



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 Muchilōttu-Bhagavati)*

Sudheendran Kuttyadan, *make-up (Theyyam of Muchilōttu-Bhagavati)*

Manoharan Malayan Tharammal, *vocals and kurum kuzhal (shawm)*

Aneesh Kumar Mangat Valappil, *chenda (large drum)*

Muraleedharan Mangattu Valappil, *chenda (small drum)*

Malayantharammal Ramakrishnan, *chenda (large drum)*

Haridasan Kuniparambil, *karmi and stage manager*

Kunhikannan Vellarikkundil, *make-up and costume assistant*

Ramesan Arichira Parambil, *make-up and costume assistant*

Ratheesh Payyanmarkandi, *performer (Theyyam of Kativannūr-Vīran)*

Kundilarambath Babu, *tōttam performer (Theyyam of Kativannūr-Vīran)*

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

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the City of Berkeley's Civic Arts Program, Macy's West, and the McKesson Foundation
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Introduction

The state of Kerala stretches for about 360 miles along the famed Malabar coast in the extreme southwest of India. This lush tropical region, with its palm-fringed, sandy beaches, has since ancient times provided a major trade link between Arabia and India and the Indonesian archipelago to the east. As one traverses the coastal region of Kerala, it is not uncommon to find Hindu temples and shrines, Muslim mosques, Christian churches, and even Jewish synagogues side by side. Such edifices are witness to a long history of migration and interaction with Arab and Portuguese traders, early Jewish and Christian settlers, and later, missionaries from Holland and England. Christians are said to have first come to Tamil Nadu in southern India with St. Thomas in 52 AD; soon thereafter, they probably migrated to Kerala. The ancient Jewish settlement in and around Cochin probably dates to the same period, and the earliest conversions to Islam may have taken place in the 7th century, during the Prophet Mohammed's lifetime. Hindu temples dedicated to Vishnu, Shiva, and Shakti abound, as do shrines dedicated to ancient Dravidian divinities.

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 *daivan*, 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 (*theyyakaran*, 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, where "peru" means "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 headdresses 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 *darshan*, which means "seeing" or "perception of the sacred." When Hindus go to a temple, they will say "I am going for *darshan*" 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 headdresses 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 charac-

ters 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 *tôt-tam*, 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 *elathalam* and *kuzhal* (shawms, oboe-like instruments). For the more active warrior gods, a *vellattam*, 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 performer be made-up and costumed as an actual deity. The most sacred and powerful element of the costume, the *mudi*, or headdress, 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 Erin B. Mee

Part I:**Overture (*tutankal*)**

The host (usually the family chief of the owners of the shrine) calls the two leaders of the performers: that of the dancers, who belongs to the Vannan caste, and that of the musicians, who belongs to the Parayan. After consulting the gods with a ritual of divination (*kayyistam-etukkuka*, the "choice of the hand"), he pays the fee (*dakshina*) to the performers and requests that they start the ritual.

While the Parayan perform a musical overture (*melam*) with drums, cymbals, and shawms, the Vannan go to the dressing room (*animara*) in order to prepare. In the meantime, a priest (*karmi*) makes his offerings to the deities of the shrine.

After hearing the deity's praise song (*tôt-tam*), the performer who will then embody Kativannûr-Vîran (the "Hero of Kativannûr") enters, accompanied by an assistant. First, standing in front of the sacred stool, he salutes the deity he will incarnate. After tying his head-cloth and diadem on his forehead, he salutes the sacred weapons of the deity: the sword and the shield. He is then given a folded banana leaf containing offerings of petals, arica nuts, and rice, which he presents to the deity by depositing them on the stool. Then, while invoking Villi (the god Shiva as an archer), he throws rice three times in the four cardinal directions.

While doing this, he is possessed by the spirit of Kativannûr-Vîran. This possession is symbolized by a ritual walk with a pot full of *kallu*, an alcoholic beverage made from coconut milk. The use of alcohol in the ritual probably indicates a link with a form of esoteric Tantrism (*vâma-mârگا*, the way of the "left hand").

This "installation of the deity" in the body of the performer is then asserted through a dance with the weapons of Kativannûr-Vîran, in remembrance of the hero's war against invaders. The dance contributes to the settling of the deity's consciousness (*sankalpam*) into the dancer's mind.

Part II:**The Theyyam of Muchilôttu-Bhagavati**

Muchilôttu-Bhagavati is an auspicious and protective form of the goddess Bhagavati, represented in the form in which she appeared in the

PROGRAM NOTES

village of Muchilôttu. 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 (*kurumkuzhal*). 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 Muchilôttu. 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 Kativannûr-Vîran

One can hear chanting and shouting from the dressing room: it is the story of Kativannûr-Vîran. 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. Kativannûr-Vîran'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 Kativannûr-Vîran 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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