

THEYYAM

THE LIVING GODS OF KERALA





Theyyam is a form of Hindu worship that happens every winter in Kerala, India. There are about 450 forms of Theyyam, all consisting in a human embodying the form of a living god.



Most of the costume and gear worn by the performer is made of natural material and crafted before the ceremony. Making them is part of the artist's skills, like dancing or singing.



After some preliminary dancing rituals called Thottam, the believer goes to a little room to get elaborate make-up on his face. The preparation can last for hours as the make-up designs are very intricate and complicated.



Most of the make-up is orange or red, matching the costume that the performer is going to wear during the ceremony. He is going to recreate the mythical story of a God or a hero by performing songs and dances, slowly becoming the god itself.



The paintings are not only on the performer's face, they are also on the rest of his body. Here is a detail of the backpiece of this particular costume.



The final and most important part of the attire is the headdress, also called « mudi ». After it is put on his head, the performer will look himself in a mirror, shift perceptions, and actually become the god. This moment is called «mukhadarshanam».

The children are standing behind the Theyyam, who is standing on a sacred stool. They are shouting to warn him of a danger coming.





During the performance, the dancer will do all sorts of extraordinary things like stepping on red-hot coals or cutting himself with swords, all while remaining aware of his environment and staying in the rhythm.



The Theyyam performer is also dancing to tell the story of the particular mythical figure he is embodying, like Gods, heroes who fought in battles, women who comitted suicide to protect other people.



All through the ceremony, the performer will be supported by assistants, who will play drums and sing while he is dancing and singing himself.



The Theyyam holds the function of keeping together society and protecting the villages, his blessings are supposed to bring prosperity and happiness to the area he is in.



The Theyyam can also predict the future. Behind his metal eyes, this theyyam can see what will happen to the people who ask him, as they are supposed to reflect the future.



Sometimes, hundreds of people come to get predictions about their personal future. The Theyyams might charge them for it, but not in every case as the Theyyam has a general social use to the village.





During the Theyyam ceremony people can be taken by a transe and become the god themselves. Then they will go to the river or the sea to purify themselves from their former sins.





Here a man is taking the bathing woman out of the water so that she can quit her god form and become human again when she loses the trance.



The villagers offer and sacrifice a lot of different things to the gods in order to guarantee health and prosperity, like food, in some cases blood (even if it is prohibited by law), liquor, or items related to the shrine's tradition.



Each Theyyam embodies a specific God or hero according to the particular tradition of the shrine. Here, a man is dressed like Shiva, but there are hundreds of gods and goddesses worshipped in different Theyyams.



The performers are not all male, although the one on the picture is. Some female can impersonate goddesses or heroins depicted in the tradition, especially in the north of Kerala.



A performer in the very peak of the ceremony. The fake beard is made of coconut hair, and the head piece is made of arcanut wood and bamboo.

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