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An in-depth Analysis of Tharis progression in Northern Kalaripayattu: A south Indian martial art

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Abstract

Kalaripayattu is considered the most ancient and surviving martial art form originating in the southern part of India. At present, it is widely practiced in the state of Kerala and has deep-rooted links and history with Kerala's culture and folk forms. In ancient times, Kalaripayattu served as a martial art form with the ultimate goal of protecting and serving society. Kalari masters also served the society as traditional doctors called Vydyas. In this study, the researcher aims to analyze the progression of an individual in the northern Kalaripayattu practices within its particular division called Tharis.

Keywords: Kalaripayattu, tharis, meypayattu, kolthari, meythari, ankathari

Introduction

Indian traditions and its martial history

Indian culture is rich and diverse, and its history is marked by numerous wars, battles, and invasions. As a result, fighting skills and martial techniques became integral to the Indian way of life, varying according to the region's geography and giving rise to different forms of martial practices. The ancient Indian epics, Ramayana and Mahabharata, provide evidence of the historical significance of martial arts in India

The history of Indian martial arts can be traced back to the Vedic period (c. 1500-700 B.C.E.), where the science of Dhanur Veda was taught by Dronacharya and the guru of the Pandavas and Kauravas in the epic tale of Mahabharata. The secrets of utilizing the weapons, particularly the tricks of releasing the weapons and controlling them during warfare were tutored by him Dhanur Veda, derived from "dhanus" (bow) and "Veda" (knowledge), encompassed the art of archery along with armed and unarmed combat techniques, meditation, and mental conditioning.

Kalaripayattu

The word "kalari" appears in the *Puram* and *Akam* to describe both a battlefield and a combat arena. It is also mentioned in Sangam literature from the second century B.C.E. The *Akananuru* and *Purananuru* describe the martial arts of ancient Tamilakkam, including forms of one-to-one combat, and the use of spears, swords, shields, bows, and silambam. The references to "Silappadikkaram" in Sangam literature dating back to the second century refer to the sale of Silambam staves, swords, pearls, and Armor to foreign traders. The Silambamⁱ staff was one of the martial art weapons, which was in great demand with the visitors.

The earliest extant manual of Dhanur Veda is in the *Agni Purana* (c. eighth century), which contains several chapters giving descriptions and instructions on the fighting arts of Dhanur Veda, regarding earlier sutras on Dhanur Veda dating back centuries earlier. It described how to improve a warrior's prowess and kill enemies using different methods in warfare, whether a warrior went to war in chariots, elephants, horses, or on foot. Foot methods were subdivided into armed combat and unarmed combat. The former included the bow and arrow, the sword, spear, noose, armor, iron dart, club, battle axe, discus, and trident the latter included wrestling, knee strikes, and punching and kicking methods.

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History and legend

Kalarippayattu is considered the most ancient and surviving martial art form that originated Southern part of India, at present, it has been widely practiced in the state of Kerala. It has a deep-rooted link and history with the culture of Kerala and its folk forms. It is believed that it originated in the 3rd BCE and influenced the different realms of the culture directly and indirectly in the Southern region of India. According to the mythology the Sage Parasuramanⁱⁱ is considered to be the founder of Kalarippayattu who taught this art form to a group of twenty-one Brahmins to protect the land which he retrieved from the sea.

According to legend, Bodhi Dharma, a Buddhist monk who lived during the 5th century has been credited with introducing Chan Buddhism and Kalarippayattu to monks in China. "Bodhidharma's association with Shaolin, which is traceable in canonical scriptures are equally attested to by archaeological evidence at the temple -self. Shaolin steles reveal the gradual process by which the Indian saint had been linked to the Chinese temple" (Shahar, 2008) ^[7] When Zen Buddhism made its way to Japan with its martial art components, it stopped over in Okinawa, where Kalarippayattu fused with local combat techniques to become Karate. In the history of world martial art society even though India's influence has not been decisive, it has certainly been significant.

In 1804, the British banned Kalarippayattu in Kerala in response to the Kottayathu War, a rebellion against British rule in Kerala led by the Keralite king Pazhassi Raja. The ban came into effect shortly after Pazhassi Raja's death on November 30th, 1805, resulting in the closure of most of the major Kalari training grounds in Kerala. Following the ban, many Kerala gurukkals of Kalarippayattu resisted the ban and continued to teach Kalarippayattu to their students in secret. Gurukkals such as Kottakkal Kanaran Gurukkal, Kovilkandi Kelu Kurup Gurukkal, and Maroli Ramunni Gurukkal, learned and preserved the martial art for posterity and were responsible for preserving Kalarippayattu into the beginning of the twentieth century, as well as sparking the revival of Kalarippayattu in Kerala in the 1920s

In ancient times it was a martial art form and its ultimate goal was to protect and serve society, apart from that the Kalari masters were serving the society as traditional doctors called vydyaas, and Kalarippayattu has developed its traditional system which has been serving the local community till now, altogether a Kalari was a hub of a village in its holistic way it was the center of the village and its culture. The 14th-century account of life in Kerala written by Portuguese traveler Duarte Barbosa describes Kalarippayattu as an integral part of its society.

Northern Style

Northern or vadakkan style of Kalarippayattu used to practices in the northern part of Kerala, the legend says that the parasuraman is the founder of the Northern style of Kalarippayattu, Northern Kalari style starts with body exercises and advancing through the different types of weapons and finally reach to the state of verum kai or the bare hand where the practitioner learn the fighting system, so then they are practicing the Kalari chikitsa or kalari treatment based on the Ayurveda, Presently there are three styles of Kalarippayattu in northern styles namely Arappukai, Vatten thirippen, and Pilla thangi.

Aim and Objectives

To find out the relationship between the vaytharis of Arappu kai sambradayamⁱⁱⁱ in the Northern style of Kalarippayattu.

Statement of the problem

An in-depth analysis of tharis progression in northern Kalarippayattu: a south Indian martial art.

Methodology

Interviews with the masters of Kalarippayattu and Silambam and the elaborate study of primary and secondary data.

Tharis

Thari you can say a way or a method in Kalari the command is known as thari a practitioner is following the thari of the teacher and it's known as Vaythari.

Vaythari

Vaytharis or the rhythmic command is one of the peculiar types of command you cannot see in other martial forms it does not seem like a command it looks like music with a particular rhythm in Malayalam vay means mouth and the Thari means a rhythm, in Kalari vaythari means a rhythmic command which is the guidance for the student, each word has its meaning and it is explained that the particular technique what you are doing, a beginner may find it difficult to follow it in the beginning but gradually he or she will be able to follow the instructions.

According to SRD Prasad Gurukkal "In 17th century the influence of Sanskrit and Tamil made Malayalam as an independent and literal language this may help the Malayalam to develop a pure Malayalam vaythari for Kalarippayattu", but the interesting fact is that most of the practitioners and the teachers I have spoken with have an opinion that vaythari is very important in kalarippayattu because it gives a tremendous power push to practice, the power of the sound automatically takes you to the complex practices.

The same word has found an important place in the divisions of Kalarippayattu the first three divisions namely known as meythari, kolthari, and ankathari.

Mey Thari

This is the dance of the body, mastering on your own body is the primary aspect of Kalarippayattu, different types of exercises using in Kalarippayattu to gain the control over the body, starts with the leg exercises^{iv}, Meyppayattu, Astavadvikal^v, the individual is consistently practicing these body exercises until he reaches the state of Mey Kannakuka which means the body become all eyes. It gives an idea that how alert and sensitive a practitioner should be, the Meythari is known as the spine of kalarippayattu, continuous and regular practices will also create alertness and awareness between the practitioner and nature so the person will be able to sense even the slightest changes around him which is an essential quality for a warrior.

Kolthari

Kol means stick this is the phase of practice with wooden weapons in northern kalari, Kolthari is the second part of the northern Arappu kai style which deals with the wooden weapon, after meythari which deals with the physical body or molding the physical body for the higher awareness which deals physically and psychologically, a person is entering into the kolthari, there are different kind of wooden weapon.

Kettukari (panthiruchan)

Kettukalri is a long six feet or the length of the practitioner in this weapon the person learns basic blocks with a stick

Mucchan (cheruvadi)

This is the second weapon short stick which is much faster and you will get very less time to block certain kinds of attacks you will start to learn in this time

Otta or Ottakol(curved wooden stick)

In this series otta is becoming a very important weapon in the other weapon both opponents are using the same weapon and start to fight in the otta in some Kalari the learner is using the otta and the teacher is using the mucchan, in some kalaris teacher is also using same otta but the grip of the learner (Fig-I) and the grip of the (Fig-II and III) teacher is same like mucchan, there is no different between the grip of the munkol^{vi} whether he is carrying Mucchan or Otta, Also in Otta, the Pinkol will start to learn how to attack which means his blocks are becoming an attack.



Fig 1: Ottakol



Fig 2: Grip of Ottakol



Fig 3: Grip of Munkol andnPinkol

In the meythari stage all the practices you are doing is yourself the name meyppayattu^{vii} mentioning it meyppayattu the fight with your own body the fight to master your own body you are fighting with the body and enabling the body to reach where the mind wishes. In the second stage of kolthari,

you start to learn how to fight with someone, how to share with someone else space, or to understand someone else space, according to your partner your awareness starts to start to change, and the practitioner will try to learn the movement of other though it is choreographed, with different partners it will change the sensitivity of the boy increases and the alertness is improving.

Ankathari

Ankathari is the stage of metal weapons here you are learning to use metal weapons you start to deal with different kinds of weapons like dagger, swords, shield, udaval, spear, urumi the flexible sword, etc. It is an intense and more subtle and more close fight, the body becomes fluid and fearless at this stage, by the time you reach this stage your teaching ability also gradually increases which means understanding the other individual is improvising constant repetition of the same movements makes you relaxed and the movement becomes graceful, the continuous teaching experience is helping the person to understand even the slightest movement of the opponent, the body will start to response according to the movement of the opponent or your partner.

Verumkai

Verum kai or bare hand technique is the fourth stage of Kalaripayattu there is no tharis in this because verum kai does not have vaytharis or command during the practicing stage instead of vaytharis the name of the technique practitioner is using, this stage is coming after three stages of vaytharis which will completely transform your physical and mental realms. Apart from these, there is one more part in Kalaripayattu known as Kalarichikitsa or Kalari treatment based on Ayurveda different types of massages and treatments are included in this part.

A comparison between the same movements used in different Tharis

Chuzhichu (binding)

This is one of the basic movements the practitioner is using repeatedly in different tharis in a different way, the movement of the hand Fig- I, repeating in other tharis in Kolthari Fig-II, III and IV in Ankathari Fig-V, VI, VII when it comes to the Verum Kai the movement will become part of your body then naturally the reflex will work when you want to use it.

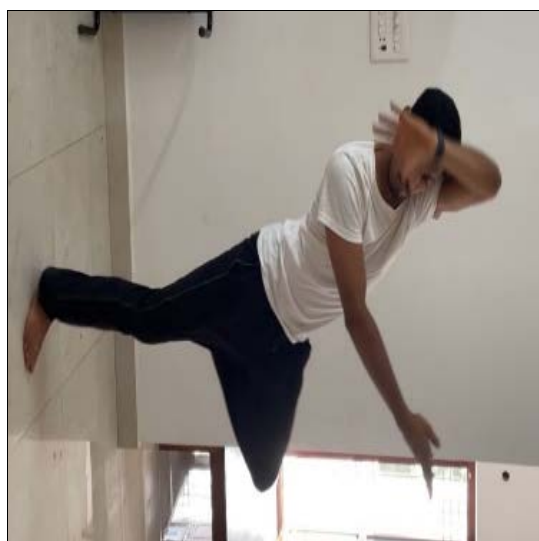


Fig 4: Thirinju Chavutti



Fig 5: Kettukari-Chuzhichu



Fig 6: Valapadi pukketu vilangi



Fig 7: Panthittirunnu Chuzhichu



Fig 8: Kadara-Olavil Chernnu Malarannu Thirinjju



Fig 9: Sword and shield Othiram Chadi Vetti



Fig 10: Mara pidichu Kuntham-Vettukil Valamarthi

Conclusion

Kalaripayattu is a martial form in which the progression and the development of the body are gradual, the structure of the Northern style of Kalaripayattu is scientific and connected from one to another so breaking the pattern may break the system scattered and interrupt the holistic development of a person, the learning the form based Kalaripayattu should help the individual to carry it forward and for the physical, psychological and social development.

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ⁱ Silambam also known as the Tamil Martial Art form

ⁱⁱ Mythology says that Parasuraman is one of the incarnation of Vishnu and one who created Kalarippayattu

ⁱⁱⁱ style

^{iv} Beginning exercises of northern style helping to gain flexibility, balance and strength

^v Animal Postures – the Postures based on animals and Birds

^{vi} Munkol is the teacher and the pin kol is the learner

^{vii} Sequences of exercises which molding your body and including different types of defensive techniques