

Yali is a mythical creature found predominantly in South Indian, Tibetan and Chinese, Nepali art and architecture celebrated for its diverse and hybrid forms. It is typically depicted as a composite of multiple animals, such as a lion, elephant, horse, and sometimes even other creatures, symbolizing a range of attributes like strength, protection, and divine guardianship. Yalis are unique in that they don't adhere to a single form; instead, they have various manifestations, each combining features of different animals to embody specific qualities. These creatures are similar to mythical beings like the hippogriff, sphinx, and griffin from other cultures, reflecting the universal theme of blending different animal traits to create a powerful and symbolic guardian. Yalis appear in various forms, each symbolizing different aspects of protection and power. The Yali is also found in South Indian art, particularly in Kanjivaram silk sari ornamentation. Depicted as part-lion, part-elephant, and part-horse, the Yali is a symbol of protection and strength. It shares similarities with other mythical creatures like the hippogriff, sphinx, and griffin from different cultures. Historically, Yalis have been a prominent motif in medieval South Indian temple architecture, with their presence dating back to the Pallava dynasty. They are commonly seen in famous temples like the Meenakshi Amman Temple of Madurai and the temples of Hampi, where they are intricately carved into pillars and temple entrances, acting as divine guardians. The Yali motif is also intricately woven into Kanjivaram saris, using zari and silk yarn, often appearing on the borders, pallus, and sometimes on the body of the sari. These designs are not merely decorative but serve as a form of symbolic protection for the wearer. Culturally, the Yali acts as a guardian, embodying strength, vigilance, and divine protection, providing comfort and inspiration in times of uncertainty. The yali travelled west to the Vijayanagara Empire in the 14th century, and became a key motif in the exquisite temple architecture of the region, particularly visible in present-day Hampi. From there it spread beyond, and is found in temples across Karnataka, as well as in Orissa and Madhya Pradesh. Descriptions of the Yali and references to its forms can be traced back to ancient Indian texts such as the "Silpa Sastra" and "Mayamata." These texts, which detail traditional Indian iconography and architectural principles, mention the Yali as a guardian of sacred spaces, symbolizing protection and spiritual vigilance. The "Silpa Sastra" and "Mayamata" are ancient Indian texts whose exact dates of composition are not precisely known, but they are traditionally dated between the 5th and 8th centuries CE for the "Silpa Sastra," and around the 8th to 12th centuries CE for the "Mayamata." The "Silpa Sastra" consists of texts that provide detailed guidelines for traditional Indian arts, iconography, and architecture, particularly focusing on temple construction and the sculpting of various figures, including mythical creatures like the Yali. The "Mayamata,"

attributed to the sage Maya, is an ancient treatise on architecture and town planning, detailing the principles of Vastu Shastra (Indian architectural science) and including references to various deities and mythological creatures, emphasizing their symbolic and protective roles in sacred spaces. These texts are essential for understanding the rich heritage of South Indian art and architecture. The iconography of the Yali became particularly prominent in South Indian sculptures around the 16th century. Descriptions from these ancient manuscripts highlight its combination of features: a cat-like graceful body, the head of a lion with the tusks of an elephant (Gaja), and the tail of a serpent. In some representations, the Yali is depicted standing on the back of a Makara, another mythical creature and the vahana (mount) of Budha (Mercury). Makara is a mythical creature often seen in South Asian art and architecture, symbolizing both aquatic life and fertility. It is typically depicted as a hybrid creature, combining features of various animals such as a crocodile, fish, and sometimes even a peacock or elephant. In Hindu mythology, the Makara is considered to be the vahana (mount) of Varuna, the god of the oceans, and sometimes also serves as the mount of the river goddess Ganga. Its presence in iconography represents the primordial waters and the life-giving aspects of nature. Budha, in Indian mythology, is not just the planet Mercury but also a deity associated with intelligence, wisdom, and communication. He is considered to be the son of Chandra (the moon) and Tara, and in Hindu astrology, Budha governs aspects of intellect, eloquence, and analytical skills. The association of the Yali with Budha through its depiction standing on the back of a Makara symbolizes the control of wisdom and intellect over primal instincts. Yalis are typically positioned at temple entrances and on the pillars, believed to protect the pathways leading to these sacred places. They often possess the stylized body of a lion and the head of another beast, with the most common variations being the lion-headed Simha-vyala, the horse-headed Ashva-vyala, the human-faced Nara-vyala, and the dog-headed Shvana-vyala. The names yali and vyalas are synonymous. Yali is also referred to as vyala. There is mention of 16 different types of Yalis or vyalas in ancient texts while each of them has their own unique significance. The Simha Yali is a fierce protector, depicted with the head of a lion standing upon a crouching elephant. As one of the most recognizable forms, the Simha Yali serves as the guardian of the temple. It is also a motif woven onto the Kanjivaram drape, symbolizing protection to the wearer.. The most common form of Yali in Nepal is the Simha Yali. The Gaja Yali, with the head of an elephant and the body of a lion, represents power and intelligence. This is the most commonly occurring Yali motif. On the Kanjivaram sari, it is intricately woven with its tusk and trunk prominent atop the graceful, cat-like lion's body. The Nara Yali, known as the

protector of dharma and knowledge, has a smiling human face on a lion's body and stands upon a defeated warrior or demon. The Yali wears an expression of victory, symbolizing its strength over the forces of evil. The Mrga Yali combines the horns of a deer with the body of a lion, signifying power, speed, and wisdom. This form blends the graceful agility of the deer with the might of the lion and is depicted with its upper body bending and turning in a snake-like manner. The Svana Yali has the body of a lion and the head of a dog, standing atop the figure of an elephant, poised to attack in its protective stance. The dog's head symbolizes loyalty and ferocity, making this Yali a formidable defender of the sacred. The Sardula Yali, with the head of a tiger, embodies beauty in ferocity. This magnificent and fierce creature is both feared and revered as a symbol of immense power and beauty, often depicted standing upon an elephant or a prostrate body. The Mesha Yali is portrayed with strings of pearls in its mouth and a rider on its back, having the head of a sheep. This Yali symbolizes purity, strength, and sacrifice, representing the unifying power of the divine. The Ashva Yali is composed of a lion's body with a horse's head, standing on an elephant's back and poised to leap into the air. As a representation of the warrior's courage, the horse symbolizes raw power and vitality, making this Yali a strong motif of protection. The Gandaki Yali features the head of a female rhinoceros on a lion's body, representing freedom, peace, and solitude. In sculpture, this Yali is often depicted trampling upon an elephant, turning back to observe its defeated foe. The Marjara Yali has the head of a cat and the body of a lion, symbolizing guile and cunning. This form of the Yali combines a crafty intellect with the strength of a protector, using deception and agility to guard the sacred. The Vrika Yali has the head of a wolf on a lion's body, signifying the dangerous and destructive nature of a predator. This Yali appears as a wild, fierce warrior, engaged in a lone battle against the forces of evil. The Sarpa Yali, with the head of a snake on a lion's body, is a powerful symbol of mortality. The snake's association with guardianship and revenge lends this terrifying Yali an immense strength, representing the relentless force of protection and vengeance. The Dharma Yali symbolizes righteousness and justice, while the Brahma Yali represents knowledge and creation. The Vishnu Yali is associated with preservation and protection, and the Shiva Yali is linked to transformation and destruction. These additional Yalis further enrich the symbolism and diversity of this mythical creature in South Indian art and architecture. Each type carries its own unique significance and role, emphasizing different aspects of strength, protection, and spirituality. In Nepalese architecture, particularly in the Patan and Kathmandu regions, Yalis hold a significant role as protectors stationed at the entrances of temples. These mythological guardians are not just decorative; they embody deep cultural and religious symbolism, representing control over

various aspects of nature. Yali carvings can be found on the Taleju Temple and other historic buildings in Patan Durbar Square, showcasing the intricate craftsmanship of the Newar artisans. These hybrid creatures, with their fierce yet graceful forms, are a testament to the artistic and spiritual legacy embedded in South Asian culture. The Yali is more than just a mythological figure; it represents the guardian force against evil, both physically and spiritually.