

THE DANCING GODS

From December to April, Kerala's folklore and mythology come to life through the ritual art of Theyyam. The audience is agog, the performers are in a trance and the visuals are awe-inspiring.

WORDS Edwina D'souza **IMAGES** Shutterstock, Dinodia, Unsplash



of a village shrine, mainly in the districts of Kannur and Kasaragod in North Kerala.

On a late evening, I arrived at my lodge near the Thavakkara Bus Terminal in Kannur, all set to catch a scheduled Theyyam performance. Little did I know that most festivals in Kerala are celebrated according to the Malayalam calendar, and the Theyyam calendar that I meticulously put together drawing from the various schedules published online stood redundant. The timetable published online is only an approximate one and cross-checking with a local is recommended. Fortunately, my lodge manager guided me to the nearby Railway Muthappan Temple where we could try our luck.

However, we reached just as the performance was coming to a close. From the artist's mask with Lord Shiva's *trishul* (trident) marked on the head and the coconut leaves used to decorate his attire, we guessed he was a Gulikan *theyyakaran*, dressed to represent the Hindu god of death, Yama. The Gulikan Theyyam act is only one of over 400 types of Theyyam performed across Kerala. Each with a unique costume, dance style, make-up and religious significance.

Not ready to give up so soon, I packed up and headed to Kasaragod, a town on the northernmost tip of Kerala, bordering the state of Karnataka. Once there, we saw posters near

1. In Theyyam performances, fire often indicates the *raudra* (angry) form of the deity.

Kerala's natural beauty and cuisine has always made me fall in love with the state a little more, with every visit. During my stay in north Kerala, I gorged on traditional Moplah dishes such as Kerala *parottas* and *erachi ularthiyathu* (spicy, fried meat preparation), Malabar biryani and stuffed mussels. But satiating my taste buds wasn't the only mission. It was December, the season of Theyyam – a folk dance popular in north Kerala – and my aim was to catch as many performances across the region as I could.

The ancient folk art of storytelling through dance and mime is said to have originated more than 1,500 years ago.

Primarily performed by people of the Malayan, Velan, Vannan and Peruvannan communities, it has been orally passed down through generations. A Theyyam artiste, called *theyyakaran*, is one of the most enduring images associated with Kerala. Clad in traditional costumes and heavy make-up, these performers, mostly men, dance to invoke the gods and goddesses of Kerala mythology. The *theyyakarans* are considered to be 'possessed' by the gods they impersonate and are revered by the audience. Today, the number of performers of this religious dance form has reduced drastically.

A typical Theyyam performance takes place at night in the vicinity



The complex detailing on the face of a *theyyakaran* is done using pastes made of finely ground rice flour and natural plant-based colours. Black, red, orange, yellow and white are the colours used most often.



Catch the Act

January 5–8, Pariyaram
Sree Udayapuram Temple,
Pariyaram

January 11–14, Chirakutty
Puthiyakavu, Anchamppeedika

January 20–22, Sree
Narambil Bhagavathy Temple,
Thattammal

January 29–31, Koyyodan
Koroth Temple, Kunnaru
Source keralatourism.org

the Old Bus Stand with details in Malayalam that translated to Kanathur Shree Nalvar Daivasthana – Kaliyatta Mahotsavam. The former is the name of a temple in Kanathur village and Kaliyatta Mahotsavam translates to 'the local Theyyam festival'.

My hotel manager in Kasaragod suggested that I take a pre-hired rickshaw to and from Kanathur, which is about 20 km away. The drive was an adventurous one – after cutting through winding lanes in the dead of the night for an hour, we reached the temple.

The *kavu* (sacred grove) where the Theyyam would take place was a 10-minute walk

through the village. I was guided by the colourful paper decorations overhead and the resounding chants in the distance.

The Theyyam set-up at Shree Nalvar Daivasthana was visibly larger in scale compared to the gathering at the temple in Kannur. It was a fair-like atmosphere with fluorescent tube lights and multicoloured rice lights hanging on trees and makeshift wooden posts. The entire village had turned up to witness the act. There were stalls for cotton candy, *goli-soda* and biryani. We walked past it all towards the *kavu* where the ceremony was taking place. Surrounded by men in *mundus*

1. *Mukhathezhuthu*, the intricate art of painting the faces of Theyyam performers is a tedious one and lasts several hours. Seen here, a make-up artist applying the characteristic black face paint to emphasise the eyes of a *theyyakaran*.
2. Costumes are elaborate, bulky and often take the help of several volunteers to assemble correctly.





A Dandiganath Bhagavathy Theyyam performer decked up in the full gear of a complex headdress and intricate face paint. A unique feature of the costume is the use of painted arecanut leaves as decoration.



(a garment worn around the waist) and women in traditional sarees, we seemed like the only non-Malayalis at the venue. Unperturbed, we watched the spectacle, even if from a tourist's perspective; fully aware that for everyone else present there it was a religious ceremony.

My first full glimpse of the *theyyakan* left me captivated. He was fully decked up; his face was painted in a vivid mix of red and orange, eye sockets were black and so was his painted moustache. He donned chunky metallic bangles and ankle bands, and wore a headgear made of shimmering glass pieces. It seemed like the Kinnimaani Theyyam – the dance of invincible truth keepers. Shree Nalvar Daivasthana, where I was,

A performance of Kuttichathan Theyyam in progress at the Karuvalli Sree Koorumba Bhagavathy kavu. Kuttichathan was a child granted by Shiva and Parvati to a childless Brahmin couple. The performance is a reenactment of Kuttichathan's notorious life story.



FLAUNT YOUR SHINY SIDE. IN STYLE.

KOLORS[®]
make life better

Presenting KWARTZLINE,
premium glass cover frames
that reflect your fine taste in life.



KWARTZLINE^E



Corp Office : Cosmo Electro Industries Pvt Ltd, Mumbai - 053

Toll Free : 1800 221 470 | E : sales@kolorsworld.com

www.kolorsworld.com

Follow kolorsswitches on : [f](#) [t](#) [YouTube](#) [@](#)



1. Post a Theyyam performance, a *theyyakaran* listens to devotees' woes' and, in the capacity of a divine incarnation, blesses them. 2. Drummers playing the *chenda*, a unique Keralite percussion instrument that marks the frenzy of the performance based on the intensity and speed with which it is played.

is considered to be the 'divine court', and the ancient practice of resolving human affairs through divine intervention is still followed here.

As the dance narrative proceeded, I saw temple volunteers standing with blazing wooden sticks. An hour into the performance, the *theyyakaran's* moves became aggressive and his expressions more intense. He began sprinting and taking rounds of the courtyard to the tune of the

chendas (drums) and trumpets. The temple priests sprinkled holy water on the ceremonial armour before handing it over to the *theyyakaran*. Five more volunteers assembled to place on him a nine-foot headdress while he moved in a trance-like state.

Another hour into the act, the procession moved towards the smaller temples into the village. The celebrations culminated with devotees seeking blessings from the *theyyakaran* in a completely possessed state by the god he was invoking. The ceremony would most likely continue well into the night and past sunrise as well. As much as I wanted to stay to witness the crescendo, I decided to leave at 12 am.

I finally succeeded in my quest to watch this elusive folk dance ritual. I had my share of obstacles, but to quote a popular saying, 'Nothing worthwhile comes easy'. 🙏



GETTING THERE

AirAsia India flies to Kochi from New Delhi, Bengaluru and Hyderabad.
airasia.com