

Folk Dances of Kerala, Name, List, Features, Cultural Significance

July 24, 2026 • vajiramandravi.com



Folk dances of Kerala present a lively and colorful glimpse into the state's deep-rooted **culture** and **traditions**. They are an integral part of **festivals**, **temple celebrations**, and **community gatherings**, performed with graceful movements, rhythmic patterns, and vibrant attire. Beyond entertainment, these dances serve as a medium to convey **stories**, express **emotions**, and strengthen **social unity**, reflecting the simplicity and harmony of life in Kerala.

Famous Folk Dances of Kerala

Folk dances of **Kerala** reflect the rich **cultural heritage**, **traditions**, and **social life** of the state. These dance forms are deeply connected with **festivals**, **temples**, **rituals**, and **everyday life**, showcasing themes of **mythology**, **devotion**, and **community bonding**. Each dance has its own unique **style**, **costumes**, **music**, and **significance**, representing different **regions** and **communities** of Kerala. Some of the most **famous folk dances** are discussed below in detail, highlighting their **features** and **cultural importance**.

1. Kathakali

- **Kathakali** is one of the most **famous and visually striking classical dance forms** of Kerala, dating back around **500 years**.
- The term means **“story play”**, as it combines **dance, drama, music, and storytelling** into one performance.
- It mainly portrays stories from **Indian epics like the Ramayana and Mahabharata**, focusing on the battle between good and evil.
- The performers undergo **intensive training**, especially in controlling their **eye movements, facial expressions, and body gestures**.
- The costumes are extremely elaborate, with **large headgear, layered skirts, and detailed face painting using natural colors**.
- Each color in the makeup represents a **particular character trait**, such as green for heroes and red for villains.
- The performance is accompanied by **traditional instruments like chenda and maddalam**, along with singers who narrate the story.
- Kathakali is not just a dance but a **complete theatrical experience that requires patience and deep understanding** from the audience.

2. Mohiniyattam

- Mohiniyattam is a **graceful and elegant classical dance form**, traditionally performed by women.
- The name means **“dance of the enchantress”**, inspired by the mythical character Mohini.
- It combines elements from **Kathakali and Bharatanatyam**, but focuses more on **soft, flowing, and feminine movements**.
- The dancer usually wears a **white saree with golden borders, traditional ornaments, and jasmine flowers in the hair**, symbolizing purity.
- The dance includes **gentle swaying movements, subtle expressions, and slow rhythmic steps**.
- It is performed to **Carnatic music**, which enhances its soothing and devotional mood.
- Themes often revolve around **love, devotion, and feminine emotions**, making it emotionally expressive.
- Mohiniyattam is appreciated for its **simplicity, beauty, and refined gestures**.

3. Theyyam

- Theyyam is a **ritualistic and highly spiritual dance form** performed mainly in **North Kerala**.
- It is closely linked to **temple worship and local deities**, and is considered more than just a performance.
- The dancer is believed to **become the deity during the performance**, and people seek blessings from them.
- The costumes are extremely grand, featuring **massive headgear, vibrant face paint, and detailed body decorations**.
- The preparation itself can take several hours, showing the **importance of tradition and precision**.
- The performance includes **dance, music, chanting, and rituals**, making it a complete religious experience.
- It reflects the **belief systems, myths, and social history** of local communities.

- Theyyam also plays a role in **social equality**, as performers often come from specific communities regardless of caste hierarchy.

4. Kolkali

- Kolkali is a **folk dance that originated among rural farming communities** in Kerala.
- It is performed using **wooden sticks**, making it lively and energetic.
- A group of about **24 dancers moves in a circle**, striking sticks in perfect coordination.
- The rhythm gradually increases, requiring **timing, concentration, and teamwork**.
- The songs sung during the performance often narrate **local legends and stories of gods**.
- The dance reflects the **spirit of cooperation and unity in village life**.
- It is commonly performed during **festivals and social gatherings**.
- Kolkali also helps in developing **physical coordination and group discipline**.

5. Ottamthullal

- Ottamthullal is a **lively and humorous dance form** created to entertain and educate people.
- It was developed by **Kunchan Nambiar** as a response to more serious art forms.
- The performer presents stories in a **simple and relatable manner**, often using satire.
- It focuses on **social criticism, moral lessons, and everyday life situations**.
- The dancer uses **expressive gestures, facial expressions, and rhythmic movements**.
- The costume is colorful but simpler compared to Kathakali.
- The language used is **easy to understand**, making it accessible to common people.
- It remains popular for its **entertaining and meaningful storytelling style**.

6. Kalaripayattu

- Kalaripayattu is not just a dance but a **traditional martial art form of Kerala**.
- It is considered one of the **oldest fighting systems in the world**.
- It includes **physical exercises, weapon training, and combat techniques**.
- The movements involve **strength, flexibility, speed, and balance**, making it physically demanding.
- It was originally practiced by **warriors for self-defense and battlefield training**.
- Today, it is also performed as a **cultural demonstration and stage performance**.
- It promotes **discipline, mental focus, and physical fitness**.
- Many modern performance arts and even films draw inspiration from Kalaripayattu techniques.

7. Padayani

- Padayani is a **ritual folk dance performed in temples**, especially dedicated to **Goddess Bhadrakali**.
- It is known for its **large, colorful masks made from natural materials like areca leaves**.
- The dance is performed during **temple festivals that can last several days**.
- It includes **music, chanting, and dramatic movements**, creating a powerful atmosphere.
- The performers follow **strict rituals and traditions**, showing deep devotion.

- Each mask represents a **different character or divine figure**.
- The dance symbolizes the **victory of good over evil**.
- Padayani highlights the **strong connection between art, mythology, and religion**.

8. Margamkali

- Margamkali is a **traditional dance of the Syrian Christian community** in Kerala.
- It is performed by a group of **women moving in a circular formation**.
- A **lighted oil lamp at the center** symbolizes spiritual presence and guidance.
- The dance narrates **religious stories and teachings of Christianity**.
- It is usually performed during **festivals, church events, and weddings**.
- The steps are simple, focusing more on **coordination and devotion**.
- It represents **faith, unity, and cultural identity**.
- Margamkali shows how Kerala's dance traditions include **different religions and communities**.

9. Koodiyattam

- Koodiyattam is an **ancient Sanskrit theatre tradition** performed in temples.
- The name means **"acting together"**, as it involves both male and female performers.
- It is considered one of the **oldest living theatre forms in the world**.
- Performances can last for **several days**, sometimes up to 20 days.
- It focuses on **detailed storytelling, slow movements, and deep emotional expression**.
- Actors use **highly controlled facial expressions and gestures** to convey meaning.
- The performance includes **Sanskrit verses, music, and traditional instruments**.
- It requires **patience and cultural understanding** to fully appreciate.

10. Chakyar Koothu

- Chakyar Koothu is a **solo storytelling performance traditionally held in temples**.
- It is performed by members of the **Chakyar community**.
- The performer narrates stories from **epics and ancient texts** in an engaging way.
- It combines **humour, satire, and serious storytelling**, making it unique.
- The artist uses **expressions, gestures, and voice modulation** effectively.
- Sometimes, the performer includes **commentary on current social issues**.
- It is both **educational and entertaining**, keeping the audience engaged.
- This art form highlights the **importance of oral storytelling traditions in Kerala**.

Folk Dances of Kerala Cultural Significance

- Folk dances of Kerala play an important role in preserving the state's **cultural heritage** and traditions, with forms like **Kathakali** and **Mohiniyattam** reflecting classical storytelling and artistic excellence.
- Many dances are closely connected with **religious beliefs and rituals**, such as **Theyyam** and **Padayani**, where performances are considered sacred and linked to temple worship.

- These dance forms help in expressing **mythological stories and moral values**, as seen in **Kathakali** and **Koodiyattam**, which narrate stories from epics like the Ramayana and Mahabharata.
- Folk dances promote **social unity and community bonding**, especially group performances like **Kolkali**, **Oppana**, and **Margamkali**, where people participate together during festivals and celebrations.
- They reflect the **cultural diversity of Kerala**, with dances like **Oppana** (Muslim community) and **Margamkali** (Christian community) showing the coexistence of different traditions.
- Some dance forms act as a medium of **social awareness and entertainment**, such as **Ottamthullal**, which uses humour and satire to convey messages to the public.
- Traditional practices like **Kalaripayattu** highlight the importance of **physical fitness, discipline, and self-defense**, while also influencing performance arts.

Source: <https://vajiramandravi.com/current-affairs/folk-dances-of-kerala/>

© Vajiram & Ravi. For personal use only.