Theatrical and Ritual Boundaries in South Asia: 
Afterword*

Starting point

This volume is the second in what became a series of two issues dedicated to the Theatrical and Ritual boundaries in South Asia. The first volume was published in two parts as CIS 19.1 and CIS 19.2. The initial core and idea of investigating the topic of boundaries between theatre and ritual could not be better summarized than by quoting the abstract of the volume in extenso:¹

The pertinence of maintaining a strict dichotomy between the categories of theatre and ritual has been challenged by recent studies. It has been argued that such a separation is a construct of European modernity, which is not possibly applicable to every time and society. The disciplinary

* This essay is part of the research conducted in the project “Performing Arts and Religious Practices in Classical and Medieval Sanskrit Literature”, carried out at the Institute of Asian and Oriental Studies, Indology, of the University of Zurich (funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation).

¹ This short manifesto-like declaration of intents has been elaborated on in the Introduction to CIS 19.1–2, in particular with regard to how the debate about theatrical and ritual boundaries has been shaped at the intersection of the humanities and social sciences, and how this was preceded by another debate, within Indian studies, about the origins of Sanskrit drama. See Ganser 2017: viii-xxiv.
boundaries between theatre and ritual have been furthermore questioned by the emergence of new fields of research such as performance studies and ritual studies, in which these boundaries are manifestly and programatically blurred. The case of South Asia offers a particularly rich reservoir for an enquiry into the relevance of the concepts of theatre and ritual as applied to a plurality of performative contexts. On the one hand, contemporary forms of performance, with reference to which scholars prefer nowadays to use denominations such as “ritual drama”, “ritual performance” or “staged ritual”, are seen to challenge the very existence of two clearly separate spheres. On the other, since the beginnings of systematic scientific discourse in classical India, theatre and ritual have been treated as different objects, each endowed with its proper textual codifications (śāstra) and technical vocabulary.

Links between ritual and theatre exist on multiple levels and throughout the history of South Asia. Starting from observations concerning the Vedic period, the dramatic character of some of the dialogical hymns of the Rg-Veda and their ritual interpretations in the Brāhmaṇas have given rise to speculation about the use of dramatic dialogues in Vedic ritual and their possible connection to the origin of Sanskrit theatre. The first theoretical treatise on theatre, the Nāṭyaśāstra, displays in its turn strong links with the ritual universe: theatre is launched as the “Fifth Veda”, and its performance is preceded by a complex ceremony, the pūrvaraṅga, described as a worship of the deities of the stage. Such links are reiterated also in the extant texts of the Sanskrit plays, for instance with the mention of the benediction at the opening, and of the occasions for staging a play during public religious festivals or royal investitures.

In classical India, we witness the emergence of professional figures connected to the various arts of dancing (nrṛta), singing (gīta) and instrumental playing (vādya), both at the court and at the temple, but also figures of ascetics and lay devotees, worshipping the deities through the performative arts in order to obtain extra-worldly results. The boundaries between theatre and ritual become even more permeable and difficult to discern in the medieval forms of devotional drama, such as the Vaiṣṇava līlās, where actors embody the characters rather than represent them. Embodiment, or making the gods and other beings present, is also a key feature of various forms of performance involving possession, which are often carried out through a highly formalized procedure resembling a dramatic score, and are at times preceded by singing and dancing as methods to provoke the possession. Today, anthropologists do not fail to notice how rituals and theatrical performances often cohabit the same religious or cultural event, and how the labelling as either theatre or ritual becomes a ground of contention in the modern politics of cultural heritage and tourist industry.
The volume’s aim is to investigate first of all the connections, intersections and ruptures between the theatrical and the ritual sphere, paying utmost attention to the vocabulary used with reference to them. The focus will be on both practices and texts, and on areas where literary sources, religious practices and living performative arts overlap and interact with one another. Secondly, the practical and theoretical implications of either preserving, dismantling or displacing the boundaries between ritual and theatre will be tested against specific case studies, in which such boundaries reveal their crucially problematic and often contested nature.

A general interest in exploring the theatrical and ritual boundaries in South Asia was manifested by the core participants of the May 2014-Panel of the same name, organized by Elisa Ganser at the 5th Coffee Break Conference in Rome “Space, Culture, Language and Politics in South Asia: Common Patterns and Local Distinctions”.

Several other people, with whom we had the occasion to discuss some of the ideas outlined in the abstract in friendly conversations, gradually joined the project. We hence decided to enlarge the number of contributions in order to cover as many topics as possible, within the relevant field of the current discourse. Our intent was to approach the topic through different disciplinary perspectives, and to incorporate recent theoretical developments in the field of performance and ritual studies in a dialogue with the analyses and concepts drawn from the primary sources in Indian languages. This meant promoting both historically and philologically informed investigations, based on the ancient texts and epigraphic documents, as well as studies relying on the anthropological data coming from fieldwork and the observation of living forms of performance.

The other major panel of the Conference was published in 2016 as CIS 18, edited by Cristina Bignami and Ewa Dębicka-Borek, with the title Cosmopolitanism and Regionalism in Indian Cultural Dynamics. As declared in the Introduction, “The Coffee Break Project focuses on scholarly methodology and aims at creating a platform for comparing not only data from different fields of research, but also concepts and vocabulary of different traditions of scholarship that constitute the different approaches of disciplines such as, e.g., anthropology, history of religion, and theatre” (Bignami et al. 2016: vii).
Despite our efforts, we were not able to secure contributions on a number of topics, especially significant for an historical perspective. One of them is the connection of aesthetic and religious experience, which is for instance evidenced by the addition of śāntarasa in early medieval aesthetic theory, and in the bhaktirasa theorized by Bengali Vaiṣṇava authors in the latter half of the second millennium, which is closely intertwined with practical perspectives on acting and devotion based on the Puranic narratives.\(^3\) The second is the classical and medieval theatre of the Jains and Buddhists, where religious drama was staged for the community during festivals and processions, constituting a powerful propaganda instrument.\(^4\) On the contemporary and more ethnographic front, although the number of possible case studies is much greater and virtually coinciding with as many fieldworks as allowed by individual efforts, we regret not to have been able to include the paper presented by Giorgio De Martino at the Coffee Break Conference, which dealt with a legal case of contestation of theatrical and ritual boundaries, in the perspective of an international recognition of Teyyam as intangible heritage, by a group of performers in Kerala.\(^5\) We are, however, particularly glad that we could extend the query to other regions which, although not strictly part of the Indian subcontinent, have important historical and cultural contacts with India, which are reflected in the performative practices. The textual and epigraphic records from regions as far as Indonesia and Cambodia often provide better or less ambiguous witnesses for past practices common to the Indic world, while ethnographic accounts confront us with what might be the vestiges of forms long extinct in India.\(^6\)

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3 See, e.g., Okita 2017.
4 See, e.g., Leclère 2018.
5 Nonetheless, De Martino managed to submit a paper dealing with the globalization of Teyyam in CIS 18 (De Martino 2016).
6 This is the case of articles by Goodall and Acri in this volume, which compare, to various extents, data coming from India with that from Cambodia and Indonesia.
Old questions, new methods

In his introduction to *The Mirror of Gesture* (*Abhinayadarpana*), the first translation of a treatise on Indian dance to circulate in the West, A. K. Coomaraswamy advocated the lack of clear-cut boundaries between art and ritual in India, extending up into the realm of everyday life:

> The more deeply we penetrate the technique of any typical Oriental art, the more we find that what appears to be individual, impulsive, and ‘natural’, is actually long-inherited, well-considered, and well-bred. Under these conditions life itself becomes a ritual. (Coomaraswamy & Gopalakrishnayya 1917: 4)

At the opposite end of the spectrum, one may quote M. Narayanan’s reaction to the emphasis on ritual in studies on Indian theatre, voiced almost a century later:

> […] the unfortunate fact is that among the later adherents to ritual/performance studies, there has developed a tendency when it comes to studies of non-Western theatres—especially traditional Asian theatres—to overemphasize the importance of ritual in performance. Sometimes this is done even to the exclusion of other aspects that are equally or more vital to the understanding of performance. This inclination has also led some to explain away many features of performance by interpreting them as rituals, while obviously ignoring their value as techniques or conventions of theatre. (Narayanan 2006: 137)

Narayanan attributes what he dubs as the “over-ritualization of performance” to a recent trend in ritual and performance studies. However, the connection of Indian theatre and ritual is already part of a much earlier perception of Indian art, recorded for instance in Coomaraswamy’s statement evoked above. His translation of the Sanskrit treatise *Abhinayadarpana* had a remarkable influence in shaping and consolidating a perception of Indian theatre as spiritual, religious or

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7 This is linked to earlier works on ritual and performance by anthropologists of religion—for instance of Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner—working in the second half of the 20th century (*ibid.*).
ritualistic, including on a central figure in avant-garde theatre such as Edward Gordon Craig.\(^8\)

The text of Coomaraswamy is also emblematic since it intersects an older debate, the one about the religious or secular origin(s) of Sanskrit drama. Already known to Europe as a literary form at the end of the 18\(^{th}\) century, the first editions and translations of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* made it evident that Indian theatre was a high art and an independent discipline endowed with a text. At the same time, this text was unmistakably informed by a ritual universe, ambiguously caught between the old Vedic ritual imagery and a new one, made of worship aimed at appeasing and pleasing a new class of gods closer to the epic and Puranic universe. The search for the link between ritual and theatre as expressed in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* started in the last decades of the 19\(^{th}\) century and continued well into the 20\(^{th}\) century with an upswing in the 1960s and sporadic outbreaks up to today. Obviously enough, this debate about the origins of Sanskrit drama has mostly remained the prerogative of a restricted circle of textual scholars of Indian studies. As a consequence, the tendency to blur the boundaries between the sphere of ritual and theatre in India has been often attributed—as for instance by Narayanan—to the more recent developments in disciplines at the crossroad of the humanities and social sciences. In performance studies, the impact of Asian theatre in the redefinition of the categories of “theatre”, “ritual” and “performance” by the avant-gardes is generally evaluated as a moment of revelation triggered by the visual contact with a foreign form of performance, for instance Antonin Artaud’s encounter with Balinese theatre in 1931 at the Colonial Exhibition in Paris, or Bertolt Brecht’s vision of the Peking Opera actor Mei Lanfang at a performance in Moscow in 1935—to quote two major figures who especially developed ideas about theatre as ritual or ritual-like.\(^9\)

\(^{8}\) See Ganser (forthcoming).

\(^{9}\) See, e.g., the essays on inter-cultural theatre in Fischer-Lichte et al. 1990.
Besides this often-repeated pattern, other trajectories are also possible. The already mentioned English director Craig, for instance, never saw Indian theatre performed. However, we now know that his idea about the Über-Marionette is much indebted to Richard Pischel’s writing about puppet theatre and its Indian Heimat, which was meant to contribute to the Indological debate on the origins of Sanskrit drama. Moreover, Craig’s direct and principal interlocutor about Indian theatre, in the technical knowledge of which he entrusted his hopes for a regeneration of the English stage, was none else than Coomaraswamy.  

This example is meant to show that although phenomena may appear distant and unrelated, a consideration of the larger net of intellectuals and knowledge circulation, including both the academic and the artistic milieus, might shed light on hitherto unnoticed connections.

In the Introductory Essay to the first volume, the multifocality of the debate on theatrical and ritual boundaries in South Asia has been traced to different historical and disciplinary intersections. Accordingly, across the map of Indological studies dealing more or less directly with this topic, two main dominant tendencies have been noticed. The first consists in investigating areas in which the two spheres of theatre and ritual and the concepts associated with them interfere, overlap, or are so entangled as to result in hybrid forms, to which no clear-cut classification seems to do full justice. These studies are often based on ethnographic accounts, and use the concepts developed in the social sciences with a focus on performance. The second tendency, on the contrary, privileges a historical-philological approach and can

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10 See Ganser (forthcoming).
11 Similarly, Bansat-Boudon suggests, if by way of speculation, that an indirect influence of the Nāṭyaśāstra on Artaud’s vision of theatre might have occurred either by considering the historical contact between the Indian and Balinese theatre traditions, or through the intermediary of Artaud’s contemporary René Daumal, who translated the first chapter of the Nāṭyaśāstra into French. See Bansat-Boudon 2012.
be linked to the debate about the ritual or secular origins of Sanskrit drama. This debate extends in some cases over theatre’s ancillary arts, such as dance and music, in their various manifestations from high arts to folk entertainments, which often overlap with their uses in ritual and religious contexts.

**Pulling the threads together**

Since a thematic planning and state of the art have been provided in the Introductory Essay to the first volume, and since an overview of the contents of the various articles is attached to both volumes, I will limit myself, in the following pages, to present how the authors have variously interpreted the categories of ritual and theatre and the question of boundaries. Albeit sketchy and partial, this may serve the reader as a *fil rouge* to read through the various papers.¹²

As Marianna Ferrara puts it at the outset of her paper, a discussion of the question of the link between theatre and ritual cannot but depend on how one is prepared to flesh out these notions. Ferrara starts from the acknowledgement of how the categories of ritual and theatre underwent profound reshuffling during the reshaping of the disciplines in the 20th century, and ended up caught in a net of dichotomies, such as text/myth vs. performance, aesthetic vs. religious, authentic vs. inauthentic, fictional vs. real, and so on. Although in this proliferation of opposites “performativity” and “theatricality” were typically associated with the communication of meaning, respectively, in ritual and theatre, when used the other way round they become useful tools to rethink them. Performativity applied to theatre can be used to speak about what an artistic production does, not only in terms of its aesthetic effect, but in terms of socio-religious efficacy on the audience. Theatricality applied to ritual, in its turn, challenges the idea of ritual

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¹² More than following a programmatic intent, or a thematic division, the repartition of the articles in either of the two volumes has been driven by practical concerns, such as deadlines and publishing constraints, as well as by the timely spaced involvement of the various contributors in the project.
being just a standard or codified behaviour, and focuses attention on
display as an inherent dimension of rites. Rethinking Vedic recitation
and the performance of rituals disciplined by the Brāhmaṇas as two
faces of the same coin, Ferrara explores how ritual efficacy is achieved
through theatricality, intended as display of skills with a normative
power. This aims at reproducing the religious discourse and its social basis.

Hermina Cielas similarly focuses on the display of skills in
(Sāhitya)Avadhāna, an art which shows many similarities with the perhaps better known Vedāvadhāna or Anyōnyam, and thereby with Vedic recitation. The development of mnemonic techniques and the display of extraordinary memory skills and concentration are for instance common to both. Following the hints of scholars of ritual studies, according to whom not all ritual is religious, she discusses the cultural practice of Avadhāna, difficult to seize as either ritual or theatre, as a “secular rite” or “the ritual of memory”. Its fixed and predictable score makes it a ritual, but the mixture of creativity and skills it requires, involving all sorts of literary games, makes it an art of entertainment for the audience.

A broad definition of ritual as standard, codified, or stylized behaviour is used by Gautam Chakrabarti to talk about the link between Ariane Mnouchkine/Hélène Cixous’s play L’Indiade and a certain relation to ritual derived from Indian theatre. As in the case of other avant-garde directors, a new vision of theatre and its place in society was developed by the direct contact with living forms of Asian theatre—Kathakali in the specific case of Mnouchkine. Besides looking at the link between ritual and theatre as a “search for transcendence” filtered by European sensitivities and expectations about Asian theatre, with a comparative gesture Chakrabarti looks at the echo of some of the theoretical principles of the Nāṭyaśāstra in the staging of L’Indiade, suggesting that some of the precepts contained in this ancient text could have indirectly influenced Mnouchkine, through her direct acquaintance with Kathakali.

The Nāṭyaśāstra is at the centre of the reflection of other authors, in particular Thomas Kintaert and Natalia Lidova. In his endeavour to single out the textual data about ritual in Bharata’s seminal treatise on
theatre, Kintaert opts methodologically for a restriction of the category of ritual to religious ritual in order to keep it apart from theatre and avoid overextending it to any kind of stylized behaviour. He builds up his own definition of ritual as “formalized action that is ultimately (by itself or as part of a larger performance) aimed at securing the support of one or more supernatural beings for achieving a specific goal”, noticing that in Indian languages there is not a single word corresponding to “ritual” working as a collective term for manifold phenomena such as temple worships, observances, religious processions, sacrifices, etc. The construction of a database on ritual data in the Nāṭyaśāstra and its analysis might eventually help scholars to better determine the ritual world of the Nāṭyaśāstra and thereby its cultural and historical setting.

Lidova goes even further, and situates theatre on the side of the pūjā ritual, in opposition to the Vedic yajña. For Lidova, the link between drama and the pūjā is not only allegorical, but structural and functional, as the affinity with the Brahmayāga and the Indra festival described in ritual texts suggests. Lidova considers early nāṭya as a “visual sermon” on a par with the recitation of the epic text, and stresses its value in spreading new religious ideas. On the contrary, she regards classical kāvya as a secular development. For Lidova, a clearer understanding of the ritual background of the Nāṭyaśāstra might throw light on the development of the pūjā as the central ritual of Hinduism.

The connection between ancient rituals and drama is also addressed, though in very different ways, by David Pierdominici Leão and Silvia D’Intino, with focus on the poetic text. Pierdominici Leão looks at the peculiarly licentious overtones of ritual in a satirical play of the 14th century—the Hasyārṇavaprahasana of Jagadīśvara—where the sacred meaning of the Spring Festival is comically turned into a parody of sexual enjoyment. The Spring Festival is indicated as one of the occasion for staging a play in several prologues, and its description constitutes an element of the narrative plot in other Sanskrit plays. Pierdominici Leão sees an original connection between farce and the ancient spring rites coinciding with the festival of Kāma in later sources. These were characterized by public
participation and a collective access to the rite, unlike in the Vedic solemn ritual.

D’Intino also moves away from the solemn ritual as a candidate in the debate about the origins of Sanskrit drama. She focuses instead on the poetic form of some Vedic hymns that present a dialogical structure. Although the universe and imagery informing these hymns is clearly ritual, the study of the referents of the demonstrative pronouns punctuating the dialogues reveals sophisticated practices of literary distanciation, including dialogues with two or more voices (saṃvāda) and monologues (atmāstuti). The poet never speaks in his own voice, but through a poetic persona, which is regarded by D’Intino as a process of distanciation rather than identification, in which “self” and “role” emerge in opposition. This splitting of the poet’s self into different voices, or roles, prefigures the emergence of the character in what D’Intino regards as the “invention” of Indian theatre. At the same time, the creation of alterity in this “verbal theatre” has the effect of approaching men and gods onto the same sacrificial/spectacular scene.

The distinction into “self” and “role” is also discussed in practices involving possession. It requires, in fact, a reflection on the different ways in which the performer can enter in relation with another entity, be it a fictional character or an all too real deity. As authors dealing with performances in which possession is the main feature argue—Irene Majo Garigliano on Deodhāni-nāc, Marianne Pasty-Abdul Wahid on Muṭiyēṭṭu’ and S. A. S. Sarma on Kaḷameluttum Pāṭṭum and Teyyam—what is given to see in such public spectacles are the deities themselves acting through a performer, sometimes identified with an oracle or assuming the function of oracle when he interacts with the public at set times. These “ritual performances” are first of all treated as rituals since ritual efficacy is principal in them. Pasty-Abdul Wahid evokes a distinction in Kerala between art forms meant for worship (anuṣṭhāna-kalā) and arts for entertainment (drṣya-kalā). Muṭiyēṭṭu’, Kaḷameluttum Pāṭṭum and Teyyam all belong to the first group, while Kūṭiyāṭṭam—a form of Kerala Sanskrit drama—to the second. Just like rituals, the first group of arts have
ritual efficacy as their main goal and centre on the presence of a god. However, unlike rituals, they achieve their ends through dramatization and theatricality (in a stronger sense than the display of skills evoked by Ferrara), including mimetic representation and sometimes enactment of the myths. The second group prioritizes aesthetic effects and entertainment as the main goal. Although the main category seems to be art (*kalā*), Pasty-Abdul Wahid shows how it would be restrictive to interpret Muṭiyēṭṭu’ as a theatrical performance superimposed with ritual meaning. Moreover, in India all theatrical performances are generally considered a means to please the gods.

Pasty-Abdul Wahid looks at the importance of Muṭiyēṭṭu’ in the cult of Bhadrakāḷi and detects areas in which the two categories of ritual and theatre are blurred, for instance liminal moments in which the possession has technically come to an end but the performer is still venerated like a deity by the public. Another particularity of Muṭiyēṭṭu’ is that the whole myth of the main deed of the Goddess is enacted sequentially, following a fixed scenography. This also includes several characters identified by costumes and props, but only the main performer impersonating Bhadrakāḷi is actually possessed. The myth is thus re-actualized through theatre. In Teyyam, the theatrical element is still predominant, but the myth is only sung and the performer mainly dances with stylized movements.

S. A. S. Sarma shows how the cult of Vēṭṭaykkorumakan, a god venerated in Kerala as the son of Śiva and Pārvatī, includes two ritual performances in addition to the usual temple rituals based on medieval tantric manuals. These are the Kaḷameḻuttuṃ Pāṭṭum and the Teyyam, particularly spectacular rituals used in temples of the lower castes. These elaborate rituals, taking place over several days, are punctuated by other rituals, which differ from those associated with the higher castes. These complex ritual performances are worth analyzing, since possession is highly regulated and takes place gradually, including phases of dramatization difficult to define. Teyyam—considered as the larger ritual unit culminating in the Teyyāṭṭam (dance of the god)—has a “preliminary rite”, in which the performer wears some make up
and makes a series of regulated dance steps, resembling more an actor in rehearsal, since possession has not taken place yet.

The ritual of the Deodhāni-nāc described by Majo Garigliano is principally conceived as a dance (nāc) of gods who are possessing their human vehicles. Although it is treated as an independent ritual, it is connected with another ritual taking place at the same time at the Kāmākhyā temple in Assam, the Manasā-pūjā. In the Deodhāni-nāc several deities connected with the Kāmākhyā temple complex annually possess a group of non-professional performers, who dance for three days to the beat of drums. Unlike theatre, which is a fiction, the possession is real and has to be authenticated by the display of supernatural powers, like walking on blades or transgressive practices, typical of Tantric deities, as also pointed out by Sarma in the context of Kerala possession. Here the performance does not tell a story or follow a myth, however the sequence of the ritual dance and the ritual phases preceding it are highly fixed. Majo Garigliano remarks how the deodhās, more akin to moving icons than actors, develop nevertheless a set of individual gestures or movements, which they display as fixed numbers year after year. Although the Devadhāni-nāc is a ritual performance evading any univocal classification, the categories of theatre (script, training, costume, acting etc.) can be used, as if in a contrastive way, to distinguish the Deodhāni-nāc from a theatrical performance, whilst pointing out its specificity as a visual spectacle.

Apart from being an activity by which the gods like to manifest themselves, dance is shown in several papers as a sui generis activity, entertaining special links with ritual. In certain cases, this ritual connotation involves a distinction from theatre, as in the case of Kūṭiyāṭṭam dealt with by Virginie Johan. Although everybody recognizes it as “theatre” (nāṭya), sometimes a Kūṭiyāṭṭam performance changes its name into “dance” (nṛtta), in particular when it is offered as a ritual offering in temples. A theatrical performance can be offered, in fact, to the deity of a temple, on a par with more common and less expensive ritual items, such as lamps. But dance, as a unit distinct from theatre, works also as a frame for the play, preceding and following a theatrical
performance in the form of kriya, a sequence of ritual acts identified as dance (nṛtta) in the acting manuals. Kriya/dance can also intervene in the body of some plays and break the flow of the narration at specific moments. Apart from reporting a number of opinions by practitioners about what ‘dance’ could mean as inserted in the body of the play, the analysis of Johan suggests that it works as a sort of “meta-puṟappāṭu” or “meta-pūrvaraṅga”, ritually bringing the gods on the stage when required by the narrative.

Dancing and acting are also metaphors for divine activity as cosmic activity, which, as Aleksandra Wenta explores in her paper, has been especially productive in Śaiva philosophical speculation. In the context of Cōḷa Chidambaram in South India, the state-cult revolving on the icon of Naṭarāja (Śiva-the Dancer, or ‘lord of actors/dancers’) seems to have played a role in Maheśvarānanda’s (13th–14th century) development of a non-dualist soteriological doctrine, in which the dancing god is central. Maheśvarānanda adopts earlier motives about cognitive ritual and inner worship (antarbhakti), which he reinterprets as a meditation on the Five Acts (pañcakṛtya) of Śiva, already linked by Śaivasiddhānta masters with the icon of Śiva-the Dancer. Śiva is both an actor, assuming all the roles in the theatrum mundi, and as a dancer, acting playfully and out of free will. By performing the Five Acts of Śiva and realising his identity with the god as a free agent, man achieves liberation. This process is described by Wenta as a “role-taking” flowing, almost paradoxically, both ways: Śiva enacts the puruṣa by acting in the world, and the puruṣa assumes the role of Śiva-the Dancer by meditating on inner cognitive processes, by which he becomes the performer of the Five Acts.

Role-taking and disguise aimed at imitating or embodying the deity are also present in the discourse of Andrea Acri on performance as religious observance in the context of Tantric Śaivism and its Atimārgic precursors. The overarching category is that of religion or religious praxis, which includes elements of performance (acting, singing, dancing), in particular in the form of ritual offerings to a deity (upahāra), or observances (vrata) in which the adept assumes the external paraphernalia and
behaviours of a deity, becoming its “theatrical human embodiment”. These practices could involve also possession by the deity, although little is said about the regulation of those trance-like states. Acri explores in particular the category of the religious practitioner-cum-performer, often a peripatetic ascetic at the margins of society and caste norms. Evidence from central Java from the 9th century shows that performative practices travelled with religion at an early date, while modern ethnographic accounts from Bali suggest that these performers might have been integrated at some point in the temple ritual economy, becoming specialized temple dancers.

The temple dancer is at the very core of Dominic Goodall’s article, which focuses on female dancers and musicians in Śiva’s temples. The Devadāsī institution is well attested from Cōḷa-period inscriptions in the South, but its antiquity is often a question of debate, in particular the equivalence of “dancing courtesans” and “temple women”. Combining literary sources, ritual texts and Khmer epigraphy, Goodall shows convincingly that such women—courtesans belonging to the deity of a temple and employed therein for ritual dancing or playing—existed across the Indic world at least from the 7th century, but probably even earlier. Inscriptions show that at an early stage a variety of people were connected to temple service as property, in different capacities and according to strict hierarchies of socio-ritual status, among which women performers seem to have enjoyed a higher status than other women assigned to menial tasks. The literary texts depict women dancers as courtesans, but at the same time educated and wealthy. Among them, the figure of the Rudragaṇikā (‘courtesan’ of Rudra) emerges from South Indian Temple Āgamas from the 12th century as a high-status temple woman associated with specific practices of dedication and myths, whose services as a performer were an integral part of public religion and temple-liturgy.

The visibility of women dancers in public religion is suggested by the numerous sculptures and bas-relieves showing depictions of dancers on the walls of Indian temples. Moving away from a widespread understanding of these figures as generally auspicious, Anna Tosato concentrates on recurrent dance motives in the Hoysaleśvara temple
of Halebīd (Karnataka), which she identifies with specific *karaṇas* of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*—a group of 108 dance movements famously sculpted on the gateways of the Naṭarāja temple in Chidambaram and in a few other instances, including Prambanan in Central Java. Drawing on Nāṭyaśāstra and Śilpaśāstra texts, Tosato argues that some of the more common poses and hand gestures in the selected *karaṇas*—in particular the recurrent *alapallava/vismaya hasta*—might have had a shared conventional meaning attached to them, possibly originating in a theatrical context. In particular, in the texts, “the feeling of wonder”, “awe” and “reverential fear” are recurrent acceptations for this hand gesture and the *karaṇas* containing it. Since these images were placed in key spots in the temple architecture—namely at an eye level for the devotee performing the *pradakṣiṇa*—sculptors might have intended them for communicating the extraordinariness of the temple experience with a vocabulary common to theatre and iconography.

To sum up, most of the papers collected in the two volumes can be seen through the lens of a twofold framework, which reflect to some extent a disciplinary compartmentalisation: studies based on fieldwork tend to address cultural forms on the verge between theatre and ritual and papers based on textual and literary analysis to focus on the *Nāṭyaśāstra*—both in its prehistory and legacy as well as its ancillary arts. However, it has not been rare that authors have chosen to combine the two approaches, supporting ethnographic accounts with literary data and vice-versa, or applying new concepts and methods to old questions. This testifies to the importance of crossing the different perspectives and methodologies, combining literary and practical perspectives in an attempt to find historical links or simply resonances between past and present.

We are greatly indebted to the authors and reviewers, as well as to the Editorial Board and the Scientific Council of the *Cracow Indological Studies*, for actively engaging with this project and for making this journey a rewarding experience.

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