

Gods, Goddesses & Ancestors
Music, Dance, and Rituals of Kerala, India

Sunday, October 17, 2004, 7 pm
Zellerbach Hall

The Artists
Ravi Gopalan Nair, artistic director
Lakshmanan Kundilarambath, performer (Theyyam of Muchilottu-Bhagavati)
Sudheendran Kuttyadan, make-up (Theyyam of Muchilottu-Bhagavati)
Manoharan Malayan Tharammal, vocals and kurum kuzhal (shawm)
Anceesh Kumar Mangat Valappil, chenda (large drum)
Muraledharan Mangattu Valappil, chenda (small drum)
Malayanthrammal Ramakrishnan, chenda (large drum)
Haridassan Kuniparambil, karmi and stage manager
KunthiKannan Vellarikkundil, make-up and costume assistant
Ramesan Arichira Parambil, make-up and costume assistant
Ratheesh Payyanmarkandi, performer (Theyyam of Kativannur-Viran)
Kundilarambath Babu, töttam performer (Theyyam of Kativannur-Viran)

Tonight's performance will be approximately one hour and 50 minutes in length. There will be one intermission.

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The Theyyam

It is in this pluralistic environment, mainly in northern Kerala, that rituals of the theyyam have thrived for more than 2,000 years. The word theyyam is actually a corruption of the word daśāvaṇam, meaning God. In earlier times, when only high-caste Hindus were allowed to enter a temple, the theyyam provided a means by which the lower castes could express themselves and their desires. As Aryan Brahmanical Hinduism asserted its influence in Kerala, theyyam became a great equalizing medium in which all castes and communities could participate. Thus, through the medium of trance, the downtrodden were able to acquire a voice and speak directly to the powerful higher-caste landlords, listing the abuses and injustices inflicted upon them. For in the theyyam, the dancer (theyyakanan, literally one who takes the form of God) “becomes” the god and is thus immune from persecution.

While theyyam gods and goddesses were once purely Dravidian, over the centuries, many of them have blended their divine personas with deities known and worshiped throughout India. The great irony of theyyam is that its practitioners belong to the lowest of Kerala’s complicated caste system. With so little material possessions to enhance their lives, the status of an artist becomes doubly important. Each performing caste acquires a particular title after performing certain difficult roles. Important members of the Vannan caste become Peruvannan, with “peru” meaning “great.” Likewise, the Parayan caste that provides the drummers for almost all theyyam festivals takes the name Paniker as a title.

Theyyam can be characterized as a dance form glorifying a deity who is believed to bless and arbitrate among the people of the villages. The men who perform these rituals, after extensive mental, physical, and spiritual preparations, “become” deities representing both male and female gods. Wearing spectacular costumes and head-dresses and with their human features hidden behind heavy mask-like make-up, the performers enter a shrine to make the final transformation to divine being. The defining moment comes when the performer gazes into a mirror and sees not his own made-up face but the reflection of the deity. Once this line has been crossed, devotees can directly approach, honor, and question a deity belonging to an extraordinary pantheon of divine beings, consisting not only of gods and goddesses but also of deified ancestors, warrior heroes, animals, ghosts, and spirits. An essential aspect of theyyam—and Hindu ritual in general—is darshānam, which means “seeing” or “perception of the sacred.” When Hindus go to a temple, they will say “I am going for darshani” rather than “I am going to worship.” The central act of Hindu worship is to stand in the presence of the deity and to behold the image with one’s own eyes, to see and be seen by the deity.

The artist must know how to construct the head-dresses and costumes of all the deities that his particular community is allowed to perform. Such costumes are usually made of cotton as well as natural materials including leaves and bark. The artist must know how to apply the face and body make-up (known as “face-writing” or “body-writing”) and be familiar with all the various designs. He must also know how to sing and play the drums and is expected to memorize the stories, songs, and characters of each deity. In short, he must possess an extraordinary range of skills before even entering a shrine and “becoming” a deity.

The “performance” of a theyyam is always preceded by complex preliminary rituals. Certain deities are initially honored with the tītānam, or song ritual, when the artist—usually wearing only a simple costume and with minimal make-up—sings the song that relates the deity’s myth as well as the origins of his or her relationship with the particular shrine. The musical instruments used during the performance include the chenda and veekuchenda (drums), and the dathalam and kuzhal (shawms, oboe-like instruments). For the more active warrior gods, a velattam, or energetic ritual dance, is required, which often incorporates a breathtaking display of martial arts. Only after the completion of these preliminary rituals will the performers be made-up and costumed as an actual deity. The most sacred and powerful element of the costume, the mudi, or head-dress, is placed on the artist once he is seated on a sacred stool in front of the sanctum. After this comes the actual moment of “becoming” the deity, the moment of crossing the line as the performer stares into a small hand-held mirror. It is at this point that, almost imperceptibly, he slips into another state of being, his eyes widening as they focus not on his own reflection but on the enigmatic features of a divine being.

This intimate and deeply personal occurrence is the exact point of fusion, the defining moment that is known as mukhadarshanam, “the seeing of the face.” It is when a mortal becomes a god and loses all sense of personal identity. Once this happens, the audience members believe that the performer has “become” the deity and that they are in the presence of a divine being who is capable not only of blessing them, but also of healing, exorcising evil spirits, answering questions, explaining misfortunes, and even stating the whereabouts of a missing object. Above all, though, viewers believe theyyam can provide a reassuring bridge between their uncertain world and the certainties of the deity’s universe.

—Excerpted from Reflections of the Spirit by Pepita Seth with additional material by Robert H. Browning and Eric B. Mee
village of Muchilotti. She enters, hiding behind a small curtain, and sits on the stool. By listening to the praise song of Bhagavati, the performer receives the goddess’ energy (shakti) into his body. At the same time, he puts on the large head gear and false eyes, and then takes up two fire torches.

The curtain is then removed, and the performer bows to the four directions. This is the moment at which he is embodied with the goddess’ consciousness. His attitude is expected to be as pure as that of a new-born baby, so that the goddess’ energy will symbolically bring him to the sacred Mount Kailasa.

The chenda drums then play a specific rhythm, accompanied by the shawm (kurum-kuzhal). While listening to this rhythm, Bhagavati travels from Kailasa to the Eta Lokam (the “world of the left hand”). On her way, she reaches the garden of the king Padanayar at Muchilotti. She is thirsty and tired, and she drinks water from the king’s well and bathes in order to purify herself. While doing this, her mood changes—her false eyes are removed, and she exchanges her warlike hand props for peaceful ones: a ritual sieve (mani-mûram), symbol of discernment, and a trident, symbol of the three worlds. She then performs a ritual dance in order to sanctify and bless the proceedings, before disappearing.

Part III:
The Theyyam of Kativannur-Viran
One can hear chanting and shouting from the dressing room: it is the story of Kativannur-Viran. While fighting against invaders, he was killed and his body was cut into 64 pieces by his enemies.

The performer enters the stage backwards in order to indicate that he is returning from the underworld. His dance is very passionate and energetic. He looks in all directions, searching for his wife, Chammarati, who is desperately trying to identify his body. Kativannur-Viran’s dance is very descriptive, depicting his life and referring to themes such as his love for Chammarati, his wish to help his friends in combat, his death during the war, and his desire to protect the pieces of his body from animals and to show them to his wife.

The end of the dance celebrates his happy reunion with Chammarati after her death. The performer tells his story to the assembly, which feels the beneficial presence of Kativannur-Viran and Chammarati. At times, one can almost hear voices crying, “We are not dead; don’t celebrate our funerals!”

The performance ends with a final round of drumming (kotti-vakal).

The United States tour of Gods, Goddesses, and Ancestors has been organized by the World Music Institute (www.worldmusicinstitute.org), a not-for-profit organization dedicated to the presentation of the finest in traditional and contemporary music and dance from around the world.

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Bibliography: