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REVIEW

*Gods, Goddesses & Ancestors**'Music, Dance, and Rituals of Kerala, India'**October 2004**San Francisco, Zellerbach Hall**by Renee Renouf*

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The fifteen all male troupe from Kerala, headed by Ravi Gopalan Nair, are part of a larger group from Kerala participating in a Kerala Festival in Switzerland, subsequently touring France and other European countries. Apparently this small group is the only segment continuing on to the United States.

For centuries, Kerala has been the first landfall for sailors braving the open expanses of the Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean between Africa and India. Those hugging the Arabian Peninsula could essay the Persian Gulf and coast line to drop anchor at what is now Karachi or the Gujerati coast. Despite this easier route, tradition has it that St. Thomas landed in Kerala and the Jewish community in Cochin had a corner on the pepper trade for centuries. Hindus, Christians and Muslims have lived in amity in this southwest corner of India which enjoys the highest literacy rate on the sub-continent, side by side with the deeply ingrained rituals which this group brought to the Zellerbach stage. It was explained the invocation ritual, designed as worship, reciprocity and to gain beneficent results for the community, is so strong that the deity cannot help but become present in the ritual performers. Coercion, it seems, works both ways.

The troupe represented a northern Kerala tradition. Typical of men in Kerala, they were dressed in white lungis from the waist down and bare-chested, revealing the lax stomach muscles common among many South Indian men. It is not an area of the world invested in the Greek ideal of muscle definition and a washboard stomach profile. All the participants were bare-footed.

Three drummers on the chenda and another musician on the shenai-like horn called kuzhal provided the musical backdrop for the ritual preparation and performance. An

altar stood at right angles to the audience where the priest/devotee lit tapers, incense, and flicked a seeming unending cascade of floral petals while making circular gestures and frequently making the Hindu ritual of purification. Having executed these motions for much of his life, the priest/ devotee's matter-of-fact command of the space exuded the commonplace air but also authority.

After the ritual the first third of the program was devoted to a demonstration of technique later seen in the Kaativannur Viran theyyam. The dancer in question was short, his physique clearly sturdy with tight ligaments at the joints, demonstrating great energy. He received a periodic boost from a silver-colored kundika which the dancer would toss to the attendants after taking a sip.

Showing distinct signs of the martial exercise form kalaripyattu, the dancer moved in constant circular and figure eight movements, his arms moving swiftly in other figure eights and periodically launching into a split on the floor, bouncing his way into it slightly. Movements acknowledging the four directions of the compass were clearly a part of the rituals and much of the floor patterns included a figure eight around a square structure right of center stage left which appeared to have short white unlit tapers clustered in orderly rows.

Muchilottu-Bhagavati's theyyam was both the most spectacular and static of the two theyyams demonstrated. Rendered spectacular by the gigantic rose-pink halo-shaped headdress and a mask with shining black objects for eyes, the dancer/devotee was led from a central curtain opening back stage into the center stage space by two attendants. The dress billowed to the floor, pumpkin shaped, pink and rose, adorned with concentric circles, glittering with brilliants. The effect in motion was not unlike those of Kathakali costumes, except that Bhagavati's garments were wider, longer and far more monumental; Bhagavati is a mother goddess and it doesn't seem necessary for her to hop around, although the devotee sported ankle bells and his feet were clearly visible to the audience.

The acknowledging of the four corners was repeated, and the stage patterns and arm movements again demonstrated the figure eight, as well as the box-like forward, side, back, across, forward, well remembered in Kathakali formations. At a certain point, attendants came forward and removed Bhagavati's mask and the halo-like headdress. At this point, Bhagavati began to adorn herself like a woman. The devotee clearly demonstrated the braiding of two plaits; applying kohl around the eyes and color to cheeks and lips. Friends closer said there was also the ritual of teeth brushing.

One can imagine the effect of this ritual at night, illumined by the oil in tall brass oil lamps, gestures and patterns expanded from dawn until dusk and into another day. For children it must be as indelible impression as the creche at Christmas.

Following intermission the devotee who had demonstrated technique before performed the theyyam associated with Kaativannur Viran, the prototypic warrior/protector of the village. Amplified from the earlier demonstration, from the circumambulations around the plinth-like object, the brandishing of sword and small shield in frequent figure eight patterns, and near dervish-like turns, barrel-like tours, the staple from Russian folk ensembles, has infiltrated in virtually all performing ethnic ensembles and is now an interesting movement diaspora artefact.

This theyyam struck me as more monotonous, if relieved by the repetition of the earlier sipping from a kundika and the subsequent tossing it aside to be caught by a watchful attendant, a practice I found as interesting as the theyyam itself. Another point of interest was the dusting of the devotee's brown arms and torso with white powder which, with pink bands on the upper arm and the short skirt gave the

practitioner the air of being an early Portuguese trader. This impression, seconded by the headdress with its conquistador-like sharp peak, led me to surmise that the Kaativannur Viran theyyam is a younger ritual than Bhagavati's; four centuries in contrast to the probably millennia-old practice for Bhagvati.

Whatever the length, the performance reflected the incredible stretch of practice and knowledge housed in the people of the Sub-Continent. As Kapila Vatsyayan remarked, "We go from the bullock cart to the jet air plane, from the Vedas to nuclear fission."

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