

# Onam

## A celebration for the harvest.

Onam is an annual Hindu festival, which usually falls between August - September, and is celebrated for ten days. In India's southern state of Kerala, Onam is considered the state festival. It commemorates New Year's Day and is also recognized as a harvest festival.

While predominantly a Kerala festival, regions in other states, including Uttar Pradesh (Balua and Baway), Gujarat (Bharuch), and Maharashtra also honor its significance, while Malayali's or Keralites across the world celebrate from afar. As like many other Hindu holidays, there are multiple legends of why a particular celebration occurs and what the religious significance is. The most common is the story of King Mahabali's devotion and selflessness.



### King Mahabali and Three Steps

For many, Onam commemorates the arrival of King Mahabali, the young boy who was the grandson of Prahalad, a committed devotee of Lord Vishnu, and one of the inspirations behind Holi. King Mahabali gained power and dominance by defeating the gods and taking over the three worlds (heaven, earth, sky). When the gods were defeated, they approached Lord Vishnu to join them in their battle against King Mahabali, but Lord Vishnu declined as he noted that the King was his loyal devotee and a fair leader to his people.

While King Mahabali was a smart and knowledgeable King who respected education and was known for his generosity, Lord Vishnu still decided to test the King's devotion at an opportune moment. One day, when King Mahabali was doing a *yagna* (a form of Hindu worship), a young, cheerful and small boy known as Vamana approached to ask the King for land, which would span three of his footsteps. King Mahabali's guru, Sage Shukracharya, warned him that the young boy was actually Lord Vishnu in disguise and advised against the request, but King Mahabali ignored the guru and granted the boy his wish.

As soon as King Mahabali said yes to Vamana's request, Lord Vishnu became a gigantic form known as *Trivikarma* (Sanskrit translation, "having three steps") and amassed the whole earth, including King Mahabali's kingdom, with the first step of his foot. With the second step, he accumulated the whole sky. It was then that Lord Vishnu asked King Mahabali where he should place his foot for his third step. The King joyfully offered his head to demonstrate his utter devotion, surrender, and faithfulness to Lord Vishnu. Recognizing the selfless and generous nature of King Mahabali, Lord Vishnu blessed him and sent him to a different *loka* (world). At the request of King Mahabali's people, Lord Vishnu granted him permission to come back to his kingdom once every year to be among his people. The day of his return, the tenth day of celebrations, is officially recognized as Onam.

### Symbolism of Onam

There are many celebratory aspects of Onam that offer memorable images of the festivities spanning ten days.

#### POOKALAM

*Pookalam* are elaborate floral displays similar to *rangolis*, but are often more elaborate and grander in size as they build layer upon layer

over the ten days. Most *pookalam* feature ten rings of flowers with the center being made up of yellow flowers to represent King Mahabali. When completed, a miniature umbrella is sometimes hung over it to protect it from the weather.

#### VALLAMKALI BOAT RACES

*Vallamkali* Boat Races are also known as the snake boat race. Legend has it that the boats were used to protect food being taken to the temple from river pirates and are now a popular attraction of Onam as the boat riding competitions feature beautiful decorations with various patterns.

#### ONATHALLU

*Onathallu* is a friendly type of martial arts which uses bare hands and is native to Kerala. During Onam, an *Onathallu* is staged as a memory of the battle against treachery and power.

#### PULIKALI

*Pulikali* refers to artists dressed up with body paint like tigers or leopards who dance through the streets to the beat of traditional instruments. Usually wearing masks, the dancers mimic tigers and leopards as they get cheered on by crowds. This folk art enacts the stalking game between the hunter and the agile, fierce, and feisty nature of the tiger.



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## ONAM SADYA

*Onam Sadya* (Onam feast) which occurs on the tenth day of Onam and is traditionally served on a banana leaf, usually consists of at least nine courses with many vegetables.

## ONAMKALI

Onam Kali refers to all the games played at the festival of Onam, including ball games, tug of war, and archery.

## SWINGS

Swings are an integral part of Onam, especially in the villages and rural areas of Kerala. It is common to see young couples and children sing *Onappaatt* (songs for Onam) and rock one another on swings.

## ELEPHANT PROCESSIONS

Elephant processions are one of the most awaited events of Onam. Elephants are decorated with flowers, ornaments, and jewelry and are paraded around, often 'dancing' and interacting with people.

## FOLK DANCES

Folk dances are a major attraction of the festival and there are several varieties specific to Kerala and/or Onam festivities. *Kaikottikali* is a clap dance performed by women and while dancing they praise King Mahabali. *Thiruvathira Kali* is a women's dance performed in a circle around a lamp. *Kummattikali* is a colourful-mask dance with masked dancers going from house to house performing. *Onamkali* 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. The most recognizable folk dance is known as *Kathakali* and features dancers with green facial paint with dances enacting famous legends and folktales.

## KERALA

A true pluralistic state, Kerala is home to significant Christian (approximately 18%) and Muslim (approximately 25%) communities, both of which join in on the celebrations and recognize the symbolism it holds for the Hindu community. Christian churches hold festivities and place their own spin on it and many Muslims participate in the celebrations. For these communities, it is seen as a cultural event rather than as specifically religious, but respects the Hindu stories and significance.

# Days of Onam

Onam festivities last for ten days, with each day having a unique name and significance with a mixture of competitive and celebratory practices.

## Art Activity

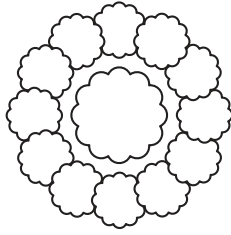
For each day of Onam, color in the illustration to make it your own art. Share your coloring activities with us on Instagram! Just use the hashtag **#onamwithhaf** in your post for a chance to be featured on our Instagram account: **@hinduamerican**.



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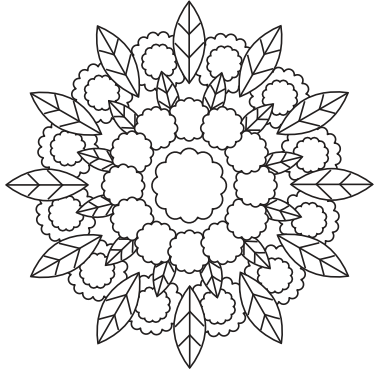
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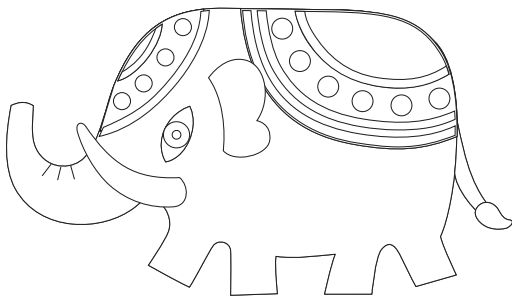
#### DAY 1: ATHAM

This is the first day of Onam when King Mahabali begins his preparation to return to earth. It is marked by the beginning of designing *pookalam*, which are elaborate flower designs similar to *rangolis*. When creating *pookalam*, the designs are created with ten layers or rings depending on the design with one ring/layer being added each day of Onam and with each color representing a different Hindu deity. Yellow flowers are reserved for Atham and are often found in the middle of the *pookalam*.



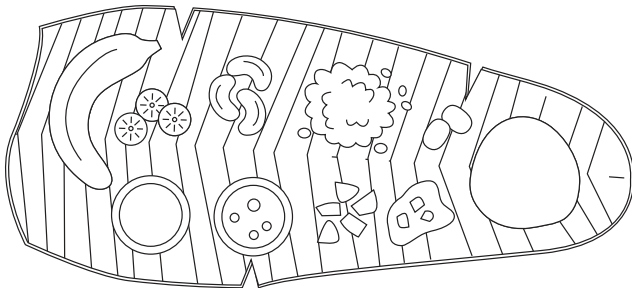
#### DAY 2: CHITHIRA

On this day, people clean their homes and add another layer to the *pookalams*, using mostly orange, cream, and yellow flowers.



#### DAY 3: CHODI

Along with adding another layer of flowers to the *pookalams*, many will shop for new clothes, jewelry, and gifts in preparation.



#### DAY 4: VISHAKAM

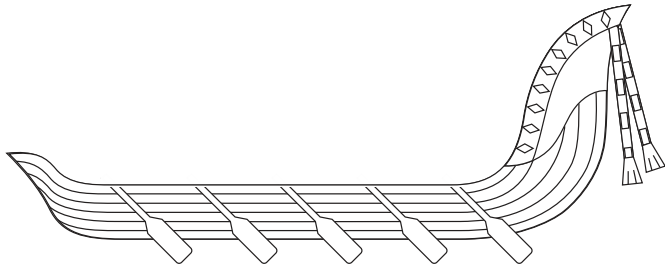
This day marks the beginning of several competitions across the state in Kerala for athleticism, *pookalam* designs, and artistic performances. Many markets offer special pricing and are visited to stock up on ingredients to make the elaborate Onam meal, known as Onam Sadya.



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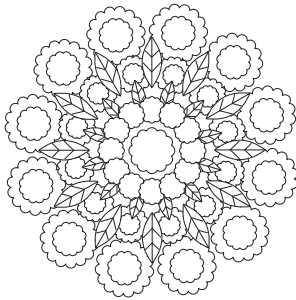
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#### DAY 5: ANIZHAM

Across the state in Kerala, the *Vallamkali* Boat Races begin, which are long snake boat races featuring hundreds of boatmen and thousands of spectators. Additional flowers are added to the *pookalam* designs.



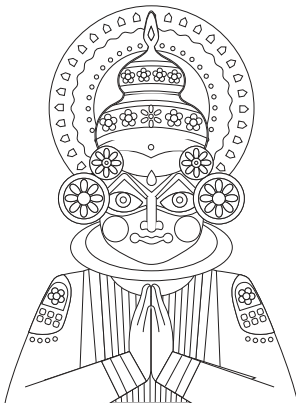
#### DAY 6: THRIKETTA

By this time, many people begin to visit their families and some businesses start to shut down as Onam vacation begins and fresh flowers continue to be added to *pookalams*.



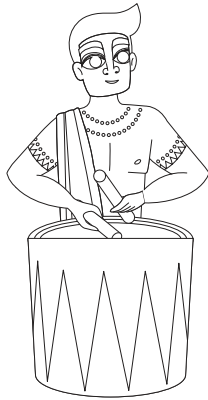
#### DAY 7: MOOLAM

In several parts of Kerala, the dances related to the festival start. The state is often beautifully decorated by this time with *pookalams* and swings adorned with flowers to celebrate the king's homecoming. Many places start serving smaller versions of the traditional *Onam Sadya*.



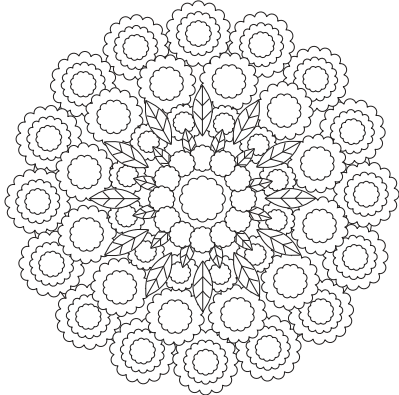
#### DAY 8: POORADAM

This is a day when the *murtis* (sacred images or statues) of King Mahabali and Vamana, the fifth incarnate of Lord Vishnu who sent the King away and allows him to visit every year during Onam, are erected at temples and at homes. These *murtis* are often placed at the center of *pookalams*, which should have eight rights by now.



#### DAY 9: UTHRADOM

This day is considered the eve of Onam and many will clean their homes on this day and complete their shopping as it is an auspicious day for buying fresh fruit and vegetables. This is also the evening that King Mahabali symbolically arrives in the community.



#### DAY 10: THIRUVONAM

This is the main day for Onam celebrations and is when King Mahabali is said to visit people in their homes so everything is clean and tidy. Gifts are distributed, new clothes are worn, *Onam Sadya* are enjoyed and the finished *pookalams* are on display. There are also several competitions held in different parts of Kerala.



#### DAY 11: AVWITOM/THIRD ONAM

To mark the end of Onam, many will recognize an eleventh day which is used to prepare for King Mahabali's departure. The murtis of King Mahabali and Vamana are immersed in the sea or river, and the *pookalams* are cleared and removed. Post Onam celebrations continue for the next couple of days with snake boat races and *Pulikali* tiger plays, among others.



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