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### MANAGING WIND AND FIRE: SOME REMARKS FROM A CASE STUDY ON *KĀLARIPPAYARŪ*

Laura Silvestri

#### Abstract

Throughout its development, the Keralan body practice *kālarippayarū* has been characterised by various visions among the masters (*gurukkal*) regarding the practice itself and its relationship to other Indian practices. Based on a case study, this chapter discusses some technical aspects and underlying principles of *kālarippayarū* according to the understanding of a specific master. At first, it addresses the changes that this master made in the repertoire of exercises in order to reflect his views on the relationship between *kālarippayarū* and yoga. In the second part, it concerns more generally the underlying principles of *kālarippayarū*.

#### KEYWORDS

Yoga, *Kālarippayarū*, *Vāyu*, *Vāyttāri*, *Gurukkal*.

## Introduction

In this chapter, I discuss some technical aspects and underlying principles of the Keralan body practice *kaḷarippayaṛṛu* (pronounced “kalarippayatt”) according to the understanding of a specific master (*gurukkaḷ*). My remarks are based on a case study that I conducted for my PhD research in anthropology about a *kaḷari* (both a school and a training ground for *kaḷarippayaṛṛu*) in north Kerala. I will try to show that the boundaries between practices depend not only on objective commonalities and dissimilarities, but also on the practitioners’ perception of their practice in relation to others.

According to the *gurukkaḷ*<sup>1</sup> whose thinking I discuss here, yoga is one of the three keys to the principles and practice of *kaḷarippayaṛṛu*, the other two being Ayurveda and Siddha medicine.<sup>2</sup> A difficulty in analysing this statement and in making any comparisons is knowing how this *gurukkaḷ* defines these disciplines himself. *Kaḷarippayaṛṛu*, as we currently know it, was shaped by a process of revival that began in the 20th century, while several other Indian medical traditions and physical practices, including yoga, were undergoing similar processes. What these disciplines are deemed to be depends on the practitioners’ perspective of their own discipline and others. Keeping these premises in mind, I will present some aspects of this *gurukkaḷ*’s practice and his interpretations of them, so that we can see how he constructs his representations of *kaḷarippayaṛṛu* in relation to other disciplines, especially yoga.

Using ethnographic examples relating to the forms of exercise practised in the *kaḷari* and more generally to the *gurukkaḷ*’s teachings, I hope to make his perspective on these disciplines more explicit. To give my argument context, I will first provide some background information about this discipline as we now know it and about one of the key figures in its development, whom the *gurukkaḷ* (the master of the school where I conducted most of my fieldwork) mentions as his reference. In the second and third sections, after briefly describing the trajectory of the *gurukkaḷ*, I will present some examples from his practice and discourse. The first set of examples will focus on the repertoire of exercises practised at the *kaḷari*. The second set will focus on the ideas and teachings underlying them.

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<sup>1</sup> I maintain *gurukkaḷ*’s anonymity here, as I usually do in my ethnographic accounts.

<sup>2</sup> Siddha medicine is a medical tradition that developed in South India. It shares the *tridoṣa* theory with Ayurveda. Nevertheless, besides some other differences, the scholarly tradition of Ayurveda has been mostly transmitted through Sanskrit, while the main language of the Siddha tradition is Tamil.

## The Construction of a Body Practice

The following brief outline of the history of *kaḷarippayarru* is intended only to familiarise the reader with the main elements known nowadays and emphasise those that may help us to understand how present-day practice is linked to aspects of Kerala's past.

What is now known as *kaḷarippayarru* is a set of training techniques codified during the Indian independence movement by collecting and systematising the techniques that were still taught in training schools called *kaḷaris*. In present-day Kerala, this word has a quite general meaning: it means a place for learning and training, such as a gymnasium or school. However, the revival of *kaḷarippayarru* has emphasised the link between current *kaḷaris* and former *kaḷaris*, which, in addition to serving other purposes, were institutions for warrior training. The first written sources that mention them are the *Vaṭakkan Pāṭṭukal* (*Northern Ballads*), which are folk songs dating from the 16th and 17th centuries, along with some European travellers' accounts dating from the same period (Bayly 1989: 68, 249, 274, and 281). *Kaḷaris* are mentioned as places where young men were educated, as warrior training centres, and as sites for ritual activities (Mathew 1979; Tarabout 1986: 413–427; 1991: 95–98). In this period, only tiny political entities existed in the region. Larger kingdoms appeared in the 18th century. Their adoption of warfare techniques based on the European model resulted in the progressive demobilisation of the *kaḷaris* as sites of warrior training (Bayly 1989: 460), which the British domination helped to exacerbate. According to Phillip Zarrilli (1998), in the 1930s members of the Keralan elite endeavoured to retrieve and promote the exercises taught at the *kaḷaris*.<sup>3</sup> The techniques began to be systematised, with some degree of reconstruction and the addition of acrobatic gestures for demonstration purposes. *Kaḷarippayarru* became one of the cultural emblems of Kerala.<sup>4</sup> The compound *kaḷarippayarru* (*kaḷari* = place of learning and training; *payarru* = the exercises) began to appear in the popular press at the time (Zarrilli 1998: 25–26). A practitioners'

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<sup>3</sup> An account from the beginning of the 20th century describes masters teaching in the *kaḷaris* of North Malabar at the time as belonging to the *paravan* community, even though they were given the title *kuruppu* (Fawcett 1915: 190–191). Thurston mentions a note in the *Madras Census Report*, dating to 1901, which describes the Malayali *paravan* as “gymnasts”: “The Malayālam Paravans are shell collectors, lime burners and gymnasts, and their women act as midwives. Their titles are Kurup, Vārakurup, and Nūrankurup (*nūru*, lime)” (1965 [1909], vol. VI: 143).

<sup>4</sup> The emphasis on the performance aspect that has contributed to the popularisation of *kaḷarippayarru* has also aroused dissent, both in Kerala and abroad. Critics regard such developments as promoting a reductive form of what they see as a deeper and more complex discipline of self-enhancement (McDonald 2003 and 2007; Sasidharan 2006).

association, the Kerala Kalarippayatt Association, was founded in 1958 under the aegis of the Kerala Sports Council (Zarrilli 1998: 57). After the Second World War, when Far Eastern arts of combat began to be known globally as “martial arts,” *kaḷarippayarru* also began to be designated as a “martial art” in Kerala, although the previous designation in English had been “art of fencing” (Zarrilli 1998: 25–26). In many cases, currently, the *kaḷari* is still regarded as a shrine. Depending on the practitioners’ beliefs and tradition, various ritual actions may take place regularly in the *kaḷaris*, such as offerings and salutations to deities or the potentially secular interaction rituals that frequently frame training sessions in martial arts (Bar-On Cohen 2009; Baudry 1992): salutations to the training place, the master, and other practitioners.

Since its revival, *kaḷarippayarru* has attracted interest among martial artists, yoga practitioners, and performing artists, especially dancers and actors, from abroad as well as locally. Phillip Zarrilli, a theatre actor and director, went to Kerala to study *kathakaḷi* in the wake of the reform of theatre that was inaugurated by Jerzy Grotowski. Zarrilli wrote the first academic monograph on *kaḷarippayarru* (1998) in the field of performance studies and created a method for actor training that combined techniques from *kaḷarippayarru*, yoga, and Chinese martial arts (Zarrilli 2008).

Some therapeutic practices are also an integral part of the teachings transmitted in the *kaḷaris*. Since few masters can make a sufficient living just by transmitting the training techniques, the treatments that they can administer to the general population are often the main source of income.

Before presenting the case study, I will briefly introduce one of the key figures in the revival of the *kaḷari* practice, Chirakkal T. Sreedharan Nair (1909–1984).<sup>5</sup> According to his own account, as a young man, Sreedharan Nair practised weightlifting and wrestling, but when he was twenty-one years old, he discovered *kaḷarippayarru* and committed himself to researching the techniques that were still available (Sreedharan Nair 1963). His son reported that he viewed *kaḷarippayarru* as a method of physical education that should be accessible to everyone (Sreedharan Nair 2007). Contrary to other practitioners, he believed that a long apprenticeship was not necessary, and that a person in good physical condition could master the fundamentals of the discipline within a few months. He was given a job at the YMCA College of Physical Education in Madras, where he taught *kaḷarippayarru* for nine years from 1956 onwards. In 1963, he published a book on *kaḷarippayarru* in Malayalam, which included the verbal commands

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<sup>5</sup> Another leading figure was Chambadan V. Narayanan Nayar (1905–1944) and his master, Kottakkal Kanaran.

that accompany the execution of the exercises. He translated them into English for his non-Malayali students at the YMCA College. He wanted to write a book in English as well, but he was unable to do so before his death. His son edited and completed his notes and published a manual in English in his name in 2007, adding several series of photographs to illustrate the movement sequences. This book is quite different from other manuals on *kaḷarippayarru* (Balakrishnan 1995a, 1995b; Kaduthuruthy 2000; Vijayakumar 2011) because it devotes most of the pages to pictures and to instructions in English on how to perform the various exercises.

### **A Master's *Kaḷarippayarru* as a Developing Practice**

The elements that I present here come from the eight-and-a-half months of fieldwork that I conducted in a *kaḷarippayarru* school in northern Kerala in 2009 and 2010. Some shorter visits to other schools and conversations with Keralan and European practitioners living in Paris helped me to put this experience into a larger context.

When in Kerala, I regularly took part in the training at this school during the first five months of my stay. Before I went, I had taken some beginners' *kaḷarippayarru* classes in Italy from a disciple of this school's *gurukkaḷ* and in France. As Zarrilli (2005: 20) remarks, teachers of *kaḷarippayarru* may adopt varied "paradigms of teaching and practice." This master's reflections and theorisations form an example of how a *gurukkaḷ* can interpret the practice that he teaches.

The *gurukkaḷ* with whom I conducted my fieldwork is a Muslim who was educated in one of the English-medium private schools in his town in northern Kerala. Attracted by *kaḷarippayarru* since his youth, like Sreedharan Nair, whom he explicitly named as someone whose perspective on *kaḷarippayarru* he wanted to adhere to, he collected as much practical and theoretical knowledge as he could. He began teaching in the 1970s, and in the 1980s his school attracted its first foreign disciples. In the 1990s, he was awarded a grant by the Kerala Folklore Academy, a government agency in charge of promoting and safeguarding Kerala's heritage, which allowed him to build a second and larger *kaḷari*. In the 2000s, foreigners started to find his school by word of mouth and came to train, transmit the practice in their own countries, and conduct research.

By training daily, practitioners are deemed to acquire a series of psychophysical qualities and skills, whose development depends mostly on bodily work. Of the qualities that are developed, two are fundamental and complementary, according to this master: strength (supported by grounding) and suppleness. The balanced combination of the two results in fluidity and continuity of movement. Exercises, especially in the family of

styles called “northern” (*vaṭakkan*), are composed of several elemental units assembled into progressively longer and harder sequences. A substantial part of the training comprises body-conditioning exercises, the basis of which is several kinds of kicks (literally “legs,” *kālukaḷ*), performed while walking along the east–west axis of the *kaḷari* and keeping the arms stretched above the head. This preliminary and fundamental exercise is thought to not only influence the development of the physical body, but also act upon what the master called “the subtle body” by stretching the *nāḍīs*, which he defined as invisible channels where the *prāṇa* (vital breath) circulates. These movements facilitate this circulation. The progressive sequences that follow are called, in many schools, body exercises (*meṇṇuppayarṛu*). The English term used for these sequences is “form,” as in Far Eastern martial arts. These combine the kicks with *vaṭivukaḷ* (i.e., styles of movement; singular: *vaṭivu*) named after animals (some examples are *gajavaṭivu*, “elephant”; *aśvavaṭivu*, “horse”; *siṃhavaṭivu*, “lion”; and *varahavaṭivu*, “wild boar”). The subsequent phases of the apprenticeship involve sparring using codified sequences with various kinds of weapons. The weapon-handling sequences are also based on the poses and ways of movement that are learned with the *vaṭivukaḷ*. In an ideal progression (which is not always followed), the ultimate phase of apprenticeship comprises empty-hand applications. These can be taught in parallel with the therapeutic treatments used by the *gurukkaḷ*. Both these parts of the apprenticeship imply acquiring practical knowledge of the *marmmaṇ*, a term that is usually translated into English as “vital spots” (Sieler 2013, 2015; Zarrilli 1992a, 1992b, 1998: 154–200).<sup>6</sup> Apprentices are in fact prepared for this phase from the beginning of the apprenticeship, although they are not necessarily aware of that.

The *vaṭivukaḷ*, in addition to the kicks, are a fundamental element of the apprenticeship. They help to condition the body, for example by strengthening the legs and making the hips more flexible, which facilitate a maintenance of the low poses that are required by most of the forms. They also serve to help the apprentice to acquire—unknowingly in the early phases of training—techniques of attack and defence. Zarrilli (1994, 1998, and 2007) notes that even though they may recall some animals’ behaviours, the main purpose of the *vaṭivukaḷ* is not to mimic these animals. According to the *gurukkaḷ* with whom I worked, each *vaṭivu* teaches a way of moving; further, its practice has specific psychosomatic effects mediated by the *vāyus*: the various ways in which the vital breath sustains bodily functions. Long exercises are taught by decomposing them into short fragments. Once a fragment is mastered, another one is added, and the apprentice

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<sup>6</sup> The *marmmaṇ* are usually described as concealed points of the body that can sustain various degrees of damage if hit in specific ways or can be treated to heal various ailments (Roṣu 1981; Sieler 2013, 2015; Wujastyk 2009). Specific training is required to locate, hit, or treat them.

repeats the exercise in a cumulative way, each time adding the last fragment that they have learned until they know the entire sequence. When teaching some of the *vaṭivukaḷ*, the *gurukkaḷ* or one of his assistants may ask the apprentices to stop on a specific stance and stand still for the duration of several breaths or, depending on their level, several minutes. This is especially followed when the practitioners are beginners, in order to experience the required alignment of the spine, head, limbs, and gaze. In addition, in learning how to enter the pose, they learn the first small sequences of gestures that will be connected in the longer exercises.

For a few years before I arrived at the *kaḷari*, some foreign disciples who were familiar with some forms of postural yoga promoted a “*kaḷari-yoga*” that included this way of practising *vaṭivukaḷ*. However, during my stay, the master appeared unsatisfied with this “*kaḷari-yoga*” way of representing *kaḷarippayaṛṛu*, even though on some occasions he expressed the view that some poses, namely the “elephant,”<sup>7</sup> the “horse,”<sup>8</sup> and the “fish,”<sup>9</sup> have their origin in yoga. He was implementing some modifications to the repertoire of exercises—which he called the “syllabus”—practised at the school. One modification was the replacement of the *meṃuppayarṛu* group of sequences that he was teaching at the time of my arrival by one coming from a different style. While the first *meṃuppayarṛu* emphasised fluid and watery movements, the other stressed leaps and had more explosive dynamics. The *gurukkaḷ* explained that in his view the first served as training for metal weapons and the other for stick and empty-hand combat. He had noticed that the first had a “slowing” effect on practitioners. Another modification was the suppression of a series of six salutation sequences (*vaṇakkam*), of which I had learnt the first three. He explained this choice by the fact that he had introduced these salutations recently to some disciples who wished for a practice more closely related to yoga, but they were not part of his “lineage” and he preferred to follow Sreedharan Nair’s book (1963) on *kaḷarippayaṛṛu*, which does not include them.

Among the teachers of the *gurukkaḷ* whom I was able to meet, one was a representative of the style known as *vattin tiruppu*, which is focused on acrobatics. However, he was more renowned for manual treatments and especially for fixing dislocated bones.

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<sup>7</sup> When the “elephant” is practised motionless, the feet are apart, the knees bent, the spine bent forward. The fists are in front of the forehead, pointing within the eyebrows. The elbows are kept together in front of the chest.

<sup>8</sup> In the “horse,” one knee is bent while the other leg stretches backwards. The spine is bent forward in line with the stretched leg.

<sup>9</sup> In the “fish,” the back leans forward, parallel to the ground, standing on the left leg. The right thigh extends the spine line, bending the knee.

Another was especially well versed in empty-hand combat. He was also a ritual specialist in *teyyam*<sup>10</sup> cults. A third was known in the district for his skills in the preparation of herbal medicines and in physical treatments. The last *gurukkaḷ* I met had learned directly from Sreedharan Nair, among other masters. Another one, whom I was not able to meet, had transmitted to the *gurukkaḷ* a set of techniques that are usually collectively called “central style.” The concept of different masters transmitting different knowledge and techniques is not uncommon. Therefore, even though the word “lineage” evokes the normative ideal of a linear chain of transmission, here it should probably be understood as the repertoire of exercises and teachings that a master regards as relevant and coherent for transmission to his disciples. In practice, the notion of lineages does not prevent a *gurukkaḷ* from collecting and selecting exercises in an attempt to approximate the most complete set of techniques possible.

Despite the suppression of the six *kaḷari vaṇakkam* sequences, the salutation to the *kaḷari* (*kaḷari vandanaṁ*) was maintained. One movement in this exercise was simplified. Since it demands flexible hips, the *gurukkaḷ* thought that some foreigners could get injured. All the salutation gestures that had typically punctuated the training sessions were also maintained. These were the salutations to the *kaḷari* ground when entering and exiting the training place, to the *gurukkaḷ* and one’s fellow disciples, to the southwest corner of the *kaḷari*, to the weapons, and to one’s opponent before and after a combat exercise. Practising some *vaṭivukaḷ* by standing motionless was still part of the training. In particular, the “elephant” and the “horse”<sup>11</sup> were practised by beginners, the “fish”<sup>12</sup> was practised by advanced students, and the “cat”<sup>13</sup> was essentially used as a rest pose.

This wish to distance *kaḷarippayarru* from yoga, together with his reference to Sreedharan Nair, give this master’s teaching a specific perspective that, besides underlining the specificity of *kaḷarippayarru*, allows us to see it more as a method of physical education than an initiatic practice.

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<sup>10</sup> *Teyyam* (literally “deity”) rituals are cults dedicated to deceased people and deified heroes celebrated in North Malabar by the formerly untouchable castes. During the celebrations, which can last several hours, a ritual specialist embodies the deity and fulfils the function of oracle (Freeman 1994, 1998, and 1999). The dance and sometimes the weight of the costumes demand good stamina. Since some heroes are considered warriors, the specialists who perform as them can be trained in *kaḷarippayarru*.

<sup>11</sup> See footnote 8.

<sup>12</sup> See footnote 9.

<sup>13</sup> In the “cat” pose, the right knee and the plant of the left foot are on the ground, holding the spine straight.



## Regulating Wind and Fire

The strength and suppleness that practitioners have to acquire are not just physical qualities. Once developed, they inform their attitudes and behaviours. The training has the purpose of developing a kind of attention that enables one to react without the mediation of thought. From a martial point of view, this is necessary to react efficiently in combat. Since actual combat is rare, practitioners should acquire the ability to perform the correct gestures without reflection through their training. They should also be able to adapt promptly to the variations in individual movements, both in solo and partnering exercises, and to one's own or a partner's possible mistakes to avoid interruptions and injuries as much as possible. Several aspects of *kaḷarippayaru* combine to help the practitioners to acquire this ability and avoid excessive intellectualisation of the practice. One of them is linked to ideas about the breath and its relationship with the five cosmic elements (*mahābhūta*), which this master described as shared with Siddha medicine and yoga and partly with Ayurveda.

Even though he has quite well-articulated theories about the dynamics and interrelations of the *mahābhūtas* in the human psyche, the master's reflections mainly revolve around the synergy of wind and fire. Wind corresponds to the vital breath that inhabits the person, allows movement and perception, and animates the mental and emotional life. Fire is related to heat, growth, and transformation, as manifested in, for example, the digestion of food. These two elements stimulate each other, so the expansion of wind brings about an increase in fire. His theory of the interrelationship and dialectics between wind and fire partially overlaps with the *tridoṣa* theory, in which the three *doṣas* (bodily humours)—*vāta*, *pitta*, and *kapha*—are pathogenic factors that are derived from unbalanced elements. He considers the terms for *vāta doṣa* and *pitta doṣa* and those for the *mahābhūta* air (*vāyu*) and fire (*agni*), respectively, to be almost interchangeable.

Caroline and Filippo Osella (1996: 40), in their ethnography involving Keralan villagers of various social origins, observed that people could use at the same time several overlapping discourses to talk about the body, ranging from popularised versions of the *triṅṇa* theory borrowed from the Sāṃkhya system, to the pan-Indian hot-cold opposition, the germ theory of disease, genetics, and Ayurveda. They said that people did this in a contextual and eclectic way, according to the phenomenon to be explained and the position of the speaker. While there could appear to be agreement about these theories when they were used in a discourse, ambiguity allowed for dissenting interpretations: "First, for example, since laypersons can neither measure internal bodily heat nor know precisely how much heat is too much heat, it is easy to agree with

the unquantified proposition that ‘excess heat is dangerous and undesirable’” (Osella and Osella 1996: 43).

For the *gurukkal*, having too much or too little wind and fire is related to multiple environmental and individual factors, such as climate, food, thoughts, and activities, and it can be evaluated by observing physical, emotional, and behavioural signs. He explained that when the wind is out of control, a person can feel uneasy or sad, be constantly afraid, or find it difficult to concentrate or make decisions. An excess of fire may result in a tendency to become angry, irritable, or aggressive. Some somatic examples of excess wind are dehydration<sup>14</sup> and stiffness of the joints, while inflammation is one of the symptoms of excess fire.<sup>15</sup> Hence, the norm is determined not only by what ideally promotes a long life or what helps to advance a person through an apprenticeship, but also by socially accepted physical characteristics, behaviours, moral values, and notions of health. Practitioners have then to adapt to variations in the environmental context. For instance, since exercise increases fire, it is advisable to practise only in the cool season<sup>16</sup> and in the morning. Here are two other examples of this relational and contextual normativity—in the sense of Canguilhem (1979)—that can be found in this master’s teachings:

1. In many *kaḷaris*, there are two training sessions per day. The first begins in the morning, sometimes before dawn, and the second begins towards the end of the afternoon. You know that you have exercised too much in the evening session if you cannot fall asleep at night. You have developed an excess of fire that pushes you into activity. So, the evening session normally has to be shorter than the morning one.

2. You can detect an excess of wind in a practitioner based on several details, including the following: in training, when they have to perform some movements with joined palms and fingers, they cannot help separating the fingers. If they repeat this mistake after having been corrected several times, that means that they are not in control of that aspect. Instead of trying to correct their movements, one has to help

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<sup>14</sup> As was noted by Osella and Osella (1996) regarding the Keralan villagers with whom they worked, this master also uses both biomedical terms and Indian terminologies.

<sup>15</sup> Since wind and fire are interdependent, inflammation cannot develop without some action of wind.

<sup>16</sup> While training takes place in the monsoon season in many *kaḷaris*, in others it is suspended during the warm season.

them to ground their wind so that the movement will be corrected spontaneously.

Concerning the practice in the *kaḷari*, the *gurukkaḷ* considers the interdependence of wind and fire to be fundamental. He pointed out that exercise develops heat and stimulates wind. More precisely, the increase in fire partly dries water, leaving more place for wind. Such a process can be regarded as beneficial because it promotes the circulation of the vital breath across the body. Nevertheless, excessive stimulation must be avoided to prevent the disorders described above. As far as martial training is concerned, the master says that wind must be grounded for fire to be effective. The notion of grounding also relates to the dialectics between these two elements. Grounding wind is necessary to control and canalise fire; a controlled fire is equal to a mastered and effective strength.

As we have seen, the season of the year and time of day most suitable for practice are the coolest ones, to minimise the increase in heat. Moreover, according to this master, the order of the exercises in a session and the order of movements within each exercise are designed to maintain this delicate balance. We can return to the *vaṭivū* for some examples. The *gurukkaḷ* explained that *gajavaṭivū*, the “elephant,” embodies mainly the earth element and, to a lesser extent, water. Besides its effects at the somatic level (strengthening the legs and stretching the back), *gajavaṭivū* helps to ground the *vāyus*, with the effect of increasing *kapha* and developing mental and moral qualities, such as steadfastness, fearlessness, and decisiveness. The “cat,” *marjjāraṭivū*, embodies only the earth element. It appears at the beginning of some sequences to calm the practitioners and prepare them for strenuous exercise, or it can be practised as a rest pose that calms the heart and the mind, especially in the event of intense exercise being interrupted abruptly. The “horse” pose, *aśvaṭivū*, embodies mainly the water element. Going towards the ground in the “horse” pose at the end of a series of leg exercises has the function of grounding the *vāyus* that have been excited by practising kicks with the arms stretched above the head. During the various exercises, the alternation of the movements mobilises all of the *vāyus*, equilibrating *vāta* or preventing its imbalance.

I will now briefly discuss the verbal commands used to guide the exercises. As mentioned earlier, an essential part of the training is several series of movement sequences (the “forms”) that the disciples are supposed to perform with increasing fluidity. Normally, the apprentices learn the exercises without much explanation, by imitation of the *gurukkaḷ*, his assistants, or the more advanced disciples. Every form is codified, like a choreography. The performance of each is usually guided by the *gurukkaḷ* or one of his assistants with the help of verbal commands (*vāyttāri*), which are also

codified. Therefore, each movement sequence corresponds to a sequence of commands that remains constant (although this does not prevent the instructors from occasionally addressing corrections or giving advice to the disciples).

*Vāyttāris* also exist in other Keralan practices. The works by Christine Guillebaud (2008) and Marc Lambert (2004), respectively, describe the use of rhythmic syllables in Kerala in the apprenticeship of itinerant musicians and in the ritual dance *paṭayāni* practised in central Kerala. In both cases, these syllables are called *vāyttāri*, a term that refers to the vocal cues that aid the internalisation of movement, which these authors translate as “rhythm”<sup>17</sup> (Guillebaud 2008: 264), “discourse” or “sound”<sup>18</sup> (Lambert 2004: 209) “produced by mouth”<sup>19</sup> (Guillebaud 2008: 264–5; Lambert 2004: 209). However, the *vāyttāris* in *kaḷarippayarṛu* are not, in principle, rhythmic syllables but real words describing the actions to perform, even though they do so in a partial and brief way. These instructions are so brief and specific to the discipline that someone who does not know the sequence by heart would not be able to perform it based only on hearing them.

The *vāyttāris* in *kaḷarippayarṛu*, along with the repetition of the exercises in a group, are an important means to develop the correct gestures and support the suspension of discursive thought. Such suspension is necessary to develop effortless concentration. This state is not separate from the pursuit of the ideal balance of the elements, since an excess of mental activity is related to uncontrolled wind and vice versa. Modulating his voice while giving the *vāyttāris* is also a way for the master to calm down an aggressive disciple or to stimulate a phlegmatic one. My interpretation is that the efficacy of the *vāyttāris* depends on their particular status in between rhythmic syllables and verbal instructions, so that they are perceived as being one or the other depending on the practitioners’ progress. Such instructions, even though partial and limited to some keywords, minimise the mnemonic effort during exercise. They therefore help to avoid intellectualisation of the practice. When the disciples are exhausted, the master’s instructions and his presence help them to continue repeating the exercises, to stay motivated, and to draw on their deepest resources. The *gurukkal* explained that, in such moments, the individual is less consciously in control and the movement is more deeply experienced. I suspect that on such occasions verbal commands come closer to rhythmic syllables: the apprentice comes to associate each sound of the sequence with

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<sup>17</sup> “Rythme” in French.

<sup>18</sup> “Discours” or “son” in French.

<sup>19</sup> “Produit par la bouche” in French.

their movement experience. This becomes a kinaesthetic experience that is immediately evoked and is actualised every time (and most probably updated), so that the meaning of the words loses importance.

## Conclusion

In this chapter I have tried to show how this *gurukkaḷ*'s practice has evolved over time and how he has positioned it among others.

Like other masters, this one considers that the knowledge mastered by the *gurukkaḷ* in the past is now partially lost, and that it is only possible to retrieve some of it. Nevertheless, as has also been observed about Ayurveda, past-orientation does not prevent a practitioner's reflection and theory development (Trawick 1987), or the existence of dissenting views within the same discipline or theoretical framework (Alter 1999). Therefore, even though innovation is not valued *per se*, this *gurukkaḷ* does reflect on the efficacy of the exercises. He sometimes experiments with modifications either within an exercise or of the series of exercises that he teaches. He does this to adapt the training to the physical abilities of the foreigners coming to his *kaḷari*, among other reasons. Some modifications can be introduced and then withdrawn later, if it turns out that they do not bring about the improvements desired by the master.

The changes in the repertoire of exercises reflect ongoing theorisations, such as those concerning yoga. As this chapter has shown, this *gurukkaḷ* holds various opinions regarding the possible connections between yoga and *kaḷarippayaru*. Although he was willing to emphasise these connections for some time, later on he preferred to underline the specificity of *kaḷarippayaru*, drawing a stronger distinction than before between the two. Apart from differences in aims, techniques, and theories, the distinctions between practices also depend to some extent on the practitioners' positions about what correct practice is and how it relates to other practices.

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