

## DANIÉLOU'S LĪLĀ

(March 2015)

In thinking about how to present Daniélou's approach to the concept of *līlā* in Hinduism, I must admit to struggling with different perspectives and angles until I saw the title in the announcement of the event sent to me a couple of months ago: "Daniélou's *līlā*". It is there that I found the key, in playing with this genitive. Daniélou's *līlā*. What does it mean? Is it Daniélou's appropriation of that concept? Is it Daniélou's transformation of the idea into a reality (that of his concrete philosophy of life and deep understanding of Hinduism)? Is it the limit itself of the "term" (*terminus* = "ending or finishing point", perhaps a point indicating the sublation of a taken-for-granted dichotomy: language-experience), a limit incarnate in Daniélou's philosophical and artistic work? Is it the way Daniélou himself played at and with the limits of the accepted *doxa* about the history, significance and range of that impossible terminus: Hinduism? Perhaps it is each one of those aspects, simultaneously leading to other (richer and more complex) combinations and an expansion of modalities and intensities of playing, as if on a musical instrument, in consonance with a symphony of dynamic multiplicities – one should not forget that Daniélou was a polytheist and a musician, among other things.

In this sense, it seems to me that there are two ways of neglecting and betraying *līlā*:  
1. Overlooking the karmic filter<sup>1</sup> of the limited individual involved in the cosmic field and thinking that we can impose ourselves upon others, that we can exert a permanent domination and rule the whole game: the consequences of this are religious fanaticism and a metaphysical allergy to differences.  
2. Thinking that the game is wholly arbitrary, a banality, an empty field open to the imprints of our personal invention and susceptible to being governed by it (to govern in the sense of the institution of government, not the process of governance). This attitude leads to a nihilistic destruction of everything related to any form of tradition<sup>2</sup>. In this lecture I will try to show that Daniélou's *līlā* can be seen as a way of avoiding these two dangerous implications of unfair play, and at the same time as

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<sup>1</sup> I allow myself to make a methodological use of the term *karma* to emphasize its contrast to *līlā*. Karmic action is limited and narrow, due to the fact that it stems from desire and lack, whereas *līlā* introduces us to true spontaneity, effortlessness and open-endedness (cf. *Brahma Sūtra* 1. 32, 3: *na prayojnatvāt lokvat tu līlākaivalyam*).

<sup>2</sup> It is not necessary to fall back on Gadamerian hermeneutics to indicate that there is a constitutive – and not (only) an oppressive – dimension of "tradition".

a challenge and a spur to continue the human adventure with a deeper and broader capacity of understanding. Understanding: a necessary exercise in humility.

Of course a twenty or even thirty-minute lecture on this subject is also an exercise in impossibility. If I were to reconstruct the idea of *līlā* in mainstream Hinduism, I wouldn't even arrive at Daniélou's play, and if I placed myself as an analytical observer, I would miss the core of the message (of Daniélou's *līlā* as well as the theological, ontological and epistemological implications of this post-Vedic concept), and it would take too long to get back to the essentials. So I will stay with the immanence of Daniélou's interplay between testimony and creation, and hope to convey some reflections as world-perspectives in interaction to broaden the horizon of our discussion and comprehension.

Daniélou's *līlā* is the vision of Hinduism as a corpus to be played with. This is exactly the reverse of any blasphemous or irreverent act against a religion or tradition. In order to play, one has to know the rules, and at the same time the rules always have to be known in the immanence of a field surpassing the individual's capacity to synthesize and conceptualize. Daniélou's *līlā* is a Hindu symphony of thought trying to do justice to a complexity and a concretion: *sanātana dharma*, that which is permanently transmitted, in different ways and on various levels, by means of an unsurpassable and never-fully understood cohesion. Those who name it "eternal law" make it too unified, homogeneous and hence static; those who deny it disrupt the functioning of this choice-and-determination system. But independently of all that, the game goes on, and it is impossible not to play. The main question is how conscious a part we take in it.

In Daniélou's work, explicit references to *līlā* and even any articulated treatment based on the axis of a macrocosmic-microcosmic understanding of the universe (*sarṁkhya* and *yoga*) appear at a later period. One can speculate that because *līlā* as a post-Vedic concept is used above all in the Vaiṣṇava tradition<sup>3</sup> – both referring to the creative process of the universe and also to the intervention of the God within world order –, the Shaivite Daniélou (*Śiva-śaran*) opted in most cases for an indirect approach and some encrypted references to this question. I will give two examples of this indirectness from his monumental book *Hindu Polytheism* (1964). In the first one he resorts to the *Viṣṇu-Purāṇa* (6. 7, 61) in order to present an interplay between knowledge and action in the process of creation. Knowledge [*vidyā*, *jñāna*] taken in the sense of a cosmic awareness of the wholeness of being and action understood as limited and limiting power [*karma*] is

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<sup>3</sup> Vgl. Norvin Hein: "Līlā", in: William Sax (ed.): *The Gods at Play. Līla in South Asia*. New York: Oxford, 1995. pp. 13-20, especially pp. 14-16.

dynamically reciprocal, and the ensuing veil has a constitutive function: it enables the multiplicity of existential levels to come into being: “Creation is born out of the power of knowledge, veiled in a greater or lesser degree by the power of action”<sup>4</sup>. In the second example he relates the term *upaniṣad* (which he translates rather freely as “approach”) with *darśana* (which he takes in its literal sense of “point of view” or “perspective”) and explicitly points to the limits of individuated knowledge – even in the case of bearers of a non-human [*apauruṣeya*] tradition – taking into account the ludic background of the creative interplay in ontological relativity. For the sage who perceives the secret of manifestation, the whole cosmos vanishes, since he “reduces the world to nothingness”<sup>5</sup> by means of a transcendent act of knowledge. If one literally adopts the perspective of the absolute, the perspectivity itself – and thus the game of mirrors and reflections – disappears entirely, and the game is over. The emphasis on the sphere of immanence (which goes hand in hand with his defense of Hindu polytheism) is a critical response to the illusionist hypothesis of Vedāntic monism, a doctrine that reduces the concept of *līlā* to a kind of empty metaphor ultimately pointing to an a-cosmic truth. According to Daniélou, *līlā* has a positive content and does not only have to do with the rhythms of a *creatio continua*, but also with the movements (perceptions, tendencies, actions) of all beings implicated in a context that is both fully accomplished in its order and permanently changing in its openness.

One might as a result of this be tempted to place Daniélou on the side of Tantric (as opposed to Vedāntic) tradition, since his exploration of the disregarded and unseen aspects of manifestation does not attempt to “go beyond” perception, but to “expand”<sup>6</sup> it under the guidance of a science of limits [*nidāna śāstra*]<sup>7</sup> and an exercise in correspondences [*upaniṣad*]. Without a science of limits, words like *maṇḍala*, *yantra*, “symbol” and even “temple” wouldn’t have much sense (in spite of their existence and persistence, that is, their important role in contemporary imagination). Without the risk of fidelity to the Upanishadic axis uniting micro- and macrocosm, the integration of the objective classification of world phenomena and the subjective field of experience would be reduced to a kind of speculative bad taste (as the logical positivist Alfred Ayer once said of idealistic metaphysicians like Bradley: they are ultimately “bad poets”<sup>8</sup>). Daniélou’s *līlā* might also be seen as a bridge between metaphysics and arts, especially if the latter are considered

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<sup>4</sup> Alain Daniélou: *Mythes et Dieux de l’Inde*. Paris, 2009, p. 65.

<sup>5</sup> Alain Daniélou: *Ibidem*.

<sup>6</sup> At this point one should bear in mind the now widely accepted etymology of the Sanskrit word *tantra*, from the root *tan-* (to expand).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Alain Daniélou: *Approche de l’hindouisme*. Paris 2005, p. 42.

<sup>8</sup> Alfred Ayer: *Language, Truth and Logic*. Oxford 1967, p. 12.

neither as an external imitation of nature nor as an exercise of a completely free (i. e. isolated) subjective imagination, but rather as an analogy to the dynamic open-endedness of the whole [*prakṛti*]<sup>9</sup>. If we were to summarize the value of *līlā* in Daniélou's indirect treatment of the term, we could say that it is based on three main aspects: 1. A process of increasing awareness about the limit points that bridge the gap between subjective reality and objective phenomena. 2. A realization of the paradox that the individual's increasing knowledge (or extended awareness) with regard to collective and even cosmic processes does not secure any kind of possession of that knowledge, since the cosmic playground rests upon an unfathomable abyss, in the words of the *Śvetasvatāra Upaniṣad*, "neither day nor night, neither being nor not being"<sup>10</sup>. 3. A permanent de-centering of the perspective of individuation (focused exclusively on one's own lack, fragility and needs) and a re-positioning of the individual in a context of exuberance<sup>11</sup>, where the first activity does not ensue from any need or lack but rather from a spontaneous structuring of elements (beings) without any ultimate reason to be grasped by any of those elements<sup>12</sup>.

In a later book called *While the Gods Play*, originally published in 1984 under the title *La phantasie des dieux et l'aventure humaine* [The Phantasy of the Gods and the Human Adventure], Daniélou finally tackles the concept of *līlā* in a much more direct manner. In reading this book, the reader has the impression that Daniélou is making explicit something that was always an essential part of his work. The English translation emphasizes the subject in question ("divine play") already in the title, but I find the original title even better, because it allows a game of retroversion. What was Daniélou exactly thinking about (that is, not with regard to the content of the whole book but rather to the

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<sup>9</sup> Alain Daniélou: *Approche de l'hindouisme*, p. 39. The background of the analogical process is the assumption of a correspondence between deep structures of consciousness and reality, something that for Indian classical art was the result of introspective experiments. A clear example of this is the indication in *Śukranīṣāra* (VII, 74): *dhyātvā kuryāt* ("the visualization being done, set to work"), which Coomaraswamy relates to the sacrificial work of the edification of the Fire-Altar, pointing to the hermeneutic assimilation of \**ci* (edify) and \**cit* (contemplate), in the sequence of *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* IV, 2.3.9. *cetayamān āpaśyan* [they saw contemplatively] and *citayaḥ* [structures]. Cf. Ananda Coomaraswamy: *Selected Papers 1. Traditional Art and Symbolism*. Delhi 1977, p. 131.

<sup>10</sup> *Na divā na rātrir na san na cāsat* (*Śvetasvatāra Upaniṣad*, 4.18). Daniélou seems to set aside the Vedic expression included in the same Upanishadic passage: *savitur vareṇyam* (the splendor of Savitri), cf. *Rigveda* III, 62.10.

<sup>11</sup> Where the erotic aspects of a material theology of creation play an essential role. This is – also with regard to the formation of the concept of *līlā* and its Vedic counterpart (*krīdā*) – present already in the earliest sources, for example quite subtly in the Rigvedic treatment of Agni (defined as *akṛīḥan krīḥan*, X, 7.9.6) and more directly in the reference to *soma* as a vigorous steed flowing within the filter and entering the essences of the men craving for it (IX, 28.29).

<sup>12</sup> One should not overlook the analogy with the German mystic Angelus Silesius, whose famous distich is a precious exception in the Christian tradition (not exactly centered on a theology of playfulness): *Die Rose ist ohne Warum, sie blühet weil sie blühet*.

lexical precision of the term itself) when he wrote the word “Phantasy (of the Gods)”? The Greek word *phántasma* is nowadays known in the sense of an appearance lacking substantial reality, but if we take a deeper historical look we find in it the same root of the verb *pháinein* or the nominalized participle *phainómenon*. The root indicates a coming-into-presence, an original opening or disclosure of being. The verb *pháinein* or its middle variant *pháinesthai* became very important in modern phenomenology in indicating the constitution of what we might call “world”. It is interesting to note that if we play with the Sanskrit (instead of the Greek) we may arrive at a similar conclusion: what is the Sanskrit retroversion of Daniélou’s exercise in “divine phantasy”? Three options come to mind when I think of it: *vikalpanā*, *sambhāvan* and *pratibhā*. The last two terms present an interesting philosophical combination already at the level of the verbal root: *bhū-* in the case of *sambhāvan* and *bhā-* in the case of *pratibhā*. The verbal root *bhū-* means “to become”, whereas *bhā-* means “to shine”, “to come into sight”; this reminds us of the sense of *pháinein* and even of the primordial layer of phenomenal reality which a Western philosopher like Heidegger called *Lichtung* (“clearing”). The first sign of becoming is not the passing of time or the idea of limited duration, but the very act of unconcealment. As to *vikalpanā*, it should be noted that it means variety or alternation in the sense of an interruption of homogeneous continuity<sup>13</sup>. These three Sanskrit options for the word “phantasy” emphasize two characteristics mentioned by Daniélou: the sphere of manifestation as a disclosure of being and also as a field of dynamic interactions in plurality (plurality of minerals, plants, animals, humans and gods). If we consider ancient Hindu cosmology, this type of speculation has to be inevitably translated into a creation myth. Daniélou uses among other things the Vedāntic reference to Brahmā’s dream<sup>14</sup> in order to show that the divine play depends on the activity of something surpassing the very context in which the game is displayed<sup>15</sup>. However, this transcendental operator called Brahmā (because of the personification itself) is not severed from the playing field. He is not included as one of its elements, but he belongs to it as its source. In the same way,

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<sup>13</sup> Because of the meaning of *kṛp* – *kālpate* (“to be well ordered or regulated”), the prefix *vi-* was at a certain period perceived as a distortion or a deprivation; for this reason the word *vikalpanā* can also mean “irresolution” and even point to something questionable.

<sup>14</sup> That is, philosophically conceived, *nirguna brahman*, which corresponds at the same time to *māyā*.

<sup>15</sup> Quite interestingly, the speculations about the origins of the conception of the God Brahmā point in the same direction: the link between the idea of a disclosure principle and the personification of a creator: “the impersonal neuter *brahman* and the God Brahmā are two different representation of the same concept: Brahmā is *brahman* with form and personality. Brahmā epitomizes *brahman* as a deity” (Bruce Sullivan: *The Religious Authority of Māhābhārata: Vyāsa and Brahmā in the Hindu Scriptural Tradition*, in: *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Volume (Summer 2994), 62, N° 2, pp. 377-401, quotation p. 380).

Daniélou tries to articulate Sāṃkhya cosmology using a Tantric dynamism to bridge the gap between *puruṣa* (non-manifested principle) and *prakṛti* (energetic substance of manifestation). The world appears when *puruṣa* enters *prakṛti*<sup>16</sup>, hence what we call universe cannot be anything other than “voluptuous delight”<sup>17</sup>. In the Sāṃkhya philosophical system there is a connection between *puruṣa* and *prakṛti* because the latter can be *avyakta* (unmanifest or *mūlāprakṛti*) or *vyakta* (*traiguṇya* or qualified reality)<sup>18</sup>, so there is always a primordial form even on the non-material plane. According to Daniélou, *eros* can be taken back to the primordial principle defining reality beyond manifestation. For this reason, the unstable and immaterial combination of elements identified with root-manifestation (*sattva*, *rajas*, *tamas*) may be deemed to have a cosmo-erotic component. It is no surprise that Daniélou sees in pure consciousness [cit] the origin of voluptuousness and in divine voluptuousness the transcendence of all negative aspects of human desire.

If we were to recapitulate the main aspects of our subject, we could say that according to Daniélou creation is an interplay of intensities in which we have only one possible kind of control: a modality of control related mainly to ourselves and our role within the whole. This perspective is diametrically opposed to a voluntaristic affirmation deriving from strategies of domination with regard to others. Understanding the context of actions leads to modifications within the frame of the assigned possibilities – the contrary would be the “illusion” of monadic change. Since the immediate context of Daniélou’s *līlā* is classical Hindu thought, this understanding is based on a socio-cosmic logic and seeks a modality of participation based on an increasing awareness of the forces in question instead of an influence based on one’s own affirmation as an individual. In this sense it has to be pointed out that increased awareness does not lead to any form of quietism, because action is inevitable on the plane of individual existence. Quietism would be the affirmation of something beyond *līlā* for the sake of an endgame, but of course this “something” takes once and again an a priori form within the range of human experience: the a-cosmic principle of all principles, the root of knowledge beyond knowledge, or the full realization of the impersonal source of all being. All these denominations point to a non-place of interplay that is in one way or another redistributed in the logic of *līlā* (but with negative

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. the mythological side of this conception: “the universe is considered as issuing from the *linga*, the divine phallus fecundating *prakṛti*” (Alain Daniélou: *While the Gods Play*, p. 79).

<sup>17</sup> Alain Daniélou: *While the Gods Play*, p. 115.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Gerard James Larson / Ram Shankar Bhattacharya: *Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophies, Volume IV: Sāṃkhya. A Dualist Tradition in Indian Philosophy*. Delhi 1987, p. 73. Another perspective is that of Michel Hulin: “le sāmkhya classique se présente comme un dualisme opposant la Nature originelle *mūlāprakṛti* [...] à l’Esprit ou *puruṣa*” (Michel Hulin: *Le principe de l’ego dans la pensée indienne classique. La notion d’ahaṃkāra*. Paris 1978, p. 73).

consequences). The problem of religion is not the religiosity of life, but the organization of the metaphysical governance to encode life by absolutizing a single perspective. The harmony of the whole does not rule out the disharmony of its parts - especially if the whole is to be conceived of as dynamic -, but an active and generalized exercise in disharmony prevents each part from being part of a whole. The mythological motive of the destruction of the world at the end of Kali Yuga can in this sense be seen as a full and conscious denial of the rules of the game in order to affirm each individual instance as separated, omnipotent and disruptive. According to Daniélou no act of creation can be separated from the sacrificial operation rendering it “holy” (i. e. integrated in a cosmic whole) and bearing witness to the source of consciousness constituting its universal background.