



The Festival

BY JERRY LAZARUS, MA

Legend has it that the sage Parashurama, an incarnation of Lord Vishnu of the Hindu Trinity, threw his axe toward the sea, and the water receded to where the axe landed—creating an enchanted new land, Kerala, for his devotees to live in peacefully.



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of Onam



Lower left: *National Geographic Magazine* named Kerala as one of the “Ten paradises of the world”
Photo by Shijan Kaakkara creativecommons.org)

Top middle: Chinese fishing nets in Kochi, Kerala established circa 1350 by Chinese traders.

Lower middle: The traditional 26-course Onam feast is served on banana leaves
Courtesy of Sharmilee Jayaprakash at sharmispassions.com

Right: The perfume of flowers fills the air during Onam

I GREW UP IN KERALA, a state located on the southwestern coast (Arabian Sea) of India. The name means “the land of coconuts,” which is appropriate because coconuts are everywhere in Kerala.

Our most celebrated tradition is Onam, a festival indigenous to Kerala, which is similar to Thanksgiving.



Though the festival is rooted in Hindu mythology, Onam is celebrated by Keralites irrespective of religion, caste, or creed. You’ll find Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Jews, and atheists alike celebrating with the Hindus. At Onam, identities fall away, and we celebrate as one people.

The first record of Onam celebrations dates from 800 AD, though the tradition goes back much further and is based on a story found in *Bhagavata Purana*, a sacred Hindu scripture. According to the text, there was a golden age of Kerala when the righteous King Mahabali ruled a utopian land where there was no dishonesty, deception, or unfair practices. Mahabali, however, was not satisfied with this paradise. He went to war and extended his rule to the heavens and the

netherworld, which made the deities (*devas*) fearful of his growing powers. Aditi, the mother of the deity Indira, sought Lord Vishnu’s help to stop Mahabali. Vishnu disguised himself as a *vaamana* (Sanskrit for dwarf) and tricked him into agreeing to give him whatever amount of land he could cover by taking three steps. Having godly powers, *vaamana* expanded to gargantuan proportions. His first step covered the heavens; his second covered the earth. Having nowhere to place his third step, he asked the King: “Where shall I put my foot?” Knowing now that the *vaamana* was an incarnation of Vishnu, and there was nothing he could do without risking the lives of his people, he said: “Place your foot upon my head.” Vishnu, having recognized the humility and noble self-sacrifice of the king, granted him a last wish before the third step would banish him to the netherworld. Since the king was so fond of his people, his wish was to return once a year to visit them. Thus was born Onam, when the beloved king returns home and brings with him peace, equality, justice, truth, and prosperity for all.

Growing up, I looked forward to Onam festivities and all the celebrations. Traditionally, it is held in August or September at the end of the monsoon season, which is also the time of rice harvest in Kerala, and the start of Kerala’s traditional New Year. Flowers bloom profusely and

mandala-like floral arrangements are displayed in front yards and verandas everywhere. This is to give a royal welcome to King Mahabali. Onam celebrations can last ten days, but most celebrate for three days. The three-day festivities are marked by Hindu temple celebrations with elephants and religious rituals, a wide variety of traditional games, regatta, folk songs, and dances.

Everyone buys new clothes and these are given as gifts. But it is the third day that is most anticipated as this is when a sumptuous feast is shared with family and friends.

How well I remember those feasts! Usually there are 11 essential vegetarian dishes served, and sometimes as many as 26 items (see photo). As the traditional meal is served on banana leaves, it was my task to harvest the leaves from the banana trees in our yard, cut them to size, wash and dry them, and lay them out as serving platters. I didn’t mind the work knowing the scrumptious feast that was about to follow! 🌿

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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