



Engaging with the Martial Art: Kalarippayattu, Caste, and the Logic of Supplementarity

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Abstract : *Kalarippayattu is one of the most widely discussed and popular South Indian martial arts. It could be termed a socio-symbolic text in the specific sense that the martial art form occupied a pivotal position in the socio-political and cultural domain of Kerala from 12th century AD onwards. The paper attempts to conceptualise the specificities of the social “field” through which the martial art form has evolved. It examines the pan-Kerala, hetero-religious, and hetero-caste acceptance of Kalarippayattu. The paper raises concerns about the general and popular assumption that Kalarippayattu is a semi-religious practice indelibly linked to the Hindu Nair community. It argues that Kalarippayattu was never a homogenous entity exclusively associated with the Nair community in particular or the Hindu religion in general. The paper also examines the socio-political conditions that facilitated the emergence of such exclusive discourses. The pivotal role played by oral narratives, such as Vatakkann Paattukal, in the formation of caste-specific martial identity is also explored.*

Key words: Kalarippayattu, oral narratives, Vatakkann Paattukal, supplementarity, caste

The contemporary Indian academic world seems to exhibit a peculiar penchant for corporeal epistemologies

advanced by martial art discourses across cultures. Martial art practices, especially during the pre-Independence period in India, formed one of the integral components of cultural life. It would not be an overstatement to suggest that the social life of erstwhile India was distinctly marked by the presence of various indigenous forms of combative discourses. One of the most widely discussed and popular Indian martial arts is *Kalarippayattu* whose origins could be traced back to the Sangam period. But as Kurup argues “...martial art forms which resembled *Kalarippayattu* had existed in different regions other than Kerala during different times” (“*Kalaripayattu*” 176). While the combative practice located in Thulunadu was generally referred to as *Gharoodividya*, in Telenkana it was called *Garadividya*, and in Tamil Nadu *Kalarividya*. (Nair 18). The efficacy of these corporeal practices in enabling individuals to effectively engage in actual wars could be debatable. Nevertheless, one cannot but acknowledge the paradigmatic presence of martial discourses in formulating distinctive cultural identities.

Kalarippayattu could be termed a socio-symbolic text in the specific sense that it occupied a pivotal position in the socio-political and cultural domain of Kerala from 12th century AD onwards. The performative discourse of *Kalarippayattu* appears to have existed as a composite cultural agency continually reformulating its structures of signification by repositioning itself within the network of cultural modalities specific to the erstwhile geo-political space of Kerala. The nature of the engagement between the social field and a cultural text like *Kalarippayattu* could not have been trans-cultural, because this martial art form appears to have reformulated the everyday codes, narratives, and cultural imagination of a large section of the social field of the

erstwhile Kerala. It could also be argued that during the process of reformulating the codes, narratives, and cultural imagination performative activities like *Kalarippayattu* also get re-inscribed into the social field in the specific sense that new categories of signification would be attributed by the social agents to understand such activities. The physical culture of *Kalarippayattu* appears to have a direct bearing on the evolution and development of Kerala's art and culture. From *Poorakkali*, a traditional folk dance form prevalent in north Malabar, to *Kathakali*, a highly sophisticated ritualistic dance performance, one could observe the manifestation of the physical reformulation of the body offered by the martial art discourse. Though attempts have been made by both historians and anthropologists to narrativise the phenomenon of *Kalarippayattu* in various ways, the discursive reformulations of the performer's body and those of the practicing community, as well as the performative re-inscriptions on the social field present a potential area that has not been sufficiently explored till date.

It could be averred that not many scholarly studies on the indigenous martial art exist in the libraries or institutional archives. Most of the available studies on *Kalarippayattu*, unfortunately, either try to shower voluminous praises on it or attempt to make this cultural performance appear exotic. The nature of the popular scholarship available on *Kalarippayattu* is on the verge of conceptual sedimentation, for there appears to manifest a willing suspension of critical consciousness from exploring the continual reformulation of the body and its modes of signification. Most of the available studies on this martial art form limit their scope of engagement to an exploration of either the historical (mythical?) origin, or to the documentation of various physical techniques employed in

the actual practices. The popular perception of *Kalaripayattu* as a mere form of physical exercise is the consequence of an inadequate thematisation of the development of the martial technology as an ontological and epistemological discursive agency legitimised by the social field of Kerala. In the absence of a radical process of re-territorialisation of the existing conceptual categories, this perception and understanding will get sedimented. *Kalaripayattu* has not only occupied an iconographic status and fashioned generations of ardent believers through its structural peculiarity—religious yet democratic; sacred yet profane—but has also acted as an agent of community formation and group cohesion. It was an agency that, especially in the middle ages, legitimised identities and subject positions, and organised the cultural imaginaries of generations of people in Kerala. Any attempt to understand and thematise the specific social reality engendered by the performative discourse of *Kalaripayattu* demands a proper conceptualisation of the dynamic equations within the social “field” through which the martial art form has traversed.

One of the most noticeable aspects of *Kalaripayattu* is its pan-Kerala and hetero-religious acceptance, for with significant regional variations in style it seems to make its presence visible across the length and breadth of the geographical space of Kerala. While the northern part of Kerala embodies three different styles of *Kalaripayattu* training: *Arappukai*, *Pillathaangi*, and *Vattenthirippu*, the central regions of Kerala nurtured a peculiar form of *Kalaripayattu* named *Otimurisseri*, and similarly the southern regions of Kerala offered a slightly variant form of martial practice called *Dronamballi*. Along with these stylistically distinct forms *Kalaripayattu* also seems to have

a *Madyathiruvitamcore* and a Muslim style (Vijayakumar 181-191).

It is not only geographical pervasiveness that makes *Kalarippayattu* a discourse of cultural significance, but also its apparent hetero-caste orientation. But it is a matter of concern that the martial art is generally identified as a semi-religious practice indelibly linked to the Hindu Nair community. I argue that *Kalarippayattu* was never a homogenous entity exclusively associated with the Nair community in particular or the Hindu religion in general. It was primarily a pan-Kerala body discourse practised by multiple communities in different forms, yet with substantial similarities. Quite detrimental to its hetero-caste disposition, most texts represent *Kalarippayattu* as an integral component of the everyday life of a Nair in the erstwhile Kerala. It is documented in *The Book of Duarte Barbosa* that the “Nayres when they are seven yers of age are sent to school where they are taught many tricks of nimbleness and dexterity...to twist on the ground, to take royal leaps and other leaps...when they are fully accomplished in this way, they teach them to play with the weapon to which they are most inclined...” (Dames 39, 40). The martial art practice, in due course of time, becomes an agent of caste legitimisation in the sense that it is commonly believed that “one will become a Nair only if one wears pulasyam/pulacham [the red cloth worn by kalari practitioners around their abdomen]” (Gangadharan 179). The generally accepted conceptualisation of *Kalarippayattu* and its corporeal epistemologies as inherently belonging to the traditions of the Nair community exudes a vicious politics of cultural homogenisation.

The references from *Vatakkann Paattukal* unambiguously point to the fact that there were Pulaya, Paraya and Thiyya *Kalari Gurukkal* along with Nair and Brahmin *Gurukkal*. The Maniyaani community who were traditionally involved in the construction of temples were in control of some of the famous *Kalaris* in North Malabar like *Oodangara*, *Maadangara*, *Kummanaar*, *Karindhalam Kalaris* (Gangadharan 200). The second volume of *Kerala History*, by Kerala History Association, records the existence of Thiyya *Kalari*, Pulayar *Kalari*, and Kaniyaar *Kalari* in Kerala. There are also evidences in *Vatakkann Paattukal* to prove that young men and women of Nair community learned *Kalari* from Thiyya and Pulaya *Kalari Gurukkal* and vice-versa. The legends of the Paraya *Kalari* performer Chengannooraathi who learned the art of *Kalarippayattu* from eighteen different *Kalaris* including those run by upper castes, the Pulaya *Gurukkal* Kari, the Kurchya women Njaalum Manikkoota Kunjadhey and Kumba all invariably point to the possibility of a corporeal discourse facilitated by *Kalarippayattu* where through the medium of martial technologies social agents were able to re-negotiate, at least during the period of physical practice, the hegemonic narratives of caste appropriateness. The hetero-caste orientation of *Kalarippayattu* becomes even more evident when we analyse the nature of weapons used in the martial practice. The *Vattenthiripp* tradition of *Kalarippayattu* involves a unique form of martial technology known as *Thottipayattu* which employs a tool generally used by fishermen as weapon—a long stick with a metal hook at the tip (Gangadharan 275).

A closer look at the narratives in *Vatakkann Paattukal* would attest to the fact that the martial discourse became a cultural auxiliary of the Nair community only after the

fifteenth century AD. It is significant to understand that *Vatakkann Paattukal* is an anthology of oral narratives which were in circulation in Kerala. The earliest available oral narratives, roughly around the thirteenth-fourteenth century AD, included in *Vatakkann Paattukal* are categorised as *Puthuram Paattukal* and these songs provide an exhaustive discussion on the social and ritual significance of *Kalarippayattu* and its practicing community: the *Chekon* of the Thiyya community. The *Puthuram Paattukal* which is replete with narratives on *Ankam*, and *Chekon* offers an image of erstwhile Kerala where *Kalarippayattu* and the bodies of the martial artists were structured in such a way that they satisfied a fundamental lacuna in the social field. In other words, *Kalarippayattu* was not merely a physical exercise but a performative discourse which manufactured caste bodies that are of the order of social supplements. K. Sreekumar fully captures the supplementary logic enforced upon the body of the *Chekon* when he observes that those “born in puthooramveedu have the life of a sacrificial crow” (My trans.; 19). But within a span of hundred years not only the caste identity of the practicing community, but also the nature of martial activity has undergone a tremendous transformation.

The *Thacholi Paattukal*, a category of narratives present in *Vatakkann Paattukal* which were in circulation during or after the fifteenth century AD, remains conspicuously silent on the social presence of Thiyya *Chekon*, instead these narratives represent *Kalarippayattu* as an essential component of the Nair community. The *Thacholi Paattukal* does not represent the bodies of the Nair *Kalarippayattu* performers as social “supplements” which inevitably get sacrificed so as to maintain an illusion of social harmony

(Derrida 304). Instead, one witnesses personalities like Thacholi Othenan who challenges social regulations and asserts his independence. The Nair *Kalari* veterans of the *Thacholi Paattukal* do not engage in *Ankam* so as to settle frivolous disputes that arise among the members of the Nair community but wields their swords to resolve personal rivalries.

The medieval social field of Kerala ruled by Naaduvazhi and Deshavaazhi presents a particular dimension of social supplementarity. If there emerges a dispute between two individuals or families and if it cannot be solved amicably through dialogue they resorted to a spectacular social phenomenon called *Ankam*. The directive principles of the discourse of *Ankam* required that both parties hire a *Kalari* veteran, *Chekon*, to embody their rivalry and fight it out in the open field. These *Chekon* on a pre-arranged date fight each other in the public space. It should be understood that *Ankam* follows a strict *Kalari* ethical code and there are explicit rules regarding the use of weapons. The party represented by the *Chekon* who wins the *Ankam* would be considered unanimously as victorious in the dispute. An examination of the lives of Thiyya *Chekon* would testify to the fact that these *Kalari* performers were not fighting each other out of personal rivalry, on the other hand they were social agents paid to avenge somebody else's anger. While an argument could be raised that these *Kalari* performers were attempting to deter an entire community of people from engaging in a vicious and open fight, it needs to be pointed out that the caste specific body of the *Chekon* was indeed a socially approved and ritualistically validated sacrificial entity. The supplementary category of *Chekon* was a social, political, economic, and cultural necessity of the times. They are the unfortunate

supplements generated by the vicious feudal social field to maintain peace and harmony among its economically and culturally elite social agents.

It is to be noted that not everybody had the right to become *Anka Chekon*. An excerpt from *Vatakkann Paattukal* reveals that the right to become *Chekon* was the privileged possession of certain families and such families had immense power and cultural capital in the social field.

Four types of Thorana have been given

Gold and Pallakk are given

Thandaayma position and veettayma position have been given

Wealth, prosperity and all paraphernalia have been bestowed upon Four paddy fields were given to us Engraved in copper plate. (qtd. in Vijayakumar; my trans.; 236)

The social field fashioned every *Chekon* to feel that it is his moral responsibility and social duty to fight *Ankam*, and the rejection of an invitation to fight an *Ankam* would lead to the cultural castration not just of the individual *Chekon* but his entire family. This ideological construction of *Chekonhood* goes in tandem with Derrida's observation on the logic of supplement. Every supplement necessarily needs to be supplemented by another supplement, and this trail of supplements is a never ending process. The category called *Chekon* was a form of cultural supplement that was necessary to maintain social order in a field where elite families engaged in never ending family feud or *Kudippaka*. This

supplementary category could not be maintained without it being supplemented by a certain mode of cultural legitimacy and capital. It is this logic of the supplementary chain that lies at the centre of the privileges, recognition, and cultural legitimacy exercised and enjoyed by the *Kalari* practicing community. A certain mode of cultural capital was necessary to ideologically fashion the body of the *Kalari* veterans into a social supplement. The cultural practice of *Ankam* could not be conceived as an enforced activity involving slaves or soldiers, but rather, it was the symbolic manifestation of a carefully calibrated consent among the social agents through meticulous exchanges between the social “field” and the “habitus” of the social agents (Bourdieu). A form of consent to willingly embody another person’s anger and to become a supplement to resolve that anger was consciously manufactured among social agents by bestowing a certain type of cultural habitus and capital on them. In the absence of such a carefully constructed form of cultural habitus and capital, it would be practically impossible to thematise the body of the *Kalari* performer as a mode of social supplement.

It would be legitimate to assume that such a deliberate fashioning of consent must have required a methodic construction of a certain narrative as history and tradition. Eric Hobsbawm’s observation becomes relevant in the present context, for he problematises the process involved in the invention of traditions and argues that traditions that seem to embody centuries of history are, in fact, invented and quite recent in origin. An “Invented tradition” signifies “a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past” (3).

Invented traditions are part of a larger ideological project to successfully maintain certain aspects of social field unchanging and invariant. It could be argued that an entire section in the body of oral literature called *Vatakkon Paattukal* is intended to create a sense of a tradition associated with *Ankam* and *Chekon*. The literary body serves as an ideological supplement to the art of creating a popular narrative across all sections in the social field. This form of a narrative that eulogises *Ankam* and *Chekon* was necessary for maintaining, as Hobsbawm observes, both the social supplement called *Chekon* and the supremacy and legitimacy of the *Kalari* practicing community.

It would probably be a difficult task to trace the originary point where such “traditions are partly invented, partly evolved in private groups” over a period of time (5). It is possible to trace references from *Vatakkon Paattukal* that would validate the argument raised earlier regarding the invention of a particular logic of tradition and cultural capital. *Vatakkon Paattukal* records that:

Our ancestors Were ankan chekavan On the sword lies the livelihood of Chekavan If someone comes for Ankam One cannot but go. (qtd. in Vijayakumar; my trans.; 238)

Along with this attribution of a rich history to the practice of *Ankam*, which apparently is an attempt to “use history as a legitimator of action,” the social field also invents proverbs and axioms like *ankam pidichaale chekoon aaku* [one becomes a *Chekon* only after fighting an *Ankam*] as “cement of group cohesion” and legitimacy (Hobsbawm 9). As part of the project of inventing a desired tradition, *Ankam* was linked with a ritualistic structure of faith. Once an *Ankam* is fixed the *Chekon* is expected to enter into a state of deep meditation and

constant practice. During this period it was mandatory for the *Chekon* to observe *Brahmacharya* or abstinence from lust and greed. The cause of the failure in the *Ankam* would directly be attributed to the failure in observing such ritualistic acts of faith. It is possible to arrive at the conclusion that the invention of such tradition was made possible by clubbing three of the most significant driving forces of the social field: physical prowess, cultural capital, and structures of faith.

The supplement could be understood to mean a thing which is exterior or as an “extra,” but it is neither inside nor outside, or both inside and outside simultaneously. The ontological complexity of the notion of supplement arises from the fact that the supplement is simultaneously part of the supplemented without being a part, it belongs without belonging. The ontological hybridity that characterises the supplement could also be observed vis-à-vis the discourse of *Kalarippayattu* and the *Chekon*’s body. Though, the *Chekon* is given the legitimate right to fight an *Ankam* and thereby resolve a conflict which could otherwise lead to a communal conflagration, he is always kept outside of the ambit of law and justice, in the specific sense that the *Chekon* reserves no right in his personal capacity to pronounce the verdict. It could be surmised that the *Chekon*’s body that, in all practical sense, resolves the crisis is necessarily kept under erasure as a “ghostly non- presence” by the structures of the social field (Abrams 217). Such observations add to the credibility of the argument raised earlier that the body of the *Anka Chekon* is a particular form of social supplement manufactured and maintained by the social field.

The discourse of *Kalarippayattu* ceases to be considered as a proper martial art form in the contemporary

technologically mediated and globalised world, because physical battle, *Ankam*, and *Poyithu* do not present themselves as social necessities. As a necessary consequence of this socio-political transformation the cultural capital that used to follow the practice of this martial art form in the past has completely withered away. The reformulation of one's body through the agency of *Kalaripayattu* does not appear to fetch either cultural legitimacy or social recognition as it used to be during the Sangam period or the middle ages. The transformation of the discourse of *Kalaripayattu* in terms of its acquired cultural capital began with the British government's prohibition on weapon training and *Kalari* practice in 1804. The Indian independence movement gave fresh impetus to the practice of *Kalaripayattu* as an agency to build national consciousness and cultural cohesion. It could be argued that local rulers like Pazhassi Raja employed the martial techniques offered by *Kalaripayattu* to put up an indigenous form of resistance to the British army. In the contemporary social field of Kerala *Kalaripayattu* has become what Arjun Appadurai would term "public culture" in the specific sense that diverse cultural forms cohabit within the discursive space of this martial art form (5).

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