



Playing God: Belief and Ritual in the Muttappan Cult of North Malabar

Theodore Gabriel

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Playing God discusses the genre of rituals known as the 'Teyyam extent' in the North Malabar region of Kerala State, India. In this elaborately costumed ritual, practitioners invoke the spirit of a deity into themselves which constitutes a splendid theophany in which, when the ritual process is over, the devotees are able to talk to the "god" and invoke his/her blessings and predictions of their future. This book concentrates on the cult of the Muttappan duo of gods, the most popular among the Teyyams of North Malabar. The Muttappan cult, though originating from worship of a forest god by tribal groups and untouchables of the hill districts of North Malabar, is now widely popular beyond Kerala, attracting worshippers from all castes and regions of South India. Playing God analyses the mythology and ritual praxis of the Muttappan cult and examines the attempts to integrate the cult into a wider Hinduism by enunciation of a new hermeneutic of the legend and rituals based on the Hindu Advaitic tradition. The book also discusses how the Teyyam ritual contrasts significantly with rituals and worship in Brahminical Hinduism. The popularity of the cult is a reflection of the changing relationships between castes in Kerala, involving a closer symbiosis and reflecting the urge by the untouchable groups of Kerala to gain a higher standing and acceptance in Keralan Hindu society. The rituals are rich in theological significance and symbolism, and have links to the performing arts of Kerala such as Kathakali and Ottam Tullal.

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