of Marilyn Strathern, the guiding value of experimental ethnographic writing is "the effort is to create a relation with the Other" (1986: 255).

Today, by the turn of this millennium, experimental ethnography is offered new possibilities that were not foreseen fourteen years ago. The advent of multimedia has brought about a mode of writing that can express in one concerted effort the forces of word, sound and image, of prepositional knowledge, practical knowledge and knowledge of familiarity. It recognises poetic dimensions in ethnography that are not, as Clifford assures us, "limited to romantic or modernist subjectivism: it can be historical precise, objective" (1986: 26). Persistent models, transmitted and transformed over centuries by oral traditions are revealing now their potential of coherent articulation of culture, society and interaction.⁴ Dialogue and authority of interpretation have entered a new phase of experiment through the

possibilities of interactivity in multimedia design.⁵ Clifford bases accepted anthropological authority on two textual legs: an experiential “I was there” element as unique authority, and, its very “suppression” in the text as scientific authority (1986: 244). Interactive multimedia texts unsettle this balance. The data of sound and image make experiential authority much less unique and allow the “reader-become-user” room for first hand doubt and for different interpretations. The demand for interactivity forces authority to open up data to the user from the point of view of their applications: how do the data work and to what purpose in communicative exchange? New forms of writing, polyphony, heteroglossia advocated in *Writing Culture* have arrived at the doorstep of anthropology. They demand a response, an interaction with the world and a new transaction with its inhabitants.

Communication in performance as representation (Kersenboom, 1986: 78-86) opens new possibilities to senders and receivers. Its validity is determined by double sided interaction: “milk, honey, sugar and porridge — these all four in a mixture I give you; you in return, O pure Ruby, must give to me *Cankattamil* that is threefold.”

Word, sound, image I offer YOU;
YOU give ME the Anthropology that is three.

Notes

¹ Legends hold that the poet-expert Nakkirar stood up against the god Shiva in his capacity of critic of Tamil poetry. Shiva appeared at the assembly, pleased with a poem on the goddess that he himself had composed. The imagery was quite standard and poetic language average. Shiva, however, was proud of his image of bees mistaking the

hair of the goddess for a fragrant blossom. Nakkirar refused to give Shiva the award of the golden lotus, maintaining that this poem was pure flattery and quite unrealistic: hair smells unless it is well washed, oiled and perfumed, no bee would seek long hair in its natural state. Shiva rose in anger, threatened Nakkirar urging him to reverse his decision. Nakkirar however, quickly jumped in the pond for a narrow escape as Shiva opened his third eye, trying to burn down the self-willed expert. Nakkirar's pragmatism and wisdom brought Shiva back to his senses and made him bless the poet for good judgement and integrity.

² Chapter 3, "World" in *Word, Sound, Image, The life of the Tamil text*, p. 41-82 deals with the problem of *porul* in great detail and length. Subject matter, dynamics and implications of perspective are discussed from various theoretical angles. The interactive CD *Bhairavi Varnam* that accompanies the monograph offers the perspective of the female solo performer of the poem "Mohamana". Its setting in the world is demonstrated by the CD-i file *Content-Space-Text-World*.

³ The coherence of structure, process, environment is inspired by the circle of interrelations in the Integral Management of Change as a tool for Business Consultancy (van Duren en van Manen, 1992).

⁴ Earlier multimedia publications were designed by me on the basis of indigenous models, still extant in the oral tradition of the Tamils. The interactive CD *Bhairavi Varnam* (1995) is based on the principles of *col* "utterance" and analysed into *ceyyul* "form" and *porul* "content". Form is dealt with as *prayoga*, that is, the graded training in the curricula of threefold: *iyal* "Tamil language and texts", *icai* "Karnatic music (vocal and lute *vina*)" and *natakam* "dance (*bharata natyam*)". I underwent this training myself in India for a period of more than twenty years until today. The Menu "Content" is based on the categories of *triloka* "three worlds" and *trikala* "three tenses in Time". The meta-structure for both Form and Content is determined by the dimensions "Space" and "Time".

The CD-ROM *Devadasi Murai, Remembering Devadasis* was co-produced with the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts

(IGNCA) in New Delhi. Its design is based on the ritual procedures of temple worship, termed *arcana*. These procedures traverse ritual space and time, and the offerings that are performed mark their intersection. The procedures for daily ritual (*nityaracan*) and (*naimittikarcana*) festival ritual were elicited from temple manuals, intensive fieldwork and participation in several South Indian temples.

⁵ Interactive multimedia have been received with great enthusiasm in India. The first demonstration of the CD-i *Bhairavi Varnam* during the music season in Madras met with great acclaim, discussions, interviews and publicity in the media. Several titles have appeared on a great variety of subjects: religious texts, epical drama, music, dance, poetry. Recently the IGNCA released its CD-ROM *Gita Govinda*, one of the great poems on Krishna that has spread over entire India in all regional languages, musical and drama styles since the twelfth century. The Multimedia team of the Cultural Informatics group seeks to intensify cultural learning and awareness through these applications of word, sound and image.

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