

## CONTRIBUTOR

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# THE KALARIPAYATTU SALUTATION: MOVEMENT MAKES MEANING

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## ABSTRACT

Vanakkam is the ritual salutation performed during the learning and practice of *kalaripayattu*, the martial arts system of Kerala. All vanakkams are united by their devotional character despite using expressly martial movements such as kicks and blocks. At the same time, there are differences in style, structure, and the interpretation of symbolism and significance even among Hindu *kalaris*, with even further greater variation in the vanakkams used in Muslim and Christian *kalaris*. Moreover, each weapon of the *kalaripayattu* form has its particular and specific vanakkam. This article uses the conceptual terms in the Natya Shastra, *natya dharmi* (what is suitable for the stage) and *loka dharmi* (what is suitable for daily life), introducing a very early binary of categories as separate classifications of movement. It looks to Maxine Sheets-Johnstone's 'From Movement to Dance' as she examines 'how meaning emerges in dance' to decode the process of representation as it applies to the *kalaripayattu* vanakkam. It then goes on to analyse vanakkams through their shared choreographic structure in order to show how context affects the way movement vocabularies are read. How does a kick take on ritual meaning, and how is this meaning influenced by Islam, Hinduism and Christianity?

The meaning of the word *vanakkam* is 'salutation'. It is used casually in everyday spoken Tamil, together with the gesture of palms pressed together, as a greeting suited for most occasions. In *kalaripayattu* the same word is used to designate a sequence of movements from within the body vocabulary of the form's fighting technique (with some exceptions) directed towards the south-west corner if performed in the *kalari* (the place of practice), with the look, stated intention, and animating principle of ritualized obeisance to the presiding deity. This is usually Kali (in a Hindu kalari), Allah (in a Muslim kalari), or the Christian God (in a Christian kalari).

This article explores how the devotional meaning is communicated through movement. The *Natya Shastra* (the Sanskrit manual of performance practice and theory, traditionally attributed to Bharata Muni), even though not directed towards martial arts, makes a useful distinction between two categories of movements. There is *loka dharmi*, or the actions appropriate to real life, what one does without instruction. This is considered in opposition to *natya dharmi* – what one must do correctly along with several parameters; what is codified, stylized, and therefore suitable for the stage.

The conceptual categories of *loka dharmi* and *natya dharmi*, as defined by Bharata Muni in the *Natya Shastra*, seem especially relevant to *vanakkam*, as it straddles this binary. The hypothesis of this article is that an analysis of the movements and the choreographic shape of the *vanakkam* can yield some insight as to the ways meaning emerges in movement, the ways that movement becomes performative, and under what conditions such transformations take place.

## MY PERSPECTIVE

I began studying *bharata natyam* at the famed dance school Kalakshetra in 1970, at the age of sixteen. I went on to train in this dance style with well-known and well-respected gurus for many years, and eventually began to perform, in India, Europe and Canada. During the years I was living and practicing in New Delhi, in the late 1980s, I stumbled upon *kalaripayattu* at a workshop conducted by Kavalam Narayana Panicker, a brilliant Kerala theatre director who used it as an actor training technique. Even in India at that time, it wasn't a well-known form, and I had to go to Kerala to train in it, which I did sporadically at first, until I found a teacher in Chennai, where I went regularly anyway for my dance training. Master P. A. Binoy was a strict taskmaster, and wouldn't teach me unless I practiced regularly. But we practiced in my living room, not in a *kalari*.

When Master Binoy left Chennai to work with the theatre troupe Zingaro in Paris, he put me in touch with his own guru, Vasu Gurukkal of Kaduthuruthi. It was there that I first stepped down into a mud floor *kalari*, watching and learning among a group of young male students with oiled bodies wearing only the wrapped and tied loin cloth. Vasu Gurukkal also gave me the fourteen-day massage with the feet, which is said to prepare the body for the rigours of *kalaripayattu* practice, as well as special herbal oil treatment for my left knee, which had been causing me problems in my *bharata natyam* practice. Thus, I was initiated into *kalaripayattu* as it existed within a community of practice and as a holistic healing system. My knee got better.

When Vasu Gurukkal stopped teaching to concentrate on the healing aspect of *kalaripayattu*, I came to Vijayan Gurukkal in Calicut; now I train under the watchful eye of his son, Vikas Gurukkal. I have made time for the massage with the feet every year since that first time, (except for the year of Covid).

After more than fifty years involved in the practice, performance and teaching of *bharata natyam*, with about thirty of those years similarly connected to *kalaripayattu*, I write from the perspective of a practitioner. As someone immersed in South Indian performance forms, so much so that I take for granted their history, sensibilities, and aesthetic theories, terms from the *Natya Shastra*, the Sanskrit text on dramaturgy that I learned in relation to my dance form, seem natural to use in discussing and conceptualizing *kalaripayattu* as well. Respect for the guru and the place of practice, emphasis on maintaining a tradition, and on the age of that tradition, even though in fact the forms we now practice are relatively modern, are other commonalities between the dance and the martial art form. Some of these I refer to in detail in this essay.

## THE KALARI AS THE PLACE OF PRACTICE

The very name of the form '*kalaripayattu*' – meaning 'technique practiced in a *kalari*' – marks the space of practice as significant. One enters through a low door, bowing, and stepping down, to six feet below ground level, into an earthen floor rectangle that is twice as long as it is wide. Even in the daily practice of *kalaripayattu*, a ritual of 'paying respect' before beginning is an imperative.

I first entered a *kalari* in the early 1990s, when I began to practice with Vasu Gurukkal, my guru's guru, in Kaduthuruthi, Kerala. He took me through the process, making sure I entered with the right foot, not stepping on but stepping over the threshold, descending one step and

again making sure it was the right foot that first touched the earth; that I bent to touch the beaten mud floor with the right hand, and brought the fingers to the forehead and heart, before walking with my natural gait to the main altar; paying respect there before preceding around the periphery of the whole space; paying respect with a hand to each installed deity at specified points, then forehead and heart; before finally making my way to the master, paying respect to him by the same gesture, this time at his feet; receiving his blessings and beginning the practice.

The *puttara*, or seven-stepped main altar, is set in the south-west corner of the kalari. Some form of the female divine energy, Shakti, sometimes in the form of goddess Kali, is believed to reside here. The seven steps are often related to the central channel of the spine, the *sushumna*, through which the *kundalini*, energy visualized as a serpent, moves. The practise of kalaripayattu awakens this energy and raises it through the *sushumna* awakening the *chakras*, or energy centres as it moves. The kalari is thus a macrocosm of the human body's energy system [Zarrilli 1998: 71].

Vasu Gurukkal directed me verbally, with instructions like 'Take the blessing of Kali' and 'Take the blessings of the lineage of gurus'. Some of these important locations in the kalari are marked by images that specify to which deity one is bowing. The terrifying goddess Kali is shown with a red tongue extended. Ganesha is the familiar elephant-headed god who is worshipped at the start of any venture. The lineage of gurus often has iconic photographs of Kanaran Gurukkal, an old man seated with a sword and small round shield, and C.V. Narayanan Nair – young, handsome and posing with a sword – as these two are considered to be the architects of the modern revival of the art form in the 1930s. There may also be pictures of those in the direct lineage of the present guru. Other places are marked only by an impersonal rounded stone smeared with red kumkum powder and turmeric paste and a lit lamp.<sup>1</sup>

As we made our way around, Vasu Gurukkal instructed me to walk backwards away from one deity, before turning and walking towards the next deity. We ended with the deity at the northwest corner.

1 The concept of cardinal points having a presiding deity is well known through the practice of vaastu, or auspicious construction, which, like feng shui, pervades the culture. However, there is not an exact correspondence between the deities at the cardinal points of the kalari, and the deities at the cardinal points of space in general. For example, south-west according to vaastu is governed by Rahu and Ketu, south is marked by Yama, west by Shani. But in the kalari I attended, south-west is Kali, west is Ganesha and the lineage of gurus, and south is Dhanvantari, the sage of medicine. We go on to bow to the presiding god of each of the other directions – SE, E, NE, N, NW – but no other deities are specified. When no other god or goddess has been placed there, the default becomes the god of that direction according to vaastu.

Beyond that verbal instruction, he didn't direct the manner in which I took the blessings. The movements are part of any Indian Hindu's range of movements, inculcated by example and minimal instruction from childhood. Though I am not Hindu, I had already been practising *bharata natyam* for more than ten years by that point, so I did the movement in the way that I had learned to do it as a dancer.

Even Christian and Muslim kalaris have a *puttara*. While the explanations are different, and the rituals are different, the fact that there are rituals remains a constant. For example, in the Muslim kalari I visited – KKA Kalari, Kannur, run by Sherif Gurukkal – there are no deities, but there was a lamp placed in the south west corner that students stood before in a moment of prayer, and after circling the space, they did not bow at the master's feet, but shook his hand.

## MOVING THROUGH THE SPACE

After the ritual of obeisance, several different kinds of movement take place in the kalari: warm-ups, drills, standing and waiting for one's turn, practice with a weapon with a partner, collecting oneself before a sequence, and regaining one's equilibrium after completing a difficult pattern.

Students mark the importance of the *puttara* throughout the practice session. For example, each of the *meipayattus* – the choreographed sequences of attack-and-defence movements with imagined opponents – ends with a gesture of salutation to the *puttara*, where the student goes from moving along the straight line connecting north and south, to the diagonal line, marking the south-west north-east axis.

The significance of the diagonal is marked in these several ways, which are all parts of the daily routine of practice. The first is the only one that depends on the actual space of the kalari containing the ritually installed objects of worship, the pictures of the lineage of gurus, the lit lamps, the weapons. That is, one doesn't go around and offer obeisance at each corner if one happens to be practising in a gym or one's home, or on a stage.

One does always end the *meipayattu* with the change from the vertical line to the diagonal, no matter where one is practising, and even if that doesn't mark the actual southwest direction.

The first circumambulation is an example of *loka dharmi*, the natural movement of the body in real life. There is a great tolerance for individual expression. No two practitioners do this first ritual entry

the same. Certain aspects of the ritual, such as the manner of reaching the hands to the deity, touching forehead and heart are markedly individualistic, with wide-ranging variations in actions such as the walking backwards, exactly which places should be worshipped and so forth, while the ritual itself, the order in which actions are performed, the direction of the movement, is compulsory.<sup>2</sup>

The beginning ritual salutation is the natural movement of the practitioner, moving as they would do in a temple or while taking part in any other simple ceremonial act, in the socially acquired but not necessarily explicitly taught manner, what Marcel Mauss [1934] calls 'habitus'. It embodies devotional meaning, which students express to varying degrees, some performing the actions with deep mindfulness and others going through the motions perfunctorily.

The movement at the end of the meipayattu, a long, deep lunge with the arms fully extended and palms together, on the other hand, is a stylized movement, that is part and parcel of the skill acquisition of the meipayattu, explicitly taught and corrected to conform to an ideal image as instilled by the teacher. Though it is performed in the direction of the puttara, and though the movement itself has a devotional character expressed by the gestural quality of palms pressed together, the devotional element is secondary to the athletic, and it quickly morphs into the splits. But both movements are, according to Mauss's definition, 'techniques of the body' in that they are 'effective' (being well-coordinated movements directed towards a goal), and 'traditional' (in that it has in some manner been transmitted and taught to the practitioner, implicitly or explicitly).

Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, when discussing the same binary pointed out in the *Natya Shastra*, distinguishes everyday movements from performative movement thus: 'unlike an everyday movement that is complex, the dynamic complexity of dance is not a matter of doing something or accomplishing something' [Sheets-Johnstone 2012: 46]. She shifts the emphasis from the movement itself to intention – what the movement does. This seems to be the distinction Paul Valery made in his essay on the philosophy of dance, defining it as 'an action that

*derives* from ordinary, useful action, but *breaks away* from it, and finally *opposes it*' [Valery 1964: 205].

In martial arts, it may be considered that such a distinction can't be made, since the movements of kalaripayattu are at least nominally directed to 'doing something or accomplishing something', a block or an attack, in the meipayattu itself for example.

## THE VANAKKAM

There is another form that the ritual salutation to the puttara takes, and that is the explicitly named *puttara vanakkam*, which more closely matches the criteria for classification as *natya dharmi* and approaches the condition of performative movement as defined by Sheets-Johnstone and Valery. Here, a series of movements that are considered useful and purposeful – that are 'doing something or accomplishing something' when they appear in sequences of attack and defence, such as high kicks and twisting evasive movements of the upper body – take on a different quality when combined and performed with a directional awareness of the puttara, whether it is actually there or not, moving the body towards and away from the real or imagined object of focus. There are many variations. They are not necessarily part of everyday practice, though they can be.

The one taught to me in Madras by Master Binoy, my first kalaripayattu teacher, and a student of Vasu Gurukkal, has a twisting sinuous quality and athletic movements such as the dive into the position called fish, demanding a high level of skill. Within the sequence, there are movements unique to the vanakkam – the stylized action of touching the ground, forehead and heart, the movement of the arms to touch the shoulders, knees and to move up over the head in a gesture of offering flowers. The sitting position that looks somewhat like a meditative pose appears in fighting sequences such as in the curved *otta*, and the high kicks and twisting changes of direction are part of many fighting sequences both with and without weapons.

The kalari vanakkam associated with my present school, CVN Kalari East Hill, in Calicut, taught to me by Vikas Gurukkal, shares many of the same qualities, and while there are marked differences, they are stylistic, varying in an analogous way to a difference of accents. The structure remains the same. There is a movement towards the puttara, high kicks, a purely devotional movement of the arms repeated three times as if throwing flowers, while seated in a meditative pose, a full body extension similar to that of paying respect to a deity in a temple or a highly respected person, a turn that takes the practitioner in the

2 When I came to the kalari where I now practice, the CVN Kalari East Hill in Calicut, I did the ritual of entry and circumambulation exactly as I'd done it at Vasu Gurukkal's kalari. No one said anything or corrected me in any way. I didn't notice for quite some time that at this kalari there is one more stop, in the middle of the west-facing wall, where there is a painted image of the sage of medicine. Having done it so long my way, I was too embarrassed to change and add this deity. So all these years, I've simply continued to do it the way I was first taught while those around me do it slightly differently. I have never been corrected.

opposite direction along the same axis, and a return to face the puttara for the final touching of ground, forehead, and heart.

Both Vasu Gurukkal, Binoy's teacher, and Gopalan Gurukkal, Vikas's grandfather, learned from the same teacher, Kanaran Gurukkal. Therefore, it is not surprising that they share many features in common, nor is it surprising that they are no longer identical after two generations of separation.

The vanakkam taught by Sherif Gurukkal in the Muslim kalari has no gesture of hands to knees and shoulders, and the movement to the ground is reminiscent of the ritual bowing in the mosque rather than the full body stretch that Hindus make at the feet of highly respected people or in front of deities in the temple. There are no kicks or overtly martial movements, but the leg positions of elephant, horse and cat, which are all used in the fighting sequences, appear here as well. The way in which Sherif Gurukkal teaches this vanakkam includes specific instructions regarding inhalation, exhalation and holding the breath. This is the vanakkam that Phillip Zarrilli adapted and taught as part of his psycho-physical actor training, one reason being because it doesn't require the same leg extensions and flexibility and can be learned more easily, making it therefore more accessible, to a wider range of abilities.

At the other end of the spectrum are movements of an overtly martial nature performed quickly and forcefully in the *varma adi* style associated with Tamil Nadu, which nevertheless capture the devotional nature of vanakkam, and demand the student's remembering and correctly performing martial manoeuvres according to a strict and well-defined choreography. These vanakkams also start facing in one direction, perform the same movement facing the opposite direction, and end in the first direction.

Each weapon also has a unique vanakkam that is taught when the student is first initiated into that weapon. The weapons are taught when the teacher recognizes that a student is ready to advance, functioning in a similar way to the belts of other martial arts. The progression is through the wooden weapons, going from a long stick, to a short stick to a curved stick, and when these are complete, to the iron weapons, dagger, sword and shield, and spear. These vanakkams for the weapons are often done with the teacher and are rarely practised after the ceremony of initiation. Unlike the puttara vanakkam, where the movement choreography is directed to the main altar, in the vanakkams of each weapon, it is the weapon itself that is the focus of devotional attention.

## MARTIAL ARTS OR DANCE?

When dancer and choreographer Chandralekha began her process of reimagining and reinventing the Indian dance performance, one of her first productions used Vasu Gurukkal's kalari vanakkam, performed by trained bharata natyam dancers rather than kalaripayattu practitioners, which I saw when it was first performed in Chennai (Madras at the time, 1987). It travelled to the Festival of India, where Kavalam Narayana Panicker saw it and described to me in personal conversation, the unease he felt at seeing it out of context. We discussed whether it was ethical to take the vanakkam out of the kalari, put it on the stage and claim it as 'choreography' by an individual, even though Chandralekha hadn't actually choreographed anything beyond slowing it down, and changing the direction of movement so that instead of all being focused in one direction, the dancers faced each other.

The sleight of hand being practised by taking movements that constitute part of martial art practice and changing nothing much except their context to make the same movements acceptable as dance represents by that action an existing underlying question: is there a real difference? Once the fighting applications of martial arts are rendered obsolete by modern fighting implements, such as guns, then where does the difference actually lie?

Dance itself must struggle to find a definition that includes the self-consciously conceptual, such as Jerome Bel (taking off one tee shirt after another on stage), Marie Chouinard (peeing in a bucket), and the strictly codified forms of Indian dance, that include both pure abstract movement and mimetic story-telling, such as *bharata natyam* and *kathakali*.

The movements and structure of the vanakkam fit the definitions of performative action as defined by the Natya Shastra, being natya dharmi, not loka dharmi. While the same body postures, kicks and evasive actions of the meipayattu, (which is, in this formulation, loka dharmi) are used, here they are no longer 'doing anything or accomplishing anything'. In fact, we can observe exactly that process whereby the 'ordinary, useful action' of the daily ritual of salutation to the deities of the kalari, and the 'ordinary, useful action' of the daily kalaripayattu drills of attack and defence, 'break away' from those forms, as well as that 'ordinary, useful' way of paying obeisance, and we can observe how, in the final analysis, they stand in opposition to each other.

According to the Natya Shastra, the performer should be trained in the codified stylized enactment of emotion, termed *bhava*. The particular movement sequence of puttara vanakkam approaches the point on

the continuum where martial art ventures into the performative. The kalaripayattu practitioner's movements can't avoid emotion since, in the words of Sheets-Johnstone:

**What becomes apparent on the basis of both the empirical and phenomenological evidence is that a dynamic congruency exists between movement and emotion. Dynamic kinetic forms articulated in and through the qualities of movement as they are created in the very act of moving are congruent with dynamic forms of feeling.**  
[2012: 52]

## CONCLUSION

The actuality of performing a codified sequence of movement is common to both martial artists and performing artists, whether dancers or actors. So where is the difference? According to Phillip Zarrilli: 'The martial artist performs his art as an actual and as himself. The performing artist also performs his art as an actual, but appears to be not-himself' [1984: 191] That is, the martial artist is performing an actual skill acquired by long practice, while the actor is an actual actor, but may be only 'acting' any martial art moves. This is a subtle difference, a fine line that may be crossed in a sequence like the kalari vanakkam that already has elements that take it beyond strictly useful martial arts moves.

If 'a body's movements express the knowledge of its being' [Katan-Schmid 2016: 15], then, knowledge of the puttara as an external manifestation of the human body as conceived and understood in kalaripayattu, and especially of the spinal column, the centres of energy, the chakras, and the rising Kundalini metaphorically expressed as a snake, is being expressed through the vanakkam. The sinuous shape of the vanakkam can thus be understood as the body in the act of symbol-making.

When the vanakkam is taught, my teachers did not explicitly assign any meaning to the movements, but when I asked they only said what was obvious, for example, that the movement of the cupped hands up from below the navel along the centre line of the body above the head is 'offering flowers'. This level of meaning is so literal as to be banal. Moreover, it is quite far from the loka dharmi manner of offering flowers in a ritual of worship in the temple. The chakras or energy centres along the central line of the body are visualized as lotuses, so the gesture of taking the cupped hands along that line can be seen as offering oneself as the flower. It is therefore left to the practitioner

to discover the meaning in the doing. Some practitioners, like Phillip Zarrilli, may emphasize the meditative aspects of the vanakkam, while others, like Master Binoy, maintain the athleticism and explosive power of the movements without losing any of the devotional quality.

In moving through the sequence, the practitioner is both 'signifying by instantiating' [Sigman 2000: 31] that is, in actual gestures of palms pressed together as one does in real life and 'signifying by representing' [Sigman 2000: 32] in movements of offering flowers and bowing that are representations of devotional actions.

Zarrilli doesn't make a sharp distinction, saying that both martial artists and performers are trying to achieve a 'certain type and quality of relationship between the doer and the done' [2009: 213]. According to him, the accomplished practitioner, whether performer or martial artist, is 'one who is able to manifest in practice a certain (internal and external) relationship to the specific acts' [34]. While this relationship is 'culture, genre and period specific', both performer and martial artist share the belief that 'practice is palpable, visceral and felt' [34].

The kalari vanakkam provides a form within which we can examine and test these insights. The vanakkam illustrates that moment when a movement loses its intention, the kick no longer a kick, the feint no longer a feint. When one is kicking the leg in the meipayattu, and kicking the leg in the vanakkam, the muscles may be engaged in exactly the same movements, but the feeling that one has while performing that movement or watching that movement for that matter, has changed. The same kick, embedded in the two contexts, engenders an entirely different feeling. At the same time, the ordinary movements of offering flowers to the god, or paying respect to one's teacher are now strictly choreographed and stand in opposition to the everyday relationship one has with such movements. The ordinary movements in the daily paying respect to the gods and goddesses of the kalari, and the purposeful kicks of the meipayattu are recognizable in the stylized movements of the vanakkam, but they've been transformed.

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