

Traditional/folk practices of Kerala Case Studies - Part 3 : Kalaripayattu

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Abstract

The practice of Kalaripayattu is a very popular traditional martial art of Kerala. This is an art and cultural expression practised in the southern most part of India, especially in Kerala for conditioning the spiritual, mental and physical faculties of an individual to lead a healthy long life. It is still practised through *guru-sishya parampara*. The rituals and physical practices of Kalaripayattu literally enthral the audience and is popular in India and abroad. It is practiced by an individual or group, to defend or fight against the opponents. Kalari is also used as a self-defensive mechanism. In this communication, the authors highlight three case studies, which include studies on food and medicine exclusively consumed by the practitioners during the Kalari practice in Kerala.

Key words: Kalaripayattu, Uzhichil, Gurukkal, Guruthara. Kachakettu, Thekku Kanji

Introduction

Kalaripayattu is an art and cultural expression practised in South India particularly in Kerala for conditioning the spiritual, mental and physical faculties of an individual for healthy life. This is practiced by individual or group to defend or fight against the opponents under the guidance of a Kalari Gurukkal (Kalari Master) or Asan (Teacher). Kalari is also practiced widely for self-defence.

The history reveals that the Kalaripayattu originated in Kerala around 6th century AD. It has its roots in Dhanurveda. The term '*Kalari*' denotes 'threshing floor' or 'battlefield' and *payattu* means 'practice'. Kalari school of thoughts evolved in Kerala by adopting the theoretical and practical knowledge from the classical health traditions (Ayurveda and Siddha) as well as the knowledge from the local health traditions. Therefore, it is a unique blend of both classical and local health traditions, which

in turn converted Kalaripayattu into a semi healing art practiced exclusively in Kerala. This knowledge system and its practice has been transpired from generation to generation through *guru-sishya prampara*. During the training period, the disciples worship the '*Padukas*' of Guruparampara and Guru/Asan (Master) at the Guruthara of Kalari for the successful completion of their practice.

The local legendary poetry of Kerala popularly known as *Vadakkan Pattukal* that has come down in the form of oral tradition describes the deeds of warriors indicating the practice of Kalaripayattu. Some of the Gurukkals who are remembered here with reverence and gratitude are Kottakkal Kanaran Gurukkal, Tallaserry Kunhanbu Gurukkal, Chemburi Kunhikannan Gurukkal, C.V. Narayanan Nair Gurukkal, Mohammad Unni Gurukkal, Swamy Gurukkal P.K. Madhava Panicker Gurukkal and many others. According to the tradition, there existed

three styles of Kalari based on the region such as Northern, Central and Southern, of which the Northern and Southern styles are very popular. While the Northern style is believed to have originated from Parasurama, the Southern style is traced back to Sage Agastya (Shaji K John, 2011).

In this communication, the authors highlights three case studies, which include studies on food and medicine exclusively consumed by the practitioners during the Kalari practice in Kerala.

Case Study 10*

Traditional Knowledge provider / holder Prof. K. Vijayakumar, Kappur Gramapanchayath, Palakkad District

Prof. K. Vijayakumar, aged 58, is a retired Professor of History and a Kalaripayattu expert, is a Marma Chikitsa practitioner. He has been engaged in conducting research studies on Kalaripayattu (traditional martial arts practiced in the northern part of Kerala), Marma Chikitsa, traditional knowledge and cultural expression of Kerala for more than 35 years. He has also authored a book titled 'Kalaripayattu – Keralathinte Shakthiyum Saundaryavum' (Kalari - Traditional Marital arts – Strength and Beauty of Kerala), published by the Culture & Publication Department, Govt. of Kerala in the year 2000. During the systematic documentation of traditional knowledge related to plants used for food and medicine, the authors interviewed him and documented the following information.



- Traditional knowledge related to location specific medicinal and food plants, sea algae, corals and sea tortoise used during the Kalari practice.
- Kalaripayattu (Traditional martial arts of Kerala) – historical perspective.
- Uzhichil - Types of massage using palm and feet (chavutti uzichil) with medicated oil

According to Prof. Vijayakumar, Kalaripayattu, popularly known as Kalari is the traditional martial art of Kerala, developed for self-defence of an individual or group. In the past, Kalari group was formed in each village of Kerala with a view to produce young warriors (protection force) to control the rigid administration and un-touchability practiced by the Brahmanical bureaucrats who ruled under the royal dynasties of erstwhile kingdoms in the present Kerala State. Based on the topographical position, there are three kinds of Kalari practice developed in Kerala. They are known as Vadakkan Kalari (Kalari practiced in Northern Kerala), Thekkan Kalari (Kalari practiced in Southern Kerala) and Madhya Kalari practiced in Central Kerala. It is observed that, there are variations in the Kalari practice of these regions in terms of action, consumption of food and conditioning of spiritual, mental and physical faculties of each individual.



Guruthara

* 1. Case studies 1 to 6 (Rajasekharan *et al.*, 2013)
2. Case studies 7 to 9 (Rajasekharan *et al.*, 2016)

In all the Kalaris, 'Guruthara' used to be constructed. 'Guruthara' means the place where Gurus (masters) of the respective Guruparamparas (traditions) of Kalaris are worshipped

At the age of three, children used to be taken to Kalaris for practice in the olden times. It is still widely practiced in many parts of Kerala.

Table - 1 Special food advised for conditioning the physical and mental faculties for the practitioners of traditional martial arts in Vadakkan Kalari.

Sl. No.	Local Name	Botanical/ Zoological/ English Name	Part used	Use / Indication
1	Chembu	<i>Colocasia esculenta</i> (L.) Schott	Petiole	Prepared in the form of dried vegetable along with grated coconut recommended as a food.
	Muringa	<i>Moringa oleifera</i> Lam.	Leaf	
2	Muringa	<i>Moringa oleifera</i> Lam.	Bark (fresh)	Paste prepared from the fresh bark mixed with egg white and smeared over a cotton cloth and tied as a bandage to the affected part (fracture, dislocation and sprain).
	Egg (Hen)	<i>Gallus gallus domesticus</i>	Egg white	
3	Kamuku	<i>Areca catechu</i> L.	Nut (fresh)	Prepared in the form of paste and smeared over the cotton cloth and tied as a bandage to the affected part (fracture, dislocation and sprain).
	Puli	<i>Tamarindus indica</i> L.	Seed (fresh)	
	Egg (Hen)	<i>Gallus gallus domesticus</i>	Egg white	
4	Kadalpayal (Sea algae)	<i>Chlorophyta</i> ssp.	Whole	Dried, powdered and administered orally (5-10 gm) with milk (60 ml) to enhance stamina and vitality.
5	Pavizhaputtu (Coral)	<i>Hexacorallia</i> ssp.	Whole	Medicated oil prepared from the corals is highly effective for lumbago and also used for Uzhichil (special kind of massage applied for practitioners in Kalari).
6	Kadalaama (Sea turtle)*	<i>Chelonioidea</i> ssp.	Blood	Blood collected (120 ml) from the sea tortoise, administered orally in the morning in empty stomach. Immediately after consumption the person is advised to run a distance of 5-7 kms to enhance stamina and vitality.
7	Aattirachi (Goat)	<i>Capra aegagrus hircus</i>	Meat (fresh)	Cooked with clarified butter and recommended as a special diet to the practitioners of Kalari.

* Since Sea Turtle is an extinct species, it is legally protected.

Case Study 11

Traditional Knowledge provider/holder

Shri. Pavithran Gurukkal,

Kelakam Gramapanchayath, Kannur District

Shri. N. E. Pavithran Gurukkal, aged 48, is a Kalari guru, providing training to children from age 7 to 17 in his own Kalari school. He practises Vadakkan

Kalari parambara (Kalari tradition of northern part of Kerala). According to him, there is a prescribed set of food items both



vegetarian and non vegetarian to the practitioners during the time of practice.

Medicated vegetarian coconut milk soup

Immediately after finishing each day's training, one should consume 200 – 300 ml of medicated coconut milk gruel. The main ingredients of the gruel are green gram (*Vigna radiata* L.), black gram (*Vigna mungo* (L.) Hepper), wheat (*Triticum aestivum* L.) and raw rice (*Oryza sativa* L.). This medicated gruel is having good antifatigue effect and enhances the strength and flexibility of muscles.



Children practicing Kalari

Medicated vegetarian soup

This is a medicated soup prepared by using the locally available medicinal plant known as Njarambodal (*Hiptage benghalensis* (L.) Kurz). The local term *njarambu* means nerve and *odal* means to tone up the nervous system. Fresh leaves of the plant (30 gm) prepared in the form of paste added with cow's milk (240 ml) is boiled and reduced to 90 ml. Palm jaggery or sugar candy is added and consumed after the



Njarambodal – *Hiptage benghalensis* (L.) Kurz

Kalari practice. This will also enhance the blood flow and tone up the muscles and nerves.

Medicated non vegetarian chicken soup

During the training period, soup (100-200 ml) prepared from meat and bones of chicken



Uzhichil – medicated oil massage with palm



Demonstration of medicinal plant used in Kalari Chikitsa (treatment)

(*Gallus gallus domesticus*) by adding Uzhinja (*Cardiospermum helicacabum* Linn.), Jeerakam (*Cuminum cyminum* L.), a pinch of pepper (*Piper nigrum* L.) and rock salt is given to the practitioners. It is specifically prepared to relieve fatigue and traumatic injuries.

Case Study 12

**Traditional Knowledge provider/holder –
Shri. Anand, Elavally Gramapanchayath,
Thrissur District**



Shri. Anand, aged 45, is a Kalari guru, established his own Kalari school at Elavally Gramapanchayath of Thrissur district. He practices traditional Kalari prevalent in central part of Kerala. He imparts Kalari training to the children from the age group 10-17. According to him, to maintain the physical and mental fitness is highly essential to practice Kalari under the strict supervision of a Guru.



Traditional method of Kacchakettu

The term *Kacchakettu* means traditional method of wearing a long strip of red or white coloured cloth for enhancing the agility of movements during the practise session. Classes begin everyday after paying respect to Kalari Gods and Guru. Kalari practice is usually conducted early in the morning and evening. After the initial training, one has to perform rigorous practise for conditioning the mental and physical faculties. During the initial phase of the training, the practitioners should strictly follow the prescribed food and *uzhichil*, a special kind of massage with medicated oil using palm and feet (*chavutti uzhichil*) for a prescribed time according to the age.

Food prescribed for the Kalari practitioners

The traditional food prescribed for the practitioners is locally known as '*Thekku Kanji*'. It is a combination of raw rice, sprouted green gram and dried powder of kudangal (*Centella asiatica* (L.) Urb.). This is to be prepared in the form of medicated gruel, exclusively consumed after the morning session of the Kalari practice.

Medicated oil

This is a special medicated oil exclusively prescribed for '*Uzhichil*' and '*Chavutti Uzhichil*'

(massage with palm and feet). In this process, a qualified masseur uses his feet for performing the *Chavutti Uzhichil* by holding his hand on two ropes for getting proper support for applying adequate pressure on the body during the massage. This kind of massage provides therapeutic effects such as muscle strength, overall rejuvenation of the body and acts as a detoxifier. Apart from the overall benefits, the oil massage is indicated for muscular pain, arthritis, joint pains, backaches and other kind of traumatic injuries including sprain, dislocation and bone fracture. Duration of the massage will vary according to the age and sex, ranging from 30 minutes to 1 hour for a period of minimum one week.



Chavutti uzichil - Massage with feet



Medicinal plants used in Kalari Chikitsa (treatment)

Table - 2 The fresh leaves used for the preparation of medicated oil

SL No.	Local name	Botanical name
1	Erikku	<i>Calotropis gigantea</i> (L.) Dryand.
2	Neela Ummam	<i>Datura metel</i> L.
3	Avanakku	<i>Ricinus communis</i> Linn.
4	Karinochi	<i>Vitex negundo</i> L.
5	Seetharmudi	<i>Merremia tridentata</i> (L.) Hallier f.
6	Manjanathi	<i>Morinda pubescens</i> J. E. Smith in Rees
7	Tharthaval	<i>Spermacoce articularis</i> L. f.
8	Keezharnelli	<i>Phyllanthus amarus</i> Schumach. & Thonn.

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