

Celebrations, rituals and practices

Onam falls in the month of *Chingam*, which is the first month according to the [Malayalam Calendar](#). The celebrations mark the Malayalam New Year, are spread over ten days, and conclude with Thiruvonam. The ten days are sequentially known as Atham, Chithira, Chodhi, Vishakam, Anizham, Thriketa, Moolam, Pooradam, Uthradam and Thiruvonam. The first and the last day are particularly important in Kerala and to Malayalee communities elsewhere.

The Atham day is marked with the start of festivities at [Thrikkakara Vamanamoorthy Temple, Kochi](#). This Vishnu temple is considered as the focal centre of Onam and the abode of Mahabali, with the raising of the festival flag. Parades are held, which are colourful and depict the elements of Kerala culture with floats and tableaux.

Other days have a diverse range of celebrations and activities ranging from boat races, cultural programs, sports competitions, dance events, martial arts, floral [Rangoli](#) – *pookkalam*, prayers, shopping, donating time or food for charity to spending time with family over feasts. Men and women wear traditional dress. The [Kerala sari](#) or Kasavu sari is particularly wore on this day.

Athachamayam



Onam starts off every year with a parade called Athachamayam.

The Onam celebrations across the state starts off with a grand procession at [Thrippunithura](#) near Kochi called Atthachamayam, also referred to as *Thripunithura Athachamayam*. The parade features decorated elephants marching, drum beats and other music, folk art forms, floats and colorfully dressed people with masks. In Kerala's history, the [Kochi king](#) used to head a grand military procession in full ceremonial robes from his palace to the Thrikkakara temple, meeting and greeting his people. In contemporary times, this a state-supported event.

The parade floats traditionally feature scenes from epics such as the [Mahabharata](#) and the [Ramayana](#). Additionally, some floats include themes from the [Bible](#) as well as current themes thereby highlighting unity and harmony.

The procession path historically has been from Tripunithura to the Vamanamoorthy Temple in Thrikkakara, Ernakulam district. The temple is dedicated to Vishnu in his Vamana (dwarf) avatar. After arrival at the temple, the marchers offer a prayer.

Pookkalam (Flower Rangoli)



Floral Rangoli during Onam are a tradition



Thrikkakara Appan Onathappan idol (an icon of Vamana avatar) inside Pookkalam during Onam

The floral Rangoli, known as *Onapookkalam*, *Athapookkalam* or just *Pookkalam*, is made out of the gathered blossoms with several varieties of flowers of differing tints pinched up into little pieces to design and decorate patterns on the floor, particularly at entrances and temple premises like a flower mat. Lamps are arranged in the middle or edges. It is a work of religious art, typically the team initiative of girls and women, who accomplish it with a delicate touch and a personal artistic sense of tone and blending. When completed, a miniature pandal (umbrella) hung with little festoons is erected over it. The pookkalam is similar to [Rangoli](#) which is made of powders of various colors and is popular in North India.

The traditional ritual of laying pookkalam (floral Rangoli) starts on Atham day. The pookkalam on this day is called Athapoo, and it is relatively small in size. The size of the pookkalam grows in size progressively with each day of the Onam festival. Only yellow flowers will be used on Atham with only one circular layer made and the design is kept simple. Statues or figurines of Mahabali and Vamana are also installed at the entrance of each house on this day.

Traditionally, Athapookalam included flowers endemic to Kerala and the [Dashapushpam](#) (10-flowers), but nowadays all varieties of flowers are used. Earthen mounds, which look somewhat like square pyramids, representing [Mahabali](#) and [Vamana](#) are placed in the dung-plastered courtyards in front of the house along with the Pookalam, and beautifully decorated with flowers. All over Kerala, *Pookalam* competitions are a common sight on Onam day.

Music and dance



Thiruvathira Kali dance during Onam.

Traditional dance forms including *Thiruvathira*, *Kummattikali*, *Pulikali*, *Thumbi Thullal*, *Onam Kali* and others. [Thiruvathira](#) Kali is a women's dance performed in a circle around a lamp. [Kummattikali](#) is a colorful-mask dance. In [Thrissur](#), festivities include a procession consisting of caparisoned elephants surrounded by Kummatikali dancers. The masked dancers go from house to house performing the colorful [Kummattikali](#). Onam Kali is a form of dance

where players arrange themselves in circles around a pole or tree or lamp, then dance and sing songs derived from the *Ramayana* and other epics.



[Kathakali](#) performances are a part of Onam tradition.^[45]

[Kathakali](#) dance is also commonly performed during this time, with dancers enacting characters from the various Ancient Indian legends. A famous venue for this is at [Valluvanad](#) which is associated with the growth of Kathakali, and [Cheruthuruthy](#), where [Kerala Kalamandalam](#) is located.

***Pulikali*: tiger dance**



Pulikali is a dance in tiger costumes.

[Pulikali](#), also known as [Kaduvakali](#) is a common sight during the Onam season. This dance showcases performers painted like tigers in bright yellow, red and black, who dance to the beats of instruments like Chenda and Thakil. This folk art is mainly performed in the cultural district of Thrissur and thousands pour into the city to be a part of this art.

Performances of the ritual worship dance, [Theyyam](#), are given during the Onam season.^[7] In this, Mahabali is played by the Onathar. Its variations include characters such as *Oneswaran* and *Onapottan*.

At the Thrikkakara temple, every day of the festival showcases one or more of these activities including Kathakali, Thiruvathira, Chakyar Koothu, Ottam Thullal, Patakam, Onam songs, and percussion instrument shows. The Onasadya here is grand in scale, and is attended by over ten thousand people from all religions and faiths. Festivities include Puli Kali (masked leopard dance) and traditional dance forms like Kaikotti Kali which are performed in various functions. The official Government celebrations start on this day with heavy illuminations in [Thiruvananthapuram](#), [Kochi](#) and [Kozhikode](#) along with fireworks.

Most cities in Kerala, such as the political, commercial and cultural capitals, [Thiruvananthapuram](#), [Kochi](#) and [Thrissur](#), are lit up with lights and fabulous displays of fireworks. Sumptuous Onam Sadya feasts are prepared. In Thrikkakara temple, a mega-feast is conducted, which is open to the public and is attended by more than twenty thousand people.

***Vallamkali*: boat race**



An Onam boat race

The [Vallamkali](#) (the snake boat race) is another event that is synonymous with Onam. Well-known races include the [Aranmula Uthrattadhi Boat Race](#) and the [Nehru Trophy Boat Race](#). Numerous oarsmen row huge snake-shaped boats. Men and women come from far and near to watch and cheer the snake boat race through the water. This event is particularly featured on the [Pampa River](#), considered sacred and Kerala equivalent of [Ganges River](#).

As a tribute to the traditional snake boat race, a similar snake boat race is also held by the Malayali diaspora in Singapore annually during Onam at the [Jurong Lake](#).

Onam Sadya



Sadya is the traditional nine or more course vegetarian



meal served on banana leaf.

Onam harvest festival is marked with a special feast lunch on last day and includes rice and a sweet at the end.

The *Onam sadya* (feast) is another indispensable part of Onam, and almost every Keralite either makes or attends one. The Onasadya reflects the spirit of the season and is traditionally made with seasonal vegetables such as yam, cucumber, ash gourd and so on. The feast is served on plantain leaves and consists of nine courses, but may include over two dozen dishes, including (but not limited to): Chips (especially [Banana chips](#)), Sharkaraveratti (Fried pieces of banana coated with jaggery), [Pappadam](#), various vegetable and soups such as [Injipuli](#) (also called Pulilnji), [Thorani](#), [Mezhukkupuratti](#), [Kaalani](#), [Olan](#), [Avial](#), [Sambhar](#), [Dal](#) served along with a small quantity of [ghee](#), Erisheri, Molosyam, [Rasam](#), Puliseri (also referred to as Velutha curry), Kichadi (not to be confused with [Khichdi](#)) and [Pachadi](#) (its sweet variant), Moru ([buttermilk](#) or curd mixed with water), Pickles both sweet and sour, and coconut chutney. The feast ends with a series of dessert called [Payasam](#) (a sweet dish made of milk, sugar, jaggery, and other traditional Indian savories) eaten either straight or mixed with ripe small plantain. The curries are served with rice, usually the 'Kerala Matta' parboiled rice preferred in Kerala.

In hotels and temples, the number of curries and dishes may go up to 30. The importance of the feast to Kerala's Onam celebration culture is captured in the famous Malayalam proverb "*Kaanam Vittum Onam Unnanam*" which means "One must have the Onam lunch even by selling one's property if need be." The Travancore-style Onasadya is renowned to be the most disciplined and tradition-bound.

The [Kurichians](#) tribe of [Parambikkulam](#) celebrate Onam as a festival for eating new grains. Just before Onam, they go for a community hunt and the games bagged during the hunt are distributed among participants and consumed in family feasts. The feasts are held on Uthradam and Thiruvonam. Their feast also include fish and meat.

Post Onam celebrations

Normally, the largest chunk of Onam celebrations ends by Thiruvonam. However, the two days following Thiruvonam are also celebrated as Third and Fourth Onam. The third Onam, called **Avvittom** marks the preparations for King Mahabali's return ascension to heavens. The main ritual of the day is to take the Onathappan statue which was placed in the middle of every Pookkalam during the past 10 days and immerse it in nearby rivers or sea. The Pookkalam will be cleaned and removed after this ritual.

Other customs



[Onapottan](#) in traditional costume is a custom in northern Kerala. *Onapottan* visits houses and gives blessings.

People buy and wear new clothes for the occasion of Onam, called *Onakkodi*.

During the Onam, Keralite Hindus install an image of Thrikkakara Appan or *Onatthappan* (Vishnu in the form of Vamana) in their home just as Hindus install images or murtis of [Lord Ganesha](#) on the Ganesha Chaturthi festival elsewhere.

Many lamps are lit in Hindu temples of Kerala during this celebration. A palmyra tree is erected in front of temples and surrounded by a wooden balustrade and covered with dry palmyra leaves. It is lit with a torch and burned to ashes to signify that King Mahabali went to Patala as a sacrifice.

The swing is another integral part of Onam, especially in rural areas. Young men and women, decked in their best, sing *Onappaatt*, or Onam songs, and rock one another on swings slung from high branches.

Onam season is often associated with creativity as weavers and potters go for excess production to cater to increased demands for their products during the season, especially in the North Kerala regions of [Kannur](#) and [Kasargod](#). Handloom fairs are an integral part of the spirit of Onam festivities these days.

In some parts of Kerala, people indulge in various games and dances during and post-Thiruvonam. These are known as **Onakkalikal**. These include competitions such as Ox races (*Maramadimatsaram*), [Uriyady](#), food-eating competitions, Pookkalam competitions etc. in a special month.

[Kuravans](#) of Travancore use Onam as a day for offering thanks to their ancestral spirits. On Uthradam day, they offer liquor, rice cakes, flattened and parched rice, incense, camphor, etc. to the spirits. The ritual ends with a request to the spirits to be satisfied with their offerings and assured that the next attempt would be better. Then an appeal is made to protect the believers and to ward off evil spirits from their area. This ritual is locally known as **kalayam vaikkal**. A similar offering like this is done during [Makaram](#) harvest, known as **Uchara**.

