FactsDid you know

Odi: the black art of pre-modern Kerala

Among many forms of folk magic and witchcraft documented in pre-modern Kerala, none caused more terror in the countryside than the black art called Odi. Trained sorcerers known as Odiyans practised it. People believed this secret tradition gave its members the supernatural power to change into animals.

According to regional accounts, people believed a skilled Odiyan could take the ghostly form of a bull or a dog. They also believed he could take the ghostly form of a cat. At night, under cover of darkness, the sorcerer would wait and suddenly cross the path of an intended victim or leap out in animal form. Accounts said this made the victim suffer violent convulsions or madness, or even sudden death.

Initiation into the group involved severe and secret ordeals. Novices had to satisfy veteran masters through frightening tests and call on the dread guardian spirit Kalladikode Neeli. They also learned to make magical ointments such as the legendary Pilla-thilam. Fear of the Odiyan was so great in all levels of society that people routinely carried protective yentrams. These were gold or silver cylinders worn around the neck or waist, holding rolled metal sheets with secret diagrams and mantras against an Odiyan's spell.