



Theyyam

Indian Folk Ritual Theatre—An Insider's Vision

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ISBN	9789389136982
Publisher	Niyogi Books
Binding	Hardback
Territory	USA & Canada
Size	8.5 in x 11.73 in
Pages	352 Pages
Illustrations	267 color
Price	\$160.00

- Mother, Nature, Spirit, Ancestors, Warriors and Animals are among concepts worshiped in the Theyyam tradition
- Originating in north Kerala, it is performed by people from the most humble and disadvantaged backgrounds as a series of opulent rituals
- While men from a few particular communities hereditarily perform, most Theyyams are women worshipped as Mother Goddesses

Theyyam is a colorful ritualistic folk-art tradition of India, originating in the northern districts of Kerala. The performers are daily-wage laborers struggling to eke out an existence; and yet, when they perform at the estate of their masters, the latter bow before them with folded hands.

The alluring facial-body drawings with intricate and subtle nuances and the colorful paraphernalia, including various headgears in different shapes, are endlessly fascinating. The unpolished rhythm of Theyyam enhances its appeal. Concepts such as Mother, Nature, Fertility and Agriculture, Spirit and Ghost, Animal, Reptile and Warrior, among others, are worshiped as Theyyam which refers to both the form and the performance. Most Theyyams are women worshiped as Mother Goddesses and any devotee, irrespective of religion or caste, can interact with this goddess without the help of intermediaries such as priests.

Art scholar and photographer K.K. Gopalakrishnan has captured Theyyam in its myriad facets, with a variety of stunning photographs, from the insightful perspective of an insider.

K.K. Gopalakrishnan, is a distinguished writer photographer hailing from Kerala. A connoisseur specializing in Kerala performing arts, he is a well-known contributor to India's leading newspapers and periodicals. A recipient of the coveted Tagore National Scholarship, he has authored the critically acclaimed work *Kathakali Dance-Theatre – A Visual Narrative of Sacred Indian Mime* (2016; Niyogi Books). A former Director of the Centre for Kutiyattam at the Sangeet Natak Akademi, Delhi, he is currently the Director of the South Zone Cultural Centre of the Government of India, Ministry of Culture, working tirelessly to preserve the indigenous art traditions of southern India. He hails from the Hindu matrilineal family Kamballoore Kottayil which has patronized Theyyam for over three centuries, including a Muslim Theyyam.

Published 13th Dec 2024