



# The am

I wake at three a.m., dress quickly, cross the footbridge, and find my taxi driver waiting inside his car. We bump up the cliffs in overcast dark, ocean pounding in background, and rumble out into the web of backcountry villages surrounding Kannur. After asking directions, the driver turns up a bone-jarring lane, and halts. I exit between randomly parked cars, walk a short ways through dripping trees and find myself in a cluster of simple tile-roofed houses fronting a tamped-earth square. In one corner a bonfire is shrinking into coals. In the other a small wooden shrine is strung with lights. At the roof's peak is a mask of Yama, god of death, guardian of the south. As one of Shiva's envoys, Yama is known as Kala, "time," whereas Shiva is Mahakala, "great time," eternity. A huge tree graces the compound's far corner, oil lamps blazing under its branches. This enormous beauty may well have been the original shrine, an arboreal pillar uniting heaven, earth, and the underworld. Under the tree is a dressing room plaited with palm leaves where the Theyyam performers apply their makeup and attire. The earthen square is empty right now; the ritual is in the in-between time.

Theyyam derives from the Sanskrit, *daiyam*, "god," and commonly refers to the ritual dances associated with the calling into presence of spirits benevolent to the villages of northern Kerala, on India's southwest coast. The performances take place in the dark, after the monsoon has subsided, during the winter months. Theyyam deities, unlike

## Kerala's "Theater of the Double"

JOHN BRANDI

Hindu deities represented by idols or objects, manifest themselves much like the Hopi kachinas do in the American Southwest: in the form of living gods who interact with humans through empowered impersonators.

Entering the family compound in the dark was like approaching the heart of a spider's orb. Blinking lights between dripping trees created a kaleidoscope of spun-candy luminosity. Glowing coals illuminated shadowy figures. For a second I thought I was back in Bali, walking into a village séance, a place "out of time," a realm connected to one's own heartbeat—to mists, darkness, a blur of melding worlds. An official, wrapped in white lungi tied around his waist, showed me to a raised pavilion where a dozen or so people were gathered under a thatched roof. A plastic chair appeared and I was made comfortable. "You have camera?" a man asks. "Oh, too bad. Good Theyyam." Photographs are prohibited at Pueblo ceremonies back home, so I never considered a camera here. Looking around, I realize that not only am I the only foreigner here,

I am one of the few guests who has no cell-phone camera or compact point-and-shoot.

I've done little research on the Theyyam, perhaps an advantage. I'm free to absorb the ritual in a personal sense, sans camera, notebook, pre-determined imagery. The shrine before me is a family one, yet the ceremony extends to the community — a collective séance where people can enter the realm of their spirit protectors. Theyyam deities are pre-Hindu tutelary spirits indigenous to the Keralan forests, somewhat overlaid with a veneer of Hindu concepts. Mostly they survive untainted, a throwback to the Time Before. They are active, not passive like the Hindu gods staring from piles of marigolds in smoky alcoves.

Deafening crackers explode as the sky dawns. Two drummers, barefoot and bare-chested, walk into the square and begin to beat out a clattering rhythm on their chendas, upright drums slung vertically over the shoulders on bright red sashes. The ends of these three-foot-high drums are covered with animal skin. Beaten with hardwood sticks, the sound is tight and powerful — accompanied by a man keeping time with finger cymbals.

Soon a bare-chested, lungi-wrapped elderly priest appears. Seen through the heatwaves of the bonfire, he is distorted into a wavering genie. He hunkers over a brass vessel on the dirt courtyard, placing offerings of coconuts, rice, and bananas on freshly wetted banana leaves. He brings his palms together above his forehead, prays, and disappears into the smoke of the pyrotechnics. When I look again, six drummers are drumming and two Theyyam performers are approaching the compound from the dressing area. They wear skirts of young palm fronds sliced into thin ribbons. Their faces and bodies are whitened with rice paste, eyes ringed with soot from oil lamps. Wielding long wooden poles, they jump, twirl and mime, performing variations of kicks and leaps inherent to *kalarippayattu* — a martial art indigenous to Kerala. Impulsive and unpredictable, the Theyyams halt suddenly to speak commandingly or irreverently. Next thing I know they are sitting down behind large red banners of cloth held up by attendants. All that can be seen are their bare legs and feet. The impersonators' legs remain very still at first, but then begin to jiggle. The toes twitch, the drumming ascends,

energy ripples from earth to ankles and up into the legs. Shakti, the all-present primordial force of the universe, has found its way into the performer.

Behind the curtain, the backs of the Theyyams are being tied with tall bamboo standards, six or more meters high, laced with plaited palm leaves. When the drapery around the performers is dropped, the Theyyam performers have been transformed. Their faces are covered by large, flat, red-white-and-black masks with huge eyes and gracefully scrolled fangs. When they rise to dance, they wield hardwood poles, akin to those used in *kalarippayattu* or to the *jo* used in aikido. Leaning forward onto the poles, they balance themselves precariously, headdresses and all, and slowly lower their straightened, board-like bodies toward the earth. The drumming all the while continues, heightening into crescendos, quieting again, then strengthening—like rainforest insects, or blasts of rain on banana leaves.

A young man among the spectators tells me that Theyyam performers are from a lineage of professional artists, trained and paid for their art. They must learn the myths and narratives that go with each deity in the pantheon. They must know martial arts, develop great athletic skills, stamina, and breath control. Each performance demands strict mental and spiritual preparation. “A performer must be ready to exchange his human body for the god's body. He must fast and keep from liquor or sex. If he is not pure a mistake will be made.”

The Theyyam ritual is meant to call an otherworldly ancestor (a hero or protector) into the body of the dancer, who in turn transmits that presence to those gathered. The heightening of the drums is an invocation, a repetitive calling of the god into the flesh of the performer whose consciousness will disintegrate into the vibratory energy of the god. In this trance-state the performer can exorcise evil, give counsel, answer worldly and spiritual questions, and purge physical ailments. The drumming also heightens the impersonator's awareness before he enters the courtyard. The crescendoing beat puts him in a readied state to achieve the moves, gestures, speech, and dramatic intensity expected not only by those assembled, but by the very god he is to portray, or better said, “invite into his being.”

The make-up men are also capably trained.

They are “face writers” who deftly apply the colored patterns that identify the deity about to be invoked. Along with priests, musicians and performers, they must forego the worldly and prepare themselves for the otherworldly: a tense-less, non-linear “endless present” of interchangeable continuities. I think of Chiyo-ni, the 18th century Japanese poet who looked into a pool and witnessed an “endless-present” of things exchanging places in one-simultaneously-happening sphere. Time without beginning or end:

“Clear water—  
no front, no back.”

The priest who earlier vanished into the smoky haze of the pyrotechnics now reappears. He’s in trance and is being called into the compound by another Theyyam who has joined the ritual — dressed in tasseled red skirts flaring out from an elaborately pleated waistband. His arms are lined with metal bands and wraps of red cloth, eyes darkened, face smeared with ochre, a short white beard around the mouth. With long silver fingernails accenting his gestures, he implores the dazed priest forward and props him in the center of the compound, whereupon — through magic words — the spell is broken. The priest walks normal again, but the Theyyam dashes about the courtyard with frenetic advances, clattering his bells and ornaments while the drums beat. He approaches the fire, now burned into red-hot embers. The spectators quickly back into the rear of the seating area. So do I. The barefoot Theyyam walks onto the coals, kicks them into the air, and spins wildly away from the fire, only to charge back again. Hot embers land at our feet where they sizzle and cool.

Theyyam performances are remote from the West’s notion of theater on a raised stage. Here, the earth is the platform. Characters roam helter-skelter in a courtyard, disappear into the trees, return through the crowd, vanish into mist. As in a Javanese shadow-puppet play, the audience is free to roam. There is no fixed place where one must be. You can sit in a chair, straddle a wall, get up and view things from various angles. As in the shadow play, a Theyyam audience is often addressed in the trance lingo of the gods. Growls, mutters,

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and raspy utterances bring spectators out of their static, seated realm into that of psychically-active participants. Antonin Artaud, who saw a Balinese dance in Paris in 1931, wrote: “in the midst of a whole ferment of visual or sonorous images (we are plunged) into that state of uncertainty and ineffable anguish which is characteristic of poetry.” That’s Theyyam.

Ancient, powerful, and unpredictable, the Theyyam spirits are often contradictory, full of double entendre, yet capable of wise counsel. They can ensure a good rice harvest, keep the world turning in harmony, balance the body, resolve discord, and heal community clashes. They may also make fertile a childless couple. As an outsider, I can only probe the surface, fall back in awe, be reminded of William Blake’s “energy is eternal delight,” and — be grateful for this experience — the generosity of the people who have accommodated me.

Seven hours have passed. The midday heat is sultry and bright. I return to my home-stay, take a bucket bath, drink a mango juice, and relax with my Keralan hosts, Nazir and Rosi. When I describe the fire-walking Theyyam, Nazir says it was probably Bali, the monkey god from the Ramayana. When I tell him the costume hardly resembled a monkey, he laughs. “It is not about appearance. It is about energy. How the monkey acts. He is full of whim, changeability. And that is what lies beneath all Theyyam rituals: unpredictability.”

