

MUSEE ASIATICA

Biarritz

Tel: 0559227878

Fax : 0559227879

E-mail : asiatica@wanadoo.fr

www.museeasiatica.com

Press information for the exposition on :

« Gods and Demons of Kerala »

from 3rd June to 31st August 2011

On the coastline of south India the Kerala state extends from north to south on the sloping Ghats (the mountains of the Deccan), along the coast of the Oman sea.

At the end of the harvest season, in more than 400 villages, Gods make preparations to dance all night. We were there in March 2011 to meet these extraordinary Theyyams, for you.



Theyyam Gulikan



*The village temple
Chalil Bhagawati*

Summary:

- The place: Mahé, ancient french settlement.
- The photography.
- The ayurvedic treatment.
- The festival and dance of the Theyyams.

Exposition from 3rd June to 31st August –
entry free.

**In 40 coloured photos
60 cm. x 50 cm.**



THE PLACE: The coastline of Malabar is known as “the coastline of spices” where the climate is warm and humid. On the hills, are perched some villages around which are cultivated numerous spices which are used in Indian cooking. The Arabs, the Portuguese, the Dutch and the British as well as the French have established settlements near some ports where they came to purchase spices, these “preservatives” which are so useful and valued at the time refrigerators did not exist.

It is at the geographical centre of the state of Kerala that Mahé is situated, a small town south of Kunnur on the river of the same name, the photograph of which is seen herebelow:



This settlement and its territory have been handed over to the Indian Union in 1964, at the same time as the town and the territory of Pondicherry.

Today, Mahé is quite prosperous with some attractive « cottages », and some villas built by Muslim families. In almost each family a male member works in the Gulf countries. When he returns to Mahé, he buys land and constructs a house with his savings. Or, he buys some jewellery for his wife or daughter.

PHOTOGRAPHY: Xintian Zhu and Michel Postel lodged at Kunnur (earlier known as Cananore) on the seaside for resting, because the Gods come out and dance all night upto six o'clock in the morning. It then becomes necessary to rest during the day.

Photography at night is difficult for several reasons: the place where they prepare the make-up and the costumes of the Gods is dark. The place is lit up with neon tubes which “blinds” and disturbs numeric cameras.

When they are ready, these Theyyams are constantly in movement. While photographing at night, it is normally necessary to expose for one, two or three seconds not possible here with the movements of the dancers.....



It is in this little “resort”: on the cliff at Kunnur, that one is able to rest after the torrid nights in the villages.

The small hotel is provided with a place for ayurvedic treatment, where several kinds of massages are carried out by skilful specialists with perfumed oils of plants to make the skin and the muscles relax and rejuvenate.

The festival of the Theyyams (“Theyyam” signifies “God”)



Front of the temple (“Kavu”) of village Kalikoden

At fixed dates for each village, on low lands, in the forests or the hills, the villagers organise “the night of the Theyyams”, a ceremony which lasts until morning and which goes as follows:

- at first, the local people come and pay respect to the master of the place, usually a Brahmin,
- a pyre is prepared as well as altars around the temple so that one can make offerings. Torches are lit up all night. At least ten drums beat all night for the *puja* and the dancers.
- during this time, they prepare the garments of the oracles and the gods under tents, or in open air,
- the make-up of a Theyyam can take several hours: at first they paint his body in different colours of natural origin:



The demon Chamundi

of ochre, red and white. They also paint symbols on his skin. Then they prepare the maquillage of the face. There are layers of ochre, red and black. They design some lines on his faces, like the hoods of snakes. Around the eyes, they apply thick mascara, which widen them. They complete it with fine lines on the sides.

- the dressing of the Theyyam then begins. Under the large red robe, they install a real cage of fine strips of palm which makes his robe appear swollen. They put large rings on the ankles and on the arms solidly attached in order to keep them in place while dancing.
- they prepare his hair with tight headband for receiving his imposing crown, the “mudi”, special to each Theyyam. For the female Theyyam, long hair of at least 1 m 50 are fixed at the back, like for the Theyyam CHAMUNDI.

The ceremony begins with an invocation to the Theyyams, to call them to participate in the festival, the VELLATAM. The sound of the drums and the singing increase in intensity, and the oracles begin to dance. They walk around the temple three times. They make offerings in front of the altar where they light torches. They speak, shout and dance. Some assistants fall in a trance and are taken away.

Another oracle comes out from the temple with a weapon, sort of dagger in the shape of Z and a shield. He is in a trance and shakes himself to the wild beat. He walks around the temple three times. Then VIREN (the Theyyam of the natural forces, with a white moustache) pays respect to the fire and sits at the temple, then before his special altar, where people come to him to explain their problems, for which he offers advice.

Similarly, the two oracles CHAMUNDI make some predictions to those who come to seek their advice.



Then comes the crucial stage towards midnight: they light fire to the torches on the mundi (the hair-dressing) of BHAGAWATI KOMARAN, an impressive and fantastic Theyyam. He dances and dances in front of the temple and turns around the pyre where he burns himself at times, until his torches are extinguished.



Theyyam Bhagawati Komaran



During this time, it is interesting to watch how they prepare the Theyyam of trees (GULIKAN), whose hair-dressing of six metres high is made from palm leaves, a mundi which takes the craftsmen at least twelve hours work.

He wears a huge white and red mask and pays respect in front of the temple and at the altars. Then, he leaves his mask and dances, the chest coated with feathers and the dress in green fibres. He chases the children and frightens them.

Theyyam Gulikan



On the adjacent hill, the temple of the snakes begin to resound from the drums surrendering it.

There, the Theyyam NAGA KANYA (serpent) is seated on a stool and people pay respect to him. He has a large head-dress of red cloth, pointed and decorated with MAHALAXMI at the back receiving sacred water poured by two elephants. In front, his painted yellow face is expressionless, decorated with fine designs of snakes.

The Theyyam Naga Kanya

Towards four o'clock in the morning, they prepare the most impressive Theyyam: the peacock SASTHAPPAN. His make up is extraordinary: red, white and black. His forehead is decorated with small silver snakes. His body is painted with the "eyes" of the peacock, and then the huge open tail of the peacock is added and strapped on his shoulders and back. Last, a fantastic black beak is added over his mouth.



The Theyyam Sasthappan prepares himself



*The Theyyam Sasthapan
(the peacock god)
ready to dance*

SOCIAL ROLE

The social role of the Theyyam is interesting: at the end of the ceremony, the villagers who have come sometimes from afar, go to obtain advice from the oracles and the Theyyams themselves.

These are very accessible: they give blessing to the children or even to the adults, but above all they listen to the grievances of certain persons.

We have heard their discourse: for example, a man with a sad face comes to seek the advice of the Theyyam: "My wife has died, I am not able to live without her; I wish to leave this earth". The Theyyam explains to him "that each one has some sad misfortunes in his life. With one's inner force, and that given to us by God and nature, we are able to master our emotions and help those who are in worse need around us. Go, Gods will be by your side".

These men who impersonate Theyyams are not Brahmins; they belong to Hindu castes of lower strata. They are therefore very close to ordinary people. Under their form of Theyyam (of God), they can even question the Brahmins and blame them for any wrong doing, on this day only.

Slowly, by daybreak, people and children return to their neighbouring villages in small groups as the sun rises. Impressive night but tiring.....