



Gods, Goddesses & Ancestors: Rituals of Kerala India

Dates: October 2004

Outreach Programs: Workshops; Lec-Dems & Children's/School Programs

VIDEO AVAILABLE

Kerala, a state in India located on its southernmost tip, stretches for about 360 miles along the Malabar coast on the western side of the Indian peninsula. Isolated from the Deccan Plateau by the mountains, but with a long coastline open to foreign influences, Kerala has evolved a unique culture. One of these cultural traditions is the performance of the Theyyam, an ancient ritual in which the practitioner shifts from one consciousness to another.

The Theyyam can be characterized as a dance form glorifying the Theyyam, or deity, who is believed to bless and arbitrate amongst the people of the villages. The men who perform the Theyyam ritual, 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, they enter a shrine to make the final transformation from performer 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 artist must know how to make the headdresses and costumes of all the deities that his particular community is allowed to perform. Such costumes are usually made of natural materials like leaves and bark. He must know how to apply the face and body make-up (known as "face-writing" or "body-writing") and know all the different designs and styles. He must also know how to sing and play the drums and know 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 tottam, 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. Musical accompaniments are chenda and veekuchenda (drums), elathalam and kuzhal (horns). 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 Theyyam. 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 he 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 believes 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 but also of healing, exorcising evil spirits, answering questions, explaining misfortunes and even stating the whereabouts of a missing object. Above all, though, they believe the 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)

CONCERT DATES:

17-Oct-04

7:00PM

[Cal Performances](#)

Zellerbach Hall

University of California

Cal Performances

101 Zellerbach Hall # 4800

Berkeley, CA,

Tickets and Info: 510.642.9988

22-Oct-04

8:00PM

[UCLA](#)

Royce Hall

on the UCLA campus

Los Angeles, CA

Tickets and Info: 310.825.2101

24-Oct-04 *TWO SHOWS*

3:00PM

8:00PM

[World Music Institute](#)

[Symphony Space](#)

95th & Broadway

Tickets and Info: 212-545-7536