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Kalaripayatt – the ancient indian art of self defence

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Summary

This article has not been the result of the strict empirical research. But the point of depart has been of the practical nature. For many years I have been studying the various self-defence systems of Asiatic combat sports and martial arts. As the point of depart I have chosen judo. I have black belt (4th Dan). In 1964 I won the gold in University Championship of Europe. About the same time I have been graduated at Oriental Department of Warsaw University. Than my researches on Asian martial arts have began, for more than two decades I have been interested in the studies of the cultural background of armed and unarmed combat. Some legends situated the cradle of martial arts in Bharatavarsha or in the country of Buddha's birth. Although I have written two books about it, I could not study the ancient Indian systems of self-defence. But in 2005 situation has been changed: I have got a rare opportunity to go to India -to get some glimpses of the ethos and etnos of various implications of ancient Dhanur Veda. Within the scheme of I.C.C.R. (Indian Council for Cultural Relations) I have travelled all over India. My introductory reflection on kalaripayatt written above aims at the larger interdisciplinary and intercultural project of research on this subject. To launch it at academic level, I look forward for some experienced partners – the experts and scholars.

Key words: kalaripayatt • self-defence • martial arts

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HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Although the legends of Asian martial arts derive the secret of self defence from India, for a long time the knowledge about Kalaripayatt in the West has been second to none. In the book *Martial Arts – the Spiritual Dimension*, written a half century ago by Peter Payne, the author says only several words about stick fighting between two exponents of Kalaripayatt, a little known art developed in Kerala, South-west of India. “Although India may have been the cradle of the spiritual martial arts – he adds – contemporary Indian systems of self-defence are not wide-spread and much of the knowledge has died out or is taught only secretly” [18, p. 7].

That line of presentation is still alive. Although the role of Indian combat training has not been underestimated by military experts of the West, the “exotic secrets” prevail in many descriptions. The publishers of *The Martial Arts Encyclopedia* [4, p.72], issued in the United States not much later after the book mentioned above, translated the term Kalaripayatt as “gymnasium exercises” – from the South Indian *malayalam* root, the language of old Dravidian origin proclaimed as the official one in Kerala State after the Independence. On the same page we read some words of the explanation: “The ancient Southern Indian art of self defence is centered in Kerala, and still secretly practiced today. It is sometimes called the «Indian Karate». There are four stages to kalaripayatt. «Metoxhil» are the calisthenics to build strength and develop quick reflexes. «Kolthari» are wooden staff exercises performed alone or with partner. «Agathari» are exercises with a sword, shield, and a dagger. «Verumkai» is unarmed fighting for health and self defence. A fascinating story relates how a kalaripayatt master chalked the tip of his sword during demonstration and then whirled it around at the spectators. Ten of them received the mark on their necks” [*ibidem*].

The Western adventure with Indian archaeological discoveries has been full of surprises. Many legends turned up to be sheer tale stories of “Indian ninjas”. On the other hand, in the account of some serious Indian scholars, Sharada Srinivasan and Srinivasa Ranganatham, met during my researches as a visiting professor in the University of Bangalore (Department of Archaeology), we may find the real trace leading to the source of the oldest art of swordmanship and swordsmiths in the world evidenced in archeological excavating situated near to the traditional kalaripayatt training region: “According to some reports of travellers to the East, Damascus swords were made by forging small cakes of steel that were manufactured

in Southern India. This steel was called *wootz* steel. It was more than thousand years before steel as good was made in the West. *Wootz* was first high-quality steel made anywhere in the world” [25, p.1].

Some other works confirm the exemplary status of several ancient Indian practices indirectly. In a book *Indian Mathematics and Astronomy* which I brought back to Poland after my trip to India sponsored by The Indian Council for Cultural Relations [2], there is a message about up-to-date usage of the ancient handbook of mathematics compiled about two thousand years ago by the famous astronomer Bhaskara. At the beginning of the 20th Century it has been published in sacred language of old India, sanskrit, and then in modern *hindi* version, to reappear in some Western languages quite recently. As it has been translated into Polish with the same title, *Lilavati*, we know that is the best-known ensemble of mathematical puzzles for thousand years used to train the mind. If we look into the text of *The Scientific Edge. The Indian Scientist from Vedic to Modern Times* [10] we shall find there the information about continuity of the scientific secrets for several thousands years – that is the real age of some ancient Indian Academies.

If we look for some other evidences, we find out the famous Mogul iron pillar in New Delhi, made from unknown kind of blend never subjected to corrosion and therefore- in some spectacular theories – maintained to be a kind of UFO relict. More sound is the practical evidence – the popularity of stick fighting all over India – elements of various systems called *dandi* have been used by the Indian police and the Indian army since the colonial times of the British Raj. Looking for the ancient roots of these practices we may analyse the performing arts in the most important creations of sacred folklore – *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. Their batalistic infrastructure has been founded on methodology and axiology known all over as *Dhanur Veda* [11]. The aims of this system are so deeply rooted in the Indian tradition as the practice of Ayurvedic healing. One can trace them in the illustrations of Roy Craven’s *History of Indian Art* [7]; the oldest are the sculptures from the temple of Kanchipuram near Madras (today named Chennai) – the conflict of two ancient dynasties have been resolved on the ground of martial arts.

About the secret knowledge of combat practiced for some thousand years wrote Stephen Cohen in his book *The Indian Army* [6]. Such reflections have been verified in some ancient reports of the Chinese pilgrims traveling to India for Buddhist studies in the seventh century. According to their accounts the best Indian soldiers have been recruited from the bravest warrior



clans, for many generations specialised in particular kinds of arms. If we look into the description found in *Mahabharata*, the epics known for more than two thousand years, we shall find the same weapons attributed to particular heroes of legendary war [15, p. 217-248].

If we consider, that India's caste system preserved the secret knowledge of combat within the framework of dharma of the professional warriors (kshatriyas), we cannot be surprised to find some texts on the art of war even in Three Jewels of Buddhism (triratna). Buddha pacified charging elephant and "paralysed" a famous robber Angulimala (this name means "a rosary of fingers" – of his victims) who jumped out on pilgrims. About thousand years later the monk Bodhidharma, established the Shaolin tradition, the famous system of combat self realisation practiced widely in China. The continuation of this path can be traced in the Japanese Zen: in 1985 Trevor Legett compiled a book entitled *The Warrior Koans* [12] to emphasize the historical connection of meditation line with martial arts beginning from Siddhartha Gautama who was a knight (kshatriya) before becoming Buddha.

Several thousand years before it, Arias, the brave conquerors of Indus and Ganga valleys, made their offerings to Indra, invincible god of war addicted to sacred drinking of *soma*. Most of ancient gods of Hinduism have been the experts of martial arts – Krishna, Siva, Kali. One of the heroes of *Ramayana* was Hanuman, the expert on Indian wrestling. The mythic figures of *Mahabharata* derived their specialised skills in particular arms from their forefathers – the gods of Hinduism. In TV version of these sacred epics the stuntmen have been selected from kalaripayatt gyms. Another trace leads to Yoga. According to some accounts the brahmans of the North had some knowledge of *mallavidya*, the science of combat. Beginning from the 10th century they have been training a very dangerous form of boxing known as the "diamond fist" (*vajra mushti*), associated sometimes with a way of Tibetan Buddhism (*Vajrayana*). For some religious regions they performed in some villages very dangerous fights of warrior ascetics. Although the opponents attacked only the head and upper part of a body, many fighters have died during these festivals. Such tradition survived, particularly in Gujarat. But there are special events reviving "sacred battles" during some holy festivals of special importance. One of them is associated with Kurukshetra, the area known by heroes of *Mahabharata*.

The general interactions of combat arts and meditation have been analysed in the classical book of

Selvarajan Yesudian *Yoga and Sport* [23]. The yogic structure of the Indian martial arts has been described by professor Luis Frederic in his *Dictionnaire des arts martiaux* where kalaripayatt is explained as "chemin du champ du bataille". He writes of "art martial indien, originaire du Kerala, il comprend des techniques sans armes (*suvasu*) quelque peu analogues à celles du karate et de l'aikijutsu, et des techniques avec armes – ces dernières sont *otta* (sorte de massue pointue en bois dur), *modi* (poignard double fait avec les cornes du gazelle), *urimi* (un sabre à la lame flexible à deux tranchants), les lances, batons, poignards, petits boucliers ronds en osier ou en métal, etc." [8, p. 138]. And he adds: "Les mouvements sont accompagnés d'exercices de respiration contrôlée (*pranayama*) et visent à frapper les points faibles (*marman*) du corps de l'adversaire, réputé être au nombre 108. Ce style de combat rituel (il est dédié à la déesse Kali), serait, selon la légende, celui-là même que Bodhidharma introduit en Chine, au Shaolin. Aussi appelé *vajra mushti*, «poing de diamant»" [*ibidem*].

There are also some detailed accounts. In the article *Marman et les arts martiaux indiens* [20] Arion Rosu compares the vital points of combat (*marman*) with yogic *chakras* and *nadis*. "Ayant tiré profit de Ayurveda – he wrote – et attiré par la drogue d'immortalité, brahmans adopté quelques pratiques psychophysiques des arts martiaux". The word "marman" has been found already in most ancient Veda (taken from sanskrit root *mr* – to die). Patanjali handbook *Yogasutras* reports in several contexts about "marmasthanas", the knowledge of vulnerable points. This knowledge has been widely applied in yogic healing and therapeutics, cherished particularly by sivaists and tantrists.

Another evidence of the most ancient origins of the Indian martial arts can be found in the dimension of classical dances. In his collection of documentary films presented in Poland in 1979 Nicola Savarese has shown *Martial Dances of Malabara* [22], combining the message with the debate about the sanskrit theatre Kathakali. In a book *Performing Arts in Asia* [3, p. 17] Kapila Malik Vatsyayan talks about "amazing continuity of tradition and tenacity with which dance forms have survived at various levels of social strata". From the very beginning the actors of Kathakali theatre in Southern India have been the Nairs derived from the jati of kshatriyas. Their fundamental postures have been connected with kalaripayatt training. For more than 10 hours of the traditional spectacle they keep upright position staying on the external parts of their feet. For Westerners that is possible for no more than several minutes if you do not take into consideration the spectacular movements of Indian actors.

If we study performing art forms of Kerala and the influence of kalari on them, like *thayyam* and *padayani*, or even more sophisticated forms like *kudiyattam* or *kathakali*, we feel that the steps and the hand gestures perhaps owe something to the kalari fighter and the training procedures the goes through. “*Thayyam* is one of most colourful and ancient forms of ancestor worship practiced in the northern districts of Kerala even today – wrote Narayana Menon in his essay *The Performing Arts. A Definition* – The ritualistic and extravagant art form, designed to coincide with the festival periods, has imbibed several traits from the kalari system. It is worth mentioning that *kalari asans* also come from these areas Authorities such like K.N. Kurup categorically stated that *thayyam* dancers obtain martial skill from the traditional acrobatics known as *kalaripayattu*” [1, p.53].

“Many rural and urban art forms, sophisticated and unsophisticated – he adds – have drawn elements from Kalaripayattu. *Kudiyattom* is one such important art form. In *Attaprakaram*, a work which deals with the movement and gestures of the actor when he portrays a character in *Kudiyattom*, the influence of Kalaripayattu is evident. Take *Patapurappadu*. This is done either when a character prepares for a combat or when he has nostalgic memories of a combat already won. All the details related with it are depicted in a style similar to that of Kalaripayattu. In *Krishnanattom*, another form of temple theatre art. this influence is again evident particularly in the *kalasams* of male characters especially those of Krishna, Balarama, Narakasura and Murasura. In *Swayamwara*, which depicts the marriage of Draupati, the fight between the Krishna and Kalayavana, is like an adaptation from Kalaripayattu. *Kathakali*, it is believed, has borrowed from Kalaripayattu. Some of the physical training methods used in Kathakali were adopted from *maipayattu* of *kalari vidya*. Terms used among *Kathakali asans*, like *kal visal*, *kai visal*, *suchikikidal*, *thozhuthu kuthal*, *kuninju visal*, prove this. The poses described in Kalaripayattu for the elephant, horse, lion and fish have been adopted by *Kathakali* performers. Other dance poses in *Kathakali* have their basis in the *Akkachuvadu* and *Neekchuvadu* followed by kalari experts. The influence of Kalaripayattu is clear in relatively the new art forms like in the *Chavittu Natakam*. The performing art of a more martial nature known as *Velakali* clearly shows elements taken from this ancient physical training system” [*ibidem*].

The presence of martial training is evidenced in many aspects of Indian life. It can be traced in relics of Hanuman cult in small temples situated on the banks of Ganga river (the priests are the wrestlers),

as a performing art it is a part of Indian festivals, dances, movies. Description of combat training of very old roots can be found in such classical British accounts of military training like *The Sepoy* [5] written by Edmund Candler, the book on *Martial Races of India* [14] published by general George Mac Munn, and Saint Nihal Singh’s book entitled *India’s Fighters* [21]. Some other aspects have been analysed in *The Self Defence of India* [25] a book compiled by P. S. Sivaswamy Ayer.

The vast information about the Indian combat training can be found in the sacred books, legends, tale stories. The best known are epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. Transformed in TV serials they have begun to be the best evidence of Indian martial art background. If we analyse the temple painting and sculpture, we soon find the source of inspiration for many Indian movies still feeding the imagination of Bollywood producers. One has to be cautious, though, the images and symbols of Indian martial arts have been mixed up there with other systems of Asian combat sports. For more detailed information we suggest the book of M.D. Raghavan, *Folk Plays and Dances of Kerala* [19]. A manuscript entitled *Kalarividya* discovered some years ago was published by the Manuscript Library of the University of Kerala in 1956. In the introduction to it Vijaykumar points out the existence of another manuscript of *Marma Vidya* – the most secret aspect of Kalaripayattu. It has not been published yet. The *Marma Vidya* is written in Vattezbutthu and it is in the collection of the University of Calicut.

Training of kalari

If we consider Kalaripayattu as the ancient Indian performing art we have to be cautious. This kind of understanding can be misleading. Performing arts live only with music and dance but this is not a film but the theatre: the music is in our body, not necessarily in the hearing. We have to reconsider the background of Asiatic martial arts beginning from sacred body language, prayer or meditation so well described in a book *The Ritual Theatre of Far East* [13]. There is an old saying in Malayalam (the language of Kerala) which lays down the rule that for fencing exercises - the whole body must become the eye. In other words, the whole muscular structure must be made as sensitive, responsive and alert as the human eye. This is the fundamental principle on which the Kalari system is designed. Training is leading to balance, control, and flexibility of mind and body. Psychophysical integration become the foundation for self-awareness, leading to exceptionally effective performance.



The pupil is enlisted on auspicious day, usually at the age of seven. After offering *dakshina* to guru he gets his first lesson. The process of learning is conceived as a system of initiations. Though the elaborate training is designed for the males, females are not completely barred from admission. We guess it from the stories of kalari queens described in the ballads (for example *Unniyarcha*).

Kalari gym has very ancient design. It generally measures 42 feet (in the east-west direction) by 21 feet. The hard level surface is prepared six feet below the ground level and it has a gabled roof of plaited *cadian* leaves. The smaller gyms usually have the length from 18 to 12 feet. The deities of kalari range in number from seven to twenty one, the number depending on the local status of teaching Guru (*Gurukkal*) entitled with the same reverence as the Gods. But the presiding deity in all cases is the Kalari Bharadevata (or Bhadrakali). The south-west corner is considered his sacred seat, several steps lead to a tiny raised platform.

The idea of training is strictly connected with the notion of joint family, the smallest unit of the social structure of Kerala in the middle ages. Before starting the movements student touches the floor of the training ground with reverence – with his right hand. Then he places it on his forehead in a form of salutation. Afterwards he prostrates himself at the feet of Guru. The warming up is associated with various methods of massage. They are all used with a view to giving maximum flexibility to the body. With the special movements, they serve more than one purpose of maximum affectivity in fight. They also have therapeutic value and are adopted for the treatment of physical ailments.

The training can be divided into three different periods. The first phase is the period of steps, kicks and blows which remind the techniques of karate and jujitsu. The most important is the balance of body and soul. Techniques are applied with special support of yogic breathing. During the second phase the trainee is taught various movements using a stick. Here the combat between the two opponents begins. The third and last phase of training employs more intricate and dangerous weapons, After the fencing lessons with a stick of different lengths the student begins to learn the techniques of the sword, the dagger, the spear. Among them is the *otta* – kind of curved dagger having a strong guard of the fist.

Manoeuvres with these weapons need perfect mastery and skill. The secrets of successful swordsmanship are taught only to these disciples of the Guru in whom he has perfect confidence. The most dangerous strokes

are directed to the 64 *kulamarmans*, the most vital parts of the body. All together there 104 *marmans* which the master of Kalaripayatt must know. For that reason some of them become famous healers. They use herbs, massage and special movements for a treatment.

In spite of many dimensional practice of kalaripayatt, the system is basically invented for self defence. The basic principles remind the foundations of karate and aikijitsu, the advanced knowledge has been founded on very elaborate science of fencing. It is seen clearly at the age of mass media, when the science of South Indian combat – a the whole world of Asiatic self defence – has been subjected to TV impact. Kalaripayatt is often the guest of satellite channels, particularly in Kerala region. Fundamental techniques are taught in film studios, I have seen it in India. But the mastery of this art has always been a secret, most advanced training is a mystery reserved to best students. For many reasons this kind of self defence is worth to study. Combined with studies of Buddhism and Hinduism, it may develop the deeper understanding of the most important foundations of all martial arts and bring about new understanding of Indian performing arts.

CONCLUSION

Kalaripayatt is the art of self defence with very ancient roots. At the same time, it is one of the most efficient system of developing the awareness of body and mind for dangerous situations. This art, in earlier days, was given the same importance as reading, writing and arithmetic's. For many centuries it has got a special status in ritual dimension. Like the cricket today, it was a "new religion". For some higher *jatis* it has been considered as the important part of *dharma*. Sword, stick, and spear were done afternoons, reading, writing, and arithmetic's – every morning. The sacred texts talk about the secret weapons and efficient systems of the great danger. They often were the gifts of powerful Gods, like the weapons of Arjuna.

With the outcome of the modern times the knowledge about Indian systems of self defence decreased to such extent, that only a few knew about their special status and ancient background. The question arises why the tradition of Indian self defence survived fully mainly in the South. For the inhabitants of Kerala the answer is very simple. Only the South preserved the Indian soul. Kerala is more Indian than other Indian states. Only Kerala and Tamilnadu avoided the impact of islamisation at the millennium of Arab, Turkish and Mogul rules in India. At the time of the Great Moghuls, the dynasty extending power to the

boundaries of the entire subcontinent for several centuries – from Babur Shah to Aurangzeb [see 9], these two states were the independent territories, not subjected to the transition bringing in consequence the “mixed culture”. Although it is not obvious for everybody, the survival of Kalaripayatt owes much to the strength of traditional attitudes towards the Hindu rituals of Indian self defence.

Although the roots of the practice of Kalaripayatt are very ancient, the very idea seems to be modern in

the dimension of self defence. It favours flexibility of the body and awareness of the spirit, not the strength of muscles, claims for high technical standards before any other skills. It has strong connections with Ayurvedic healing and the “tuning in” of Yoga. For some thousand years it has been tested in the military practice. Recently, it has been applied for police purposes. For these reasons, the experts of universal self defence at the age of globalisation conceive the Kalaripayatt as the system worth of careful analysis and comprehensive studies.

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