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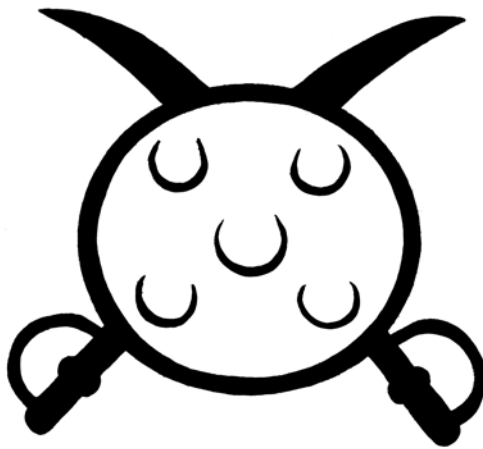
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Kalarippayat

The structure and essence of an Indian martial art



D.H. Lujendijk

Kalarippayat

The Structure and Essence of an Indian Martial Art

Een wetenschappelijke proeve op het gebied van de
Religiewetenschappen

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For my beloved wife

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Introduction

1. First contact

The Asian martial arts have been intriguing to many people around the world. The world of martial arts holds out the promise that one can learn and apply deadly techniques, that enable one to overcome a foe almost effortlessly. This promise is shrouded in secrecy and accompanied by exotic stories of supernatural powers. The myth has appealed to the imagination of many, and I was no exception.

I had practiced Judo and Kung Fu. The latter, especially, had drawn my attention. Inspired by movies about Chinese martial arts and by the display of Kung Fu's graceful movements, I decided to go to China to see if I could find a good school. Naturally, the first places I went to were known to be the centers of Kung Fu, such as Shaolin, Emei, and the Beijing Wushu Team. The first thing I noticed was that the martial arts schools were all controlled by the Chinese government. I came to the conclusion that those schools were teaching the most sensational movements, without spending much time on the traditions and cultural background of the arts. This, from my point of view at that time, reduced those movements to mere acrobatics. It reminded me of some ancient frescoes I had seen at a Chinese archaeological site: the faces of the figures displayed were deliberately demolished by Mao Tse Tung's Red Army, taking away the characteristics and soul of those paintings.¹

A second thing that bothered me was that the sparring exercises seemed to be limited to high kicks, reducing the sparring itself to a kickboxing match, but without the use of fists. For me this was not 'real' fighting, but a mere sporting event: 'real' fighting was for use on the battlefield, and on the battlefield anything can be used as a weapon, not only one's legs. This automatically involved weapons, in my view; it is almost impossible to use a lot of kicks to defend an attack from a sharp sword or a pointy spear.

Furthermore, I did not like the overemphasis on chi. Chi is well known among most people who have ever been to a martial arts class: it is seen by many martial artists as the life energy of the body. Most martial arts schools teach methods for how to increase and use one's own chi. When I was in Shaolin, everyone there seemed to glorify the amazing chi power of the Shaolin monks. To prove this I was shown a booklet containing photos of their display of chi power. One of the pictures was very striking: a monk had tied a weight onto his scrotum; as a result the skin was stretched down to his knees. The text next to the photo said that the weight was eighty kilograms. This monk was able to perform this extraordinary feat because of his strong chi. The same text, however, also mentioned that the man had practiced his scrotum from a very young age.

Overall I was very disappointed with the results of this trip to China; I was not satisfied with any of the schools and teachers I had met.

By chance, I happened to be in Sri Lanka a few months after my trip to China. In Colombo I met a student of a South India-based martial art called Kalarippayat. The man gave me the address of a teacher in India. I had never heard of the existence of any martial tradition in India. Until then I associated

¹ The 'Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution', started by Mao on May 16, 1966

India only with yoga and meditation. I became curious, and at the first available opportunity I traveled to the federal state of Kerala, situated west of the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu. There I went to the Kerala Kalarippayat Academy (KKA)², situated at Puttiyateru in the area of Malabar, with its teacher or *gurukkal* (as a Kalarippayat teacher is called) C. M. Sherif. I will be referring to this *gurukkal* hereafter as the 'KKA teacher'.

The KKA teacher was looking for people who were truly dedicated to learn the ancient martial art of Kalarippayat. In contrast to the schools I visited and attended in China, this school did teach the movements in combination with an explanation of a certain 'tradition'³: it placed the martial art in a context. Moreover, the teacher related the art to its applications in a real fight, both armed and unarmed. I was very much impressed by how they were keeping the old traditions alive through their use of ancient weapons and their ritualistic approach. It was just how I expected – at that time – a martial tradition to look.

2. Some impressions

Kalarippayat is practiced in a gym, called *kalari*. The *kalari* of the KKA (which I will refer to as the 'KKA *kalari*') is built in (what the KKA teacher considers) a 'traditional' way: a rectangular building with a roof of palm leaves. The building is erected over a pit, in which the training takes place. Its walls are constructed partly from clay and mud and partly from palm leaves. A few steps lead the practitioner down into its pit. Six days a week all the students enter the *kalari* one by one when the training starts, early in the morning at around 7:00.⁴ The training usually continues until 11:00 in the morning. The practitioners perform their exercises wearing a *langutti*, a white piece of cloth knotted around the waist, which is used as underwear by many Indians.

For me the most striking thing all the practitioners did was that, before starting with the exercises, they went to one of the corners of the *kalari*. In that corner was a structure made of mud. The base of this construction was a quarter of a circle. Seven steps of mud tapered off to a single point. Just in front of this muddy heap burned an oil lamp. It created the impression of a kind of an altar. This impression was reinforced by the fact that all the practitioners would stand for a few moments in silence in front of it; then they touched the floor, their forehead, and then their heart. One of the senior students, Soman, told me it was really an altar, called *puttara*. It symbolized the home of the *kalari* goddess overseeing the *kalari*. But it was not only an altar. According to Soman, it stood for a way of life. This way of life was aimed at developing one's mind and spirit until they had become ready to unite with 'God'⁵, whom he imagined as the very source and engine of creation. The seven steps of the *puttara* represented the seven stages of this self-development, and the tip of the altar stood for the

² I arrived at the KKA on January 15, 1996

³ Throughout this research I will use the word 'tradition' in relation to the KKA and its *gurukkal* to mean the following: that tradition, which is considered to be a tradition in the eyes of the members of the KKA.

⁴ Because of the intense practice, the KKA *kalari* was closed one day a week. This was to give the students some time to recover. The day chosen to be a day off was Monday, because Sunday is a public holiday in Kerala. This allowed the local students more time to practice than on weekdays: on weekdays people have to work or to go to school. This gave the KKA *kalari* the opportunity to increase the intensity and duration of the training on Sundays.

⁵ Throughout this research I have frequently put the word 'God' between quotation marks, in those cases where I intend the term to express what is considered to be a 'central divine being' from the point of view of a specific individual.

ultimate union of man with his Maker, so it was stated. After Soman's explanation I had the very strong impression that the *kalari* was a temple, and its practitioners could be seen as followers of a certain kind of cult. But this could only be true if Soman's thoughts were shared by others: primarily the KKA teacher, and secondly his students, and perhaps Keralan society as well.

The evening of the first day of my practice I had a conversation with the KKA teacher about this. He was a devout Muslim, and he affirmed Soman's story, but from an Islamic point of view: he told me that Kalarippayat can be used as a way to find Allah. He stressed that Muslim rules of living, such as the traditional prayer (*namaz*), should be obeyed as well. Each Kalarippayat practitioner should keep his faith alongside the practice of Kalarippayat. For Soman and the KKA teacher at least, Kalarippayat was a way of life in its own right, especially as it allows for the integration of their religious traditions. According to them it was a means of mental and spiritual self-development which ultimately helped to unite them with 'God'. The next two and a half years I did not only learn the basics of (KKA) Kalarippayat as a martial art, but I became an initiate of her fundamental ideas and practices as well. I also had enough time to find out if the other students had the same attitude towards Kalarippayat and to learn the role of Kalarippayat within Keralan society. At the end of my stay in India I had become convinced that Kalarippayat was more than a martial art in the eyes of her practitioners, and that this art was taking an important place in the local society.

I saw that there were many *kalaris* (gyms) in Kerala, especially in the northern part of Kerala, an area called Malabar, where I was staying. If each of those *kalaris* were part of the local society, then the subject of Kalarippayat would be of interest to those who want to study this society. And if Kalarippayat provides a way of life as well, and if it is used by those who are involved as guidance for how to live in unity with their religious tradition, it would give meaning and purpose to their lives. This makes the art and its practice very interesting.

If Kalarippayat is a way of life, providing guidance and purpose in life to those who practice it, and the art itself has become an object of respect, maybe even worship (its practitioners are paying homage to it as their religious background prescribes, which means that they pay homage to it in the same way as they do to their 'God') Kalarippayat, in connection with the martial arts, has to be considered as a religious phenomenon. In the following chapters I want to examine if we can approach Kalarippayat as such. But first and foremost, Kalarippayat is a martial art. How is it possible that people who are doing a kind of 'sport' become 'adherents' to an implicit philosophy and perhaps a religious way of life, just by practicing this 'sport'? And what about it, then, is so attractive to its 'adherents'? As far as I can tell, every Kerali is familiar with Kalarippayat, and many of them send their children to a Kalarippayat school. Familiar as they are with certain ideas regarding the way of life Kalarippayat teaches, why do parents send their children to a Kalarippayat school? This question can be considered in a broader context: how is Kalarippayat embedded in Keralan society?

Through the search for answers to these questions, I intend to present the phenomenon of Kalarippayat. I will limit myself to one *kalari* (gym) in particular, the KKA *kalari*. I will base this presentation on my own observations and experiences in that *kalari*. To round out this presentation I will use other materials as well, existing sources in the form of available literature.

In an attempt to understand and explain the phenomenon of KKA Kalarippayat, and to clarify its inner structure, the data gathered on KKA Kalarippayat should be placed within a theoretical framework.

The choice of theoretical framework depends on the characteristics of our subject. Therefore I want to present these characteristics in the following section.

3. Some characteristics of Kalarippayat

The central person in the *kalari* is the *gurukkal*. After I had trained for some months, I realized that without a teacher, there is no *kalari*. The members of the KKA *kalari* considered the *gurukkal* in general to be the embodiment of his *kalari* and the martial system taught in that *kalari*. Moreover, the KKA teacher told me that the *gurukkal* represented all the teachers who had lived before the present *gurukkal*, starting with the *gurukkal*'s own teacher. According to the KKA teacher, this 'martial lineage'⁶ was rooted in a divine origin, meaning that the art was directly given to mankind by that divine source. In the KKA *kalari* this divine source was not predefined: as a multi-religious *kalari* the name given to that divine was the choice of the practitioner. The KKA teacher, as a Muslim, was seeing Allah as the ultimate source, whom he equated with the Highest Being of every religion. For him, as he told me frequently, the different religions were just different ways to approach that divine, and one could not say which way was right and which way wrong; according to the KKA teacher the choice of religion depended on the character and personality of the person in question.⁷

For the KKA *gurukkal* Kalarippayat was a form of knowledge obtained directly from the divine and because of that it could not be transmitted to each and every person: not everybody should be accepted to train in the *kalari*. I noticed that it is up to the *gurukkal* to decide who is welcome and who is not. The three most important reasons I was accepted were the following. Firstly, I had gotten the address (of the KKA *kalari*) in Sri Lanka from one of the senior students of the KKA *gurukkal*. This served as an introduction by that student, who, being a senior, already had a trusted position. Secondly, after a conversation the KKA *gurukkal* thought me reliable and of good behavior. Thirdly, the KKA *gurukkal* was very keen on promoting Kalarippayat in countries outside India, especially western countries.

⁶ I will use the term 'martial lineage' when I refer to one or more martial systems, handed down from teacher to a student, who, after having become a teacher himself, will also pass on this knowledge to his students, and so on. In this way a kind of filiation in the martial art is created.

⁷ The different cultures of India have often been influenced by the introduction of foreign religions. An example is the absorption of Islam into Indian culture. This caused the emergence of local interpretations of Islam, resulting in different religious practices and traditions. In the state Karnataka, for example, in the village of Hospet, I observed that the Muslim Muharram festival is celebrated with fire-walking, something which is connected in parts of the Indian subcontinent to certain Hindu festivals. The effect of Islam on Indian society was not only visible in the rise of many new religious traditions, but on art and sciences as well. Because North India was conquered by the Muslim Moghul rulers during the first half of the 16th century, art got an new stimulus, which resulted in the famous Moghul miniature paintings. In Kerala Islam influenced and was influenced by Kalarippayat. The influence of Islam on Kalarippayat can be demonstrated by the fact that a part of the army of the *raja* of Chirakkal (a Hindu) was trained by Mappila Muslims (see chapter 1.4.2), which caused Muslim specific fighting techniques to enter Kalarippayat. I will demonstrate the influence of Kalarippayat on Islam in this research as well: ideas based on local non-Islamic religious traditions connected to Kalarippayat have been accepted by the KKA *gurukkal*, which is a Muslim. Nowadays there are many different interpretations of Islam, Hinduism, Christianity and other religions in India, coloured by and absorbed into local culture. Unfortunately, several of these religious traditions became hostile towards other religious traditions. This causes frictions within and, up to a certain extend, fragmentation of Indian society.

The acceptance of a student is primarily the choice of the teacher. This choice can be based on several completely different factors. Looking at my own situation, the two main reasons were that I was introduced by a senior student, and because of my patience. But there is still another very important factor: the personal relationship between student and teacher. I mentioned that I had a conversation with the teacher before he had made a decision. The reason for such a conversation is the following.

In my experience, the student should have – and thus show – absolute trust in the teacher (usually this is limited to issues related to Kalarippayat). He should obey the *gurukkal* in whatever he requires, like a child should obey his father. From his side the *gurukkal* is held fully responsible for the well-being of his pupil; the *gurukkal* should see his student as if he was his own child. In short, the relation between *gurukkal* and student can be compared to the relationship between father and child. I have seen that the KKA *gurukkal* had the same relationship with his teacher, who, according to the KKA teacher, in turn, had a similar relationship with his *gurukkal*, and so on, until the source of the lineage, the divine. This relationship can only work well when there is a kind of ‘affection’ or ‘mutual understanding’ between teacher and student. For the teacher the conversation should not only give an impression of the potential student’s background, but also clarify if he really wants to teach the student, or in other words, if he really can be a kind of father to him (or her).

In my view the relationship between student and teacher is crucial to understanding the lineage. It places the student in a hierarchically lower position than the *gurukkal*: after all, he should obey his teacher. However, if we are to believe the KKA teacher, this would be also true of the relationship between the teacher and his *gurukkal*.

I introduced the word ‘hierarchy’ because if one person should obey another person almost without question, it indicates a ranking system, which I think is expressed well by the use of this word.

The student should obey his teacher, that teacher should obey his teacher, and so on, until we reach the divine origin of the art. The hierarchy is constructed in such a way that the divine is on top and the student at the bottom. In my experience in the KKA *kalari* a distinction is made between senior and junior students. There is not the same bond between senior and junior student as between teacher and student, but because the senior has more knowledge than the junior, he is allowed to instruct the junior students, if permitted by the *gurukkal*. Junior students should, in my experience, pay respect to their seniors. This adds another ring to the hierarchical chain in the *kalari*.

The ‘martial lineage’ plays a very important role in the legitimation of the knowledge of the *gurukkal*. A student can only give his trust to a teacher if it is clear in the eyes of the student that this teacher’s knowledge is ‘real’ and ‘authentic’. The *gurukkal* legitimates his knowledge through his lineage: he should be able to name his teacher and the (mythical) origin of the lineage. During the periods I was training in the KKA *kalari*, I frequently heard the *gurukkal* stressing the origin of Kalarippayat in general and his lineages in particular. Typical of such stories are tales of semi-legendary historical events.

4. Theoretical considerations

Kalarippayat is seen by those who practice it as an art. The word ‘art’ has for them not completely the same connotation as in our Western civilization. When

we think of art, we think of the expression of human emotions and thoughts in an original and creative way.⁸ Because what is considered to be art is highly depending on society (and is therefore subjective), anthropologist Marvin Harris does not give a definition of art, but gives four characteristics: creative play, aesthetic feelings, formal structure, and symbolic transformations.⁹ Harris states that the Western conception of art is different from the one found in many other cultures: in the West a small group of people (art specialists and critics) decide whether something is art or not. He calls Western art 'establishment art'.¹⁰

The Kalarippayat practitioner does not see the human emotions and thoughts or even human being itself as the source of his inspiration like so often in western civilization. He claims that the divine is the source of inspiration of art. One Kalarippayat student told me: "Kalarippayat is an art, like *kathakali* (dance in Kerala), because it comes down directly from God". Another student said that Kalarippayat is "the image on earth of the *shakti* (power) of God, like all other arts", and the KKA *gurukkal* held that "the beauty and power of God is expressed in arts like Kalarippayat". The divine and art are for these people closely related. Art is, according to my interpretation of these statements made by Kalarippayat practitioners, seen as making creative variations on a divine theme. The divine expresses itself through acts of creation. This divine theme is a form of self-expression of the divine. When an artist 'becomes inspired' he or she is believed to acquire 'knowledge' of the divine and its self-expression. Inspiration is then similar to a state of mind, in which the artist sees him- or herself to be close to or even being one with the divine. In this state of 'knowledge', the artist makes creative use of the elements of the divine self-expression. The action of practicing the art should ideally be done within the boundaries of a space, which is especially consecrated for the purpose.

This interpretation of art fits quite well with Harris' characteristics: performing creative variations on the divine theme may be regarded, especially from the practitioner's point of view, as creative play. These creative variations are performed according to a formal structure, whereby each pose and each movement represent (symbolizes) a divine act, referring to native cosmological assumptions. The beauty of the body movements can claim the aesthetic component.

Though Kalarippayat is a fighting system meant to kill adversaries, the act of killing should be done not for the sake of killing for personal gain, but with the understanding that some things in life have to be done because the situation requires so. The act of fighting in a battle should be performed without involvement of personal anger, hatred, or any emotion, but with a calm mood in which the warrior is unattached to those emotions.¹¹ The purpose of the fight is the fight itself, which takes place because of coincidence. The circumstances are like this because the universe and its events continue to exist according to a

⁸ Van Dale dictionary Dutch language (Utrecht, 2002). The Merriam Webster dictionary states that art is "the conscious use of skill and creative imagination especially in the production of aesthetic objects" (meaning 4a; www.merriamwebster.com)

⁹ Harris, p.499

¹⁰ Harris, p.486 and 489. Harris treats 'establishment art' as an example of the correlation between art and culture. He discusses other forms of art as well, like 'religious art' and 'statesponsored art'.

¹¹ See also Zarilli 1998, p.206. The Bhagavad Gita is very important to (Hindu) Kalarippayat practitioners. In this work the following is written regarding personal gain: "Work (with desire) is verily far inferior to that performed with the mind undisturbed by thoughts of results. Seek refuge in the evenness of mind. Wretched are they who act for results." (Bhagavad Gita II.49)

divine order, called *dharma*. Kalarippayat is an act (fighting without being involved personally) performed with a certain purpose (the fight itself), placed within a certain context (the circumstances). This idea fits the definition of the term 'ritual', as Catherine Bell proposes it. For her a 'ritual' is a set of actions, carefully set aside from other actions, placed in a specific context, to serve a certain purpose.¹² The set of actions of Bell's definition can be compared to the movements and the actions within a fight. These movements and actions are carefully set aside, because they should be performed without being involved personally, so that they merely mirror the acts of the divine. This means that they serve the specific purpose of the fight itself: the fight is done because it has to be done. The fight is caused by coincidence, which is a result of the working of *dharma*. *Dharma* provides the circumstances, that is, it provides the context in which that fight takes place. Because Bell's distinction of 'ritual' and the way Kalarippayat is, as seen by its practitioners, are identical, I will consider Kalarippayat as a ritual in the sense of Bell's characterization.¹³

As I have stated before, the data I collected show our subject from my perspective. Other authors have given their point of view in books or on their websites. Each author has given an impression of Kalarippayat. In the following I want to determine how these 'impressions' are built up.

The impressions presented to us by those authors contain data (obtained through observations, participations, interviews or teachings), and an interpretation of those data. Data are carrying information about the subject to study. In our case this subject, Kalarippayat, is a set of actions placed in the context of the society of Kerala. By mentioning the name 'Kerala', I introduced a spatial component, because it points to a carefully limited area in the country India. This spatial component is even more limited by mentioning the subject Kalarippayat, because we especially focus on one school as an example of this martial art. This means in fact that the setting of the subject is primarily restricted to the place where that school is situated, or, more specifically, the school (*kalari*) itself. If we widen our scope a bit, the setting becomes the *kalari* and its direct surroundings, that is, the neighbourhood in which the *kalari* is situated. Further opening the diaphragm of our lens, we find different levels of settings: the locality (the township of Puttiyateru), the district Kannur, the area of Malabar, the state of Kerala (state level), and India (country level), just to mention a few. When we look at these different settings, we see that, because we widen the scope with each level, one level is part of the level above –the *kalari* is part of the neighbourhood, the neighbourhood is part of the township, the township is part of the district, the district is part of Malabar, Malabar is part of Kerala, and Kerala is part of India–, that is one level is a 'sub-setting' of the level above. In this way each 'sub-setting' determines the background of the subject. Kenneth Burke equals this background with the scene of a play; he shows that there is a scene-act ratio and a scene-actor ratio.¹⁴ For Burke a scene is not merely the background of a play; the scene refers to where, when and in what context a

¹² Bell, 1997, p.82

¹³ Parallel to ritual I take the word 'rite' to indicate a 'ritual action'. This distinction is not mandatory. If one prefers one could also reverse the distinction. What matters is the difference between elements of a ritual behavior or activity (for example, the preparatory ritual for the training consists of the following elements: entering the *kalari*, touching the floor, change dress, and oiling the body) and their integration into a composite whole.

¹⁴ Burke, 1969, p.3 et seq.

certain act takes place. The scene contains the act and the actors, according to Burke, and serves as a motivation for those acts and actors.¹⁵ Speaking in terms of Burke's ideas, Kalaripayat, a martial art, is by definition an act (the 'act of fighting'), and as an act it is performed by its actors, the martial artists (the 'fighters'). In order to give meaning to that act, Kalaripayat has to be studied in relation with its background, which is the scene. But, as I have indicated above, there are different scopes possible, and we should indicate to which background we want to relate our subject with. In order to choose one or more scenes, I aim to discuss first the smallest possible scope, which is still meaningful in relation with Kalaripayat. The location is set with inside the *kalari*. Then I will move on to scopes of wider angles.

People perform the martial art within the compounds of the *kalari*-building. Here the actual teaching takes place. In my experience it is the teacher who creates the atmosphere in which the training takes place; he brings his students in the 'right mood' for practice. He, with his presence (even when he is not there, when his presence is implicit) makes the gym into a *kalari*. This fact is demonstrated when the teacher occasionally happens to be absent. Then the most senior student takes over most of the duties of the teacher. I have seen that students perform less well, and that their progress stagnates. This observation is confirmed by the relationship between teacher and student: it is the teacher's task to lift the student out of his 'state of ignorance'. This task cannot be performed by anybody else, because of the special relationship between student and teacher (see above). It looks like the act of teaching within the *kalari* work solely through the teacher and, to use a figure of Christian theology, in an *ex opere operantis* fashion.¹⁶

The teacher is able to transform a building into *kalari*. But this works also in the reverse way: the *kalari*, as a physical background gives meaning to the teacher. Outside the *kalari* the *gurukkal* looks like a normal man to most people, but inside a *kalari* his position as *gurukkal* is affirmed and confirmed.

Clearly, both *gurukkal* and *kalari* serve as the scene of a Kalaripayat practice. The scene motivates the act and actor. How does this motivation work? Mircea Eliade constructed a model based on religious, social and psychological factors to explain how a participant can be 'motivated'. Eliade observed, after having studied many cases, that "reality is a function of imitation of a celestial archetype."¹⁷ Archetype is for Eliade an exemplary model.¹⁸ Rituals and significant profane gestures acquire the meaning attributed to them, and materialize that meaning, only because they deliberately repeat such and such act posited *ab origine* (from the beginning) by gods, heroes, or ancestors.¹⁹ The myth is the story belonging to such primordial acts, and the ritual is the re-enactment of the primordial act done *ab origine*. During rituals a leading ritualist brings the participants from the profane time and space to a sacred time (*illud*

¹⁵ Ibid., p.43 et seq.

¹⁶ The teachings and the teacher are thought to work *ex opere operantis* (one can understand this by the credo: a bad teacher creates bad students). The martial art itself is supposed to be divine, and thus infallible. According to Kalaripayat practitioners, the martial art *always* works in a fight, as long as the combinations of movement are carried out according to what has been taught by the *gurukkal*. This means that the martial art Kalaripayat itself (as a system) works *ex opere operato*.

¹⁷ Eliade 1974, p.5

¹⁸ Ibid., pp.6-11

¹⁹ Ibid., p.5/6

tempus) and space.²⁰ In the case of Kalarippayat training, the role of the leading ritualist is played by the *gurukkal*. As I have stated above, the *gurukkal* (teacher) embodies the *kalari* tradition, and because of this he is the very soul of the *kalari*. And because the teacher represents Kalarippayat as a system (i.e. including the divine source of the martial art), the presence of the teacher brings the student to the 'pure form' of the art, which emanated from the divine when the martial art was created. In the words of Eliade, the teacher restores illud tempus (that time; i.e. the time of creation) for the students to the hic et nunc (here and now). The art is divine and is a part of that divine and as such it was there ab origine (from the beginning). The teacher lets the students perform the deed of the divine; that is to practice Kalarippayat.

The *gurukkal* transforms the *kalari* into the scene of the primordial act. That means that the *kalari* as a building promotes this act of restoration of primordial time. Eliade does pay less attention to the physical aspect of the background; for him the act may be enough. But Kalarippayat practitioners practice within an especially for Kalarippayat consecrated space. Catherine Bell, influenced by Eliade, reformulated the process of 'becoming motivated' more in terms of rituals in relation to their background (the 'environment'):

(...) the most subtle and central quality of those actions we tend to call ritual is the primacy of the body moving about within a specially constructed space, simultaneously defining (imposing) and experiencing (receiving) the values ordering the environment. For example, the body movements of ritually knowledgeable agents actually define the special qualities of the environment, yet agents understand themselves as reacting or responding to this environment.²¹

Her statement defines exactly the role of the *kalari gurukkal*. The teacher is the ultimate and almost infallible expert on the exercises and the rituals surrounding and constituting these exercises. As such he truly is the "knowledgeable agent" who "defines the special qualities of the environment", that is the *kalari* itself.

Bell presumes that ritual space and time are created by the gestures and sounds of the action of the ritual itself. Through this action contact with the supernatural is made, and in some instances the ritual is a means to control the supernatural.

With the above distinction of Bell we return to the various scopes by which we can treat Kalarippayat. In the previous section I discussed the principal scope of the art, which is in fact a scope limited by the walls of the *kalari*. Widening the angle of our scope, we could discuss Kalarippayat against the background of for example the village, the state, or India. Since Kalarippayat is an act performed by humans, and it points to a way of doing of certain individuals who belong to the Keralan (or Indian) society, that means that they share something with other individuals, we cannot escape to introduce the word 'culture', and more specifically, 'culture' as it has been shaped by religious tradition. Since we can only talk about a culture of a certain group of individuals when they have something in common, we have to ask what it is that they have in common. One may think about language, but there are many languages spoken in India, though many Indians may feel that all Indians share a common culture. Apparently one should look more for a common knowledge, and a common way of doing, by

²⁰ Ibid., pp.15 and 20/21

²¹ Bell, 1997, p.82; also: Bell, 1995, pp.88-93

which people of the same culture can understand each other better than people from different cultures, no matter whether this way of doing is the result of social, economical, or political factors, or, as in India, strongly influenced by religious practices.

Malinowski stated, studying the people from the Trobriand Islands, that their practices and habits should be seen against the background of their way of thinking. In Malinowski's words, the task of the researcher is

(...) to grasp the native's point of view, his relation to life, to realise *his* vision of *his* world.²²

According to Malinowski, Evans-Pritchard, and others, the researcher should strive to give an interpretation of his subject in terms of the local background, that is the local culture.²³ But to map the 'common culture' one should first understand what is meant by this.

Max Weber tried to give a description of the 'cultural background' in his study of protestant capitalism. He saw this background as

(...) a psychological vehicle that tended to create a typical conduct.²⁴

He used this idea to put the 'character' of Protestants into words:

If we may call this seriousness and the strong predominance of religious interests in the whole conduct of life otherworldliness, then the French Calvinists were and still are at least as otherworldly as, for instance, the North German Catholics, to whom their Catholicism is undoubtedly as vital a matter as religion is to any other people in the world.²⁵

In order to give a more precise and adequate description of 'common culture' than Weber, Marcel Mauss introduced the term 'body techniques':

Dans ces conditions, il faut dire tout simplement : nous avons affaire à des *techniques du corps*. Le corps est le premier et le plus naturel instrument de l'homme. Ou plus exactement, sans parler d'instrument, le premier et le plus naturel objet technique, et en même temps moyen technique, de l'homme, c'est son corps. Immédiatement, toute cette grande catégorie de ce que, en sociologie descriptive, je classais comme –divers– disparaît de cette rubrique et prend forme et corps : nous savons où la ranger.

Avant les techniques à instruments, il y a l'ensemble des techniques du corps. Je n'exagère pas l'importance de ce genre de travail, travail de taxinomie psycho-sociologique. Mais c'est quelque chose : l'ordre mis dans des idées, là où il n'y en avait aucun. Même à l'intérieur de ce groupement de faits, le principe permettait un classement précis. Cette adaptation constante à un but physique, mécanique, chimique (par exemple quand nous buvons) est poursuivie dans une série d'actes montés, et montés chez l'individu non pas simplement par lui-même, mais par toute son éducation, par toute la société dont il fait partie, à la place qu'il y occupe.²⁶

The concept introduced by Mauss was picked up by Norbert Elias, who, instead of 'body techniques', used the broader term 'habitus' as one of the central concepts of his work.

²² Malinowski, p.25

²³ Evans Pritchard, 1974, p.321-322

²⁴ Weber 1978, p.1113

²⁵ Weber 1905, chapter 1

²⁶ Mauss 1936, pp.10/11

(...) the social habitus of individuals forms, as it were, the soil from which grow the personal characteristics through which an individual differs from other members of his society. In this way something grows out of the common language which the individual shares with others and which is certainly a component of his social habitus - a more or less individual style, what might be called an unmistakable individual handwriting that grows out of the social script.²⁷

In his most known book *The Civilizing Process* Elias equated habitus with "second nature" and "an automatic, blindly functioning apparatus of self-control". Elias thought that the 'national character' of a society was constructed from the collection of individuals belonging to that society.²⁸

Pierre Bourdieu reformulated the term 'habitus' in his book *Outline of a Theory of Practice*:

The habitus, the durability installed generative principle of regulated improvisations, produces practices which tend to reproduce the regularities immanent in the objective conditions of the production of their generative principle, while adjusting to the demands inscribed as objective potentialities in the situation, as defined by the cognitive and motivating structures making up the habitus.²⁹

While Bourdieu was a sociologist, anthropologist Clifford Geertz constructed a term similar in meaning to Elias' and Bourdieu's 'habitus', 'thick description', used by him for the description of the cultural background of a people.

The point for now is only that ethnography is thick description. What the ethnographer is in fact faced with -except when (as, of course, he must do) he is pursuing the more automatized routines of data collection- is a multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed upon or knotted into one another, which are at once strange, irregular, and inexplicit, and which he must contrive somehow first to grasp and then to render.³⁰

From the concept of 'thick description' Clifford Geertz formulated a definition for the word 'culture':

(...) it denotes an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life.³¹

In this definition he uses the terms 'symbol' and 'conception'. For him a "conception is the symbol's 'meaning'" and symbols

(...) are tangible formulations of notions, abstractions from experience fixed in perceptible forms, concrete embodiments of ideas, attitudes, judgments, longings, or beliefs.³²

With the introduction of our multiple scope system, we have implicitly introduced different levels of 'shared culture'. These levels of 'shared culture' may refer, using Geertz' definition, to the amount of historically transmitted patterns shared

²⁷ Elias 1991, p.182

²⁸ Elias 1994, p.113

²⁹ Bourdieu, 2005, p.78

³⁰ Geertz, 1973, p.13

³¹ Geertz, 1973, p.89

³² Ibid., p.91

by individuals: the more patterns they share, the closer they are from a cultural point of view.

Bell, building on the work of Geertz, writes that

(...) ritual should be analyzed and understood in its real context, which is the full spectrum of ways of acting within a given culture, not as some a priori category of action totally independent of other forms of action.³³

In order to meet the requirement that our subject “should be analyzed and understood in its real context”, we should choose a scope to do so. Firstly I want to give a description of Kalarippayat against the background of the system itself, that is the background of the *kalarī* (gym), as discussed above. Then I want to place the art against the cultural background of the area. Since I have lived and traveled mainly in the Malabar area, I will take this area as second scope. One way to deal with this cultural background is to compare Kalarippayat with other arts of the region, and to mention certain ways of doing with common customs I have observed within the society of Malabar.

As we will see, Kalarippayat is supported and promoted by the Keralan government as an art belonging to the state of Kerala. The ideas of the government have, as I will show, affected the way of thinking within many art schools. Because of this reason I will try to treat Kalarippayat against the background of the Keralan state as well. In order not to lose the focus of this research, I will do this as briefly as possible.

The KKA is a school where one can learn a particular style of Kalarippayat. A school implies that there is more than one person involved. Because each of these persons has a role in the *kalarī*, there is a relationship between them. This relationship can be on basis of complete equality, or there is a particular hierarchy. This hierarchy is based on how much a person is acquainted with the skill and knowledge of the martial art, because the teacher is the highest person in rank in the *kalarī*, followed by his most senior student. But the hierarchy is not limited to individuals: the ultimate source of the martial art is the divine, represented by the *puttara*, which is acknowledged as the top of the hierarchic structure.

The subject of hierarchy in human relations has been studied thoroughly by many sociologists. Max Weber, building on the theory of Karl Marx, observed that Classes, status groups and parties are phenomena of the distribution of power within a community.³⁴

He sees power as

(...) the chance of a man or a number of men to realize their own will in a social action even against the resistance of others who are participating in the action.³⁵

Weber thinks that a person has power when he belongs to a certain class (for example aristocracy), or when he has status (in some societies scientists have a certain status), or when he has political power. He thus divides power over three groups of people, introducing a threefold stratification of society. Bourdieu developed Weber's threefold stratification into a theory in which he suggested a new definition of ‘capital’, to be used instead of the one on economical assets based definition of Marx. He introduced the term ‘symbolic capital’:

³³ Bell, 1997, p.81; also: Bell, 1995, pp.88-93

³⁴ Weber, 1968, p.927

³⁵ Ibid., p.926

(...) any property (any form of capital whether physical, economic, cultural or social) when it is perceived by social agents endowed with the categories of perception which cause them to know it, recognize it, and give it value.³⁶

Each individual in society possesses, according to Bourdieu, an amount of this 'symbolic capital', depending on his economical, physical (capability to do physical actions), cultural (e.g. class), and social position (Weber's status) abilities. Symbolic capital is for Bourdieu the true source of power. In the case of our subject the place of an individual (and even the non-organic Kalarippayat related entities such as divinities) in the *kalari* can be determined by symbolic capital. In terms of Bourdieu's ideas, skills, knowledge, and the understanding of Kalarippayat are symbolic capital within the compounds of the *kalari*, because the possession of those brings the practitioner closer to the divine source of the art. As I will show, it gives the practitioner a certain status in Keralan society as well. This special status entails the existence of a hierarchy, at least within the *kalari*, because it puts a student in a dependant position of the teacher. According to Bell, the existence of social hierarchies is caused by what she calls 'ritualization'. Ritualization is

(...) a way of acting that distinguishes itself from other ways of acting in the very way it does what it does; moreover, it makes this distinction for specific purposes.³⁷

Ritualization is the process that sets some social acts apart from others and places these acts in a certain context for certain specific purposes. It is

(...) a way of acting that tends to promote the authority of forces deemed to derive from beyond the immediate situation.³⁸

Within the system of Kalarippayat, the corpus of the tradition itself is apparently the intensely symbolic authority, derived directly from the highest divine source ('God'), as I indicated above. Seen in this light, Kalarippayat is an expression of the divine on earth. I have said that without the teacher, there is no *kalari*. This means the *gurukkal* is its embodiment; through him the tradition can be taught and given to others. In him a spark of the divine becomes visible; he has become a medium between this world and the supernatural world. I explained that because of the special relationship between student and teacher, in this position to a certain extent the *gurukkal* can decide what his students do and do not do. Most of his followers (i.e. students) will almost blindly do what he says. But the *gurukkal* should 'prove' himself first. As he is the embodiment of the tradition, he should be able to claim that he got his knowledge through a lineage, in order to legitimate himself. Therefore he must be able to name his teacher – and occasionally the teacher of his teacher – as well as the mythical origin of his style. This will convince his students that his teachings are authentic and that he can be trusted. During my sojourns there I often heard the KKA *gurukkal* tell his students about the origins of his Kalarippayat.³⁹

According to Bell, certain actions are set aside from other actions, and placed in a specific context, in order to serve a predefined purpose. She calls these actions rituals. The person who knows about these rituals legitimizes his knowledge and actions by referring to for example divine authorities. Through

³⁶ Bourdieu, 1998, p.47; also Bourdieu 2005, p.171 et seq.

³⁷ Bell, 1997, p.81

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ See paragraph 5

this person the divine authorities can be known and approached. This causes the emergence of relationships of power.⁴⁰

In other words, Bell assumes that the function of rituals is to create a certain hierarchy between people. Practice theory, as she calls her theory on the practice of ritual, is concerned with what rituals actually do, especially in terms of how they “construct and inscribe power relationships”.⁴¹ In our case the way the power relationships are built up is through the lineage of the *gurukkal*, which I have referred to above as the ‘martial lineage’.

Bell assumes that the main purpose of these power relationships is to create a kind of community.⁴² This can also be shown for the KKA *kalari*. Each individual is bonded through Kalarippayat to the *gurukkal*, as I explained. The bond works in two directions. On one hand the ‘follower’ (student) should blindly obey the *gurukkal*, on the other hand the *gurukkal* supports the student, not only with martial arts teachings, but also on a personal level, such as emotional problems or, as I have seen, helping students who come from a poor background.

After having used the ideas of Burke to give a relation between the scene (of a play) and the scope of our research, and having said something about the relationships between the actors in the scope of KKA Kalarippayat, I want to point out that I consider the cultural background (the scene) of our subject as time dependant. Victor Turner noted during his study of the central African tribe Ndembu that the social patterns were not static, but ever changing.⁴³ According to Turner, one of the main reasons that social structures should be considered as processes is that a society is not a closed, in itself existing, system, but that a society is sensitive to outside influences. This means that cultural elements and the interpretation of those elements, even within a cultural system, provides us with information of the scene or cultural background of a certain group of people at a certain place, and at a certain time.⁴⁴

Norbert Elias thinks that the process of intercultural reciprocal influence is caused by actions of the individual, which result in gradual changes in the social order and cultural patterns.

It is simple enough: plans and actions, the emotional and rational impulses of individual people, constantly interweave in a friendly or hostile way. This basic tissue resulting from many single plans and actions of men can give rise to changes and patterns that no individual person has planned or created. From this interdependence of people arises an order *sui generis*, an order more compelling and stronger than the will and reason of the individual people composing it. It is this order of interweaving human impulses and strivings, this social order, which determines the course of historical change; it underlies the civilizing process.⁴⁵

Bell applies the idea that cultural background is dynamically changing with time to the subject of her work, rituals. She stresses that ritual is a part of a historical process, in which past patterns are not only reproduced, but also reinterpreted or retransformed.⁴⁶ This is certainly true for Kalarippayat. As each teacher is the

⁴⁰ Bell, 1997, p.82

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Turner 1957, p.241; also: Turner 1974, pp.23-35

⁴⁴ See note 7

⁴⁵ Elias, 1994, p.444

⁴⁶ Bell 1997, p.83

center of his *kalari*, his personal beliefs and convictions play an enormous role in the teachings. In subsequent chapters I will show how this applies to several subjects. As we will see, for example, the religious conviction of the *gurukkal* impacts how the *kalari* greeting rituals are interpreted. In the case of Kalarippayat a historical process is not only caused by external factors, as Turner suggests, but also due to the fact that the *gurukkal* becomes older, and because of that he develops different insights. This is a process, which is, as I will show, imbedded within the psychology of Indian philosophy, and more narrowly, that of Kalarippayat. Hence teaching Kalarippayat is a time depending and historical process.

In our theoretical treatment we have followed a line of successive theories, in which the subject of study is placed in the (social) context of the cultural background. In this research, I want to approach Kalarippayat as a ritual, which can be studied against several (cultural) backgrounds. The principal background is the *kalari* itself, which is the décor of the daily exercises. The *gurukkal* has the power to transform a building into a *kalari*, a building for exercise, while the *kalari* gives meaning to the teachings and the person of the teacher. The second scene (or scope) I want to consider is the society of Malabar, which places Kalarippayat along with other forms like dance and (religious) theatre. A third scene, which gives meaning to Kalarippayat as an art, is the society of the state of Kerala. This scene-act ratio is important because there are *kalaris* all over Kerala, and the government of the state of Kerala promotes Kalarippayat as cultural heritage of all Keralan people.

Further I suggested considering mainly *that* part of the scene, which shows the *cultural* background of the martial art. A cultural background shows, using the above definitions given by the various scholars, an expression of human society and ways of thinking. If we think about human society, we think about relationships between humans. Some relationships can be hierarchical, while others can be based on a certain equality. These relationships provide us with insight into the cultural background of the subject to study, and as such they can give us a better description of the scene-act ratio. In the case of Kalarippayat in particular, relationships and their hierarchical structure are interesting, because the martial art itself is built on a social hierarchy.

A third point of attention is to consider the cultural background as time dependant. Because we have assumed the existence of a scene-actor and a scene-act ratio, the scene motivates the actor and the act, but the actor, by performing his act, influences the scene. If a *gurukkal* (actor) changes an exercise (act) or its interpretation, than that particular system of Kalarippayat (the scene) will change. A system (Kalarippayat), which is so much depending on the transfer of knowledge through a human medium (the teacher), must suffer from historical developments. Historical (that is time depending) developments are likely to change the view of the teacher. This may result in a change in the teachings of the *gurukkal*, and this affects the system as such.

5. Purpose

We have examined several characteristics of Kalarippayat: the status of the teacher, the existence of a social hierarchy, the role of the student, the teachings of the teacher, and, as a final characteristic, the connection between the characteristics in a ritual form. All these derive their meaning from the scene, or

cultural background, to which they are related. The principal background is the *kalari* itself, which consists of a combination of the teachings (the Kalarippayat philosophy) and the physical background of the building. We have seen that this background is centralized around the figure of the *gurukkal*, the teacher. He decides in fact what his students should do, and he even exercises a strong influence over their lives. Further we have seen that the teacher legitimizes his position by means of religious values. To summarize the previous formulations it is important to approach Kalarippayat against her Indian background, in which it appears, next to many other cults, as the cult of (the) martial art.⁴⁷ Nevertheless this cult has undergone a development as a result of which it became a rather independent phenomenon in its present form. In line with this approach Kalarippayat can be seen as a system which incorporates a number of cultic properties. In order to classify Kalarippayat as a cult, we should first give a definition of the word 'cult'.

The Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary gives the following definitions for the word 'cult':⁴⁸

1. formal religious veneration
2. a system of religious beliefs and ritual; *also* : its body of adherents
3. a religion regarded as unorthodox or spurious; *also* : its body of adherents
4. a system for the cure of disease based on dogma set forth by its promulgator
5. **a** : great devotion to a person, idea, object, movement, or work (as a film or book); *especially*: such devotion regarded as a literary or intellectual fad
b : a usually small group of people characterized by such devotion

Kalarippayat as it is taught in the KKA *kalari* could be called a kind of a cult, because it teaches devotion to the *gurukkal* and the system of Kalarippayat itself (meaning 5). As I will show in the following chapters, Kalarippayat is also regarded as a system 'for the cure of disease based on dogma set forth by its promulgator' (meaning 4), because Kalarippayat offers treatments to patients. Furthermore, Kalarippayat is a philosophy as well, teaching her students a method of spiritual self development (meaning 2). During the training several rituals can be observed, which I will discuss in the following chapters. Kalarippayat, as it is taught in the KKA *kalari*, meets most of the definitions the Merriam-Webster Dictionary gives. Nevertheless, I will examine whether Kalarippayat can be considered a cult. Maybe there is a different explanation possible for the fact that the characteristics of the KKA Kalarippayat match the definition of the word 'cult'. It is possible that this is a cultural question: namely, what appears to be a 'cult' by the definitions of the word in the English language (within the social sciences) is not necessarily interpreted as such within the context of another culture.

Max Weber looked at cult as the product of and centralized around a charismatic leader. For him 'charisma'

⁴⁷ Throughout this research, when I refer to Kalarippayat, I will use a female indication. The reason is that, as I will show, Kalarippayat, as a martial system, is thought to equal the *kalari* goddess. From this point of view the name 'Kalarippayat' refers to a female entity. Because I intend to write this research from the perspective of an insider, I have used the female personal, relative or possessive pronoun to indicate Kalarippayat.

⁴⁸ <http://www.m-w.com/cgi-bin/dictionary>

(...) soll eine als außeralltöglich (ursprünglich, sowohl bei Propheten wie bei therapeutischen wie bei Rechts-Weisen wie bei Jagdführern wie bei Kriegshelden: als magisch bedingt) geltende Qualität einer Persönlichkeit heißen, um derentwillen sie als mit übernatürlichen oder übermenschlichen oder mindestens spezifisch außeralltöglichen, nicht jedem andern zugänglichen Kräften oder Eigenschaften oder als gottgesandt oder als vorbildlich und deshalb als "Führer" gewertet wird. Wie die betreffende Qualität von irgendeinem ethischen, ästhetischen oder sonstigen Standpunkt aus "objektiv" richtig zu bewerten sein würde, ist natürlich dabei begrifflich völlig gleichgültig: darauf allein, wie sie tatsächlich von den charismatisch Beherrschten, den "Anhängern", bewertet wird, kommt es an.⁴⁹

The *gurukkal* is not a teacher (or leader) by virtue of the qualities of his own character, but by virtue of his 'martial lineage'; that is that what he has learned. Therefore it is possible that somebody without necessarily being charismatic can be a *gurukkal*.

Anthropology looks at a 'cult' as a belief or a series of practices associated with particular levels of infrastructural and structural development.⁵⁰ Anthony Wallace, in particular, postulated a definition which is used often in anthropology. Wallace sees 'cults' as forms of organization of religious doctrines and activities.⁵¹ He distinguishes four different types of cults: individualistic, shamanistic, communal, and ecclesiastical cults.⁵² An individual cult exists when there is a personal relationship with the supernatural. In shamanistic cults there is a person who is able to contact the supernatural on behalf of others, in return for gifts, fees, prestige, or power. Communal cults are characterized by one or more "non-specialists, organized in terms of age grades, men's societies, clans, or lineages, who are assuming responsibility for their own welfare or for the welfare of the society. Though the communal rituals may employ specialists, such as spirit mediums, orators, and highly skilled dancers, once the ritual performance is concluded, the participants revert to a common daily routine."⁵³ Ecclesiastic cults do have a high level of organization, which involves professionals conducting or connected to the rituals. An example is the Roman Catholic Church.

Kalarippayat looks very much like Wallace's communal cult: the *gurukkal* is a specialist in his subject, but once the daily practice and its rituals are over, he and his students return to their daily duties. Yet the KKA can be seen as a community, with the *gurukkal* at her center.

In their influential book *A Theory of Religion* Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge defined several explanatory models referring to different kinds of cults. For Stark and Bainbridge a 'cult movement' is "deviant religious organisation with novel beliefs and practices".⁵⁴ A 'cult' is, according to them, a generalization of the term 'cult movement'; 'cults' are "social enterprises primarily engaged in the generation of exchange of novel compensators".⁵⁵ Stark and Bainbridge strongly emphasize the element of novelty in their treatment of the term 'cult': when they enumerate characteristics for each explanatory model, they start these lists with

⁴⁹ Weber, 1922, chapter III, §10

⁵⁰ Harris, p. 454

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.; see also Wallace, A., *Religion: An Anthropological View*, 1966, Random House, New York

⁵³ Op. cit. Harris, p.454

⁵⁴ Stark and Bainbridge, p.157

⁵⁵ Ibid.

a reference to the novelty of the ideas behind the cult. In their book they treat three models: the psychopathology model, the entrepreneur model, and the subculture-evolution model.

In the psychopathology model cults “are invented by individuals suffering from certain forms of mental illness”.⁵⁶ Such individuals invent new packages of compensations to meet their own needs.⁵⁷ If they are able to collect a group around them of people suffering from similar illnesses, a new cult is born.

The entrepreneur model considers cults as “businesses which provide a product for their customers and receive payment in return”.⁵⁸ This ‘product’ is the product of skills and experiences which are not easily to obtain.⁵⁹ According to Stark and Bainbridge, these kind of “cults tend to cluster in lineages. They are linked by individual entrepreneurs who begin their careers in one cult and then leave to found their own. They bear strong ‘family resemblances’, because they share many cultural features”.⁶⁰

In the subculture-evolution model the ‘founding fathers’ of the cult are already “involved in the occult milieu”.⁶¹ The “cults are the result of sidetracked or failed collective attempts to obtain scarce or non-existing rewards”.⁶² Because of the common goal the bond between the members of such cult is very strong. Sometimes this can result in a social implosion: the intensity of those bonds become too strong, and dramatically decrease the intensity of those bonds with non-cult members.⁶³

The KKA *kalari* bases her ideas on a living tradition. There are many other kalaris in Kerala advocating similar ideas. Strictly speaking this argues against the definition of ‘cult’ as proposed by Stark and Bainbridge, because the philosophy of KKA Kalarippayat is not unique, but only a variation on existing patterns. However, it is possible to apply the entrepreneur model on KKA Kalarippayat. The ‘product’ sold by the gurukkal is the martial art, and his customers are his students. When the students have learned everything they have to learn, they leave their teacher and found their own *kalari*. Like in the entrepreneur model, Kalarippayat emphasizes the importance of the lineage, and the relationship between student and teacher bear a strong family resemblance. It is the question if we do not oversimplify our subject by considering Kalarippayat merely a product sold to willing customers.

For Benjamin Zablocki the difference between a cult and a religion lies in the moment

(...) when a religion’s charismatic founder dies. There is a sense in which, if the religion manages to survive this trauma, only then is the new religious movement is born as a real religion as opposed to a mere cultic fellowship.⁶⁴

⁵⁶ Ibid., p.158 (point 2)

⁵⁷ Ibid., (point 4)

⁵⁸ Ibid., p.168 (point 1)

⁵⁹ Ibid., p.169 (point 7)

⁶⁰ Ibid., (point 9)

⁶¹ Ibid., p.179 (point 2)

⁶² Ibid., (point 3)

⁶³ Ibid., p.179

⁶⁴ Zablocki 2000, *The Birth and Death of New Religious Movements* (<http://www.rci.rutgers.edu/~zablocki/>)

Parallel to this distinction, Zablocki formulated a 'theory of brainwashing'. For him 'brainwashing' is "the existence of a social influence mechanism".⁶⁵ His theory "describes a real social process (whose existence has been disputed) and the behavioural consequences of that process to the individuals who are targeted by it."⁶⁶

Since the KKA gurukkal tries to re-educate his students, as I will show, it is possible to argue that he, though mildly, 'brainwashes' his students. Then Kalarippayat can be seen as a tool, or mechanism, used by the teacher, to exert social influence.

Ronald Grimes, in his book *Deeply into the Bone*, does not give a real definition of the term 'cult'. From the context we can deduce that he understands cult as a system of religious beliefs and ritual centred around an object or person of worship.⁶⁷ He asserts that many cults "depend on initiatory processes".⁶⁸ The reason I refer to Grimes is that he is very careful to force field data into a theoretical model. He is deeply aware that the theoretical models and terms are a creation of the researcher, and that they not always capture the meaning field data have for the people studied.

Because theorists are embedded in places, times, and communities, we better understand theories when we comprehend their relation to the lives and times of those who create and consume them. Theories, like rites, must be understood in their social and historical contexts. Theorizing is a ritualized performance. It is ceremonial insofar as it exercises power, guards scholarly values, and garners academic capital. It is magical insofar as it transforms data into values or prescriptions for action.⁶⁹

However, the specification of the relationship between cult, religion, and magic does not have to be the main concern, but it may be sufficient, following Ninian Smart, to work with the concept of 'worldview'. He understands this term as the way people see the world. By using this concept Smart intends to cover each kind of ideology.⁷⁰ In this way we avoid specific definitions, and I hope that the people belonging to the culture to which I refer can recognize themselves even in the theoretical analysis of the obtained field data.

The main subject of this work is to determine what exactly Kalarippayat, and KKA Kalarippayat in particular, is, and whether we can categorize this phenomenon as a cult or even a religious system. I will do this by analyzing the information that I gathered through experiences and observations on the phenomenon of KKA Kalarippayat, and eventually comparing this with information from other writers who have studied other forms of Kalarippayat. Since I cannot give an in-depth description of all the *kalaris* in Kerala – because it is impossible for one person to become an 'insider' in all the *kalaris* in that area – I will take the KKA *kalari* as the subject of my research. This implies that I should also devote attention to the 'face' of the KKA *kalari* to the outside world; in other words, how does she present herself, how does she want her ideas to be known to others, and how does she want to be seen? As a result, I have to indicate how

⁶⁵ Zablocki 2002, *Methodological Fallacies in Anthony's Critique of Exit Cost Analysis* (<http://www.rci.rutgers.edu/~zablocki/>)

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Grimes, 2002, pp.303-305

⁶⁸ Ibid., p.144

⁶⁹ Grimes 2006, p.14

⁷⁰ Smart, p.10

KKA Kalarippayat is embedded within and related to Keralan society, and how she deals with non-Keralan people.

I want to formulate the purpose of this research as follows:

- What are the ideas behind Kalarippayat?
- How is it possible that people who are doing a kind of 'sport', become 'adherents' to an implicit philosophy, just by practicing this 'sport'? ⁷¹
- What makes Kalarippayat attractive to her 'adherents'?
- How does the KKA *kalari* present herself (local and inter-local)?
- How is Kalarippayat embedded in Keralan society?
- What are the different rituals and rites involved in KKA Kalarippayat?
- Is the Kalarippayat of the KKA *kalari* a cult or even a religious system?

The framework I will use to answer these questions and to order and interpret the information from my sources is a model which has three degrees of freedom. ⁷² One is to relate the data to a chosen scene (background). The second degree of freedom is the component of time: when giving a description of a cultural phenomenon, one should bear in mind that the appearance and/or meaning of this phenomenon changes with time. The third degree of freedom relates to the choices one has to discuss a relationship.

Regarding the first degree of freedom –the choice of scope or scene (background)– I will limit this research to one *kalari* (gym), the one in which I trained and lived for such a long time, the KKA *kalari* located in the village of Puttiyateru, near Kannur (Cannanore). In this way I am familiar with its ins and outs and with the teacher. Some of the people who train in that *kalari* became friends, so I came to know them quite well. This means that the first and most important scope is to relate Kalarippayat to the *kalari*-scene, with its *gurukkal*, students, and other related people. Then I will show the similarities between Kalarippayat and other local arts, and that certain habits of the Keralan people have found their way into the *kalari*. The third scope is to place Kalarippayat in the context of the state, especially how the art is promoted by the Keralan government.

The second degree of freedom follows from acknowledging that the scene (and the actors and acts) is subject to historical development. This brings about a time depending factor. In order to analyze the 'society' of KKA Kalarippayat I will take one moment in history and a status quo of a scope as reference point. Then I will determine how things have changed during a period in history. My long stay, and the fact that I returned to the place several times, gave me the opportunity to follow the development of the KKA Kalarippayat institution itself over a longer period. To indicate the precise status of time related observations and experiences, I speak of 'Oral Transmission Periods'. These refer to my stays in Kerala, which extended over the following periods:

⁷¹ The government of the state of Kerala promotes Kalarippayat as a sport (cf. chapter 6.5.2)

⁷² The term 'degree of freedom' is borrowed from the natural sciences, where it is used to indicate the freedom of choice within a model. An example is that an object can be put at a certain (chosen) place at a certain (chosen) point in time, or that the object itself changes with time (like in the case of a phase transition). Within the natural sciences such degrees of freedom are expressed by so-called 'coordinates'. Often the x, y, and z coordinates refer to the place of an object, and the t coordinate refers to the time dependency of that object. I have used the expression 'degree of freedom' in order to give a more mathematical approach to our model.

- Period I : January 15, 1996 – March 31, 1998
- Period II : July 17, 1999 – September 28, 1999
- Period III : December 6, 2002 – February 25, 2003

Earlier I showed that Kalarippayat could be seen as a ‘ritual’. But what is meant by the ‘ritual Kalarippayat’? Is the art an sich a ‘ritual’, or is Kalarippayat a set of ‘rituals’ and ‘rites’, including or excluding the art as a ‘ritual’? If a KKA practitioner says to perform Kalarippayat, than this usually refers to the body movements of Kalarippayat. But if he speaks of Kalarippayat, the practitioner means the body movements and the ideas (philosophy) behinds those body movements. In order to clear this linguistic problem, I distinguish several different rituals, which are performed in the KKA *kalari*:

1. Rituals for starting the (daily) practice
2. The practice itself
3. Rituals for stopping the (daily) practice
4. Rituals for accepting a new student to the *kalari*
5. Periodic rituals, associated with the ‘study’ year of the *kalari*
6. Periodic rituals, associated with the progress of the practitioner

These rituals constitute the KKA *kalari* practice as it is today. There are different levels of knowledge in the *kalari*, distinguishing senior and junior students. To a certain degree this creates a hierarchy in the *kalari*. This hierarchy becomes more evident when one considers the ‘martial lineage’, which starts with the relationship between student and teacher, and is, supposedly, rooted in a divine source. Bell calls this idea ‘ritualization’. ‘Ritualization’ is “a way of acting that tends to promote the authority of forces deemed to derive from beyond the immediate situation.”⁷³ The *gurukkal* legitimates his authority through semi-historical tales and his claim of divine origin of the art. He uses this to “construct and inscribe power relationships”, as Bell writes, legitimized by the ‘martial lineage’.⁷⁴ There is a group of students, so there are several student-teacher relationships. Thus the people training in the KKA *kalari* are a small community. This brings us to the third way to analyze my data: the identification and determination of social relations. The relations between the people of the KKA *kalari* are mainly determined by the existence of the hierarchy in the KKA *kalari*. The hierarchy of the KKA *kalari* derives its authority from a divine source. The teachings of the KKA *kalari* advocate a certain philosophy and a certain way of life, and these ideas are expressed through and imbedded in sets of rites and rituals. These sets of rites and rituals have a different meaning for each follower, i.e. it is reinterpreted, depending on the state of self development and the religious background of that follower. The highest authority of the cult is the *gurukkal*, who guides his students through the interpretation of the rituals and Kalarippayat philosophy. The KKA is the organization built around the KKA *kalari*. The members of the KKA can be considered as a community, following the ideas of the Kalarippayat of the KKA *kalari*.

The KKA has relationships with people outside its *kalari* as well, such as with the local population and with people who are not from Kerala. Most of the relationships that play a role in the KKA are mentioned in the diagram in figure 0.1. This diagram should illustrate the set-up of the KKA. When we have a look at

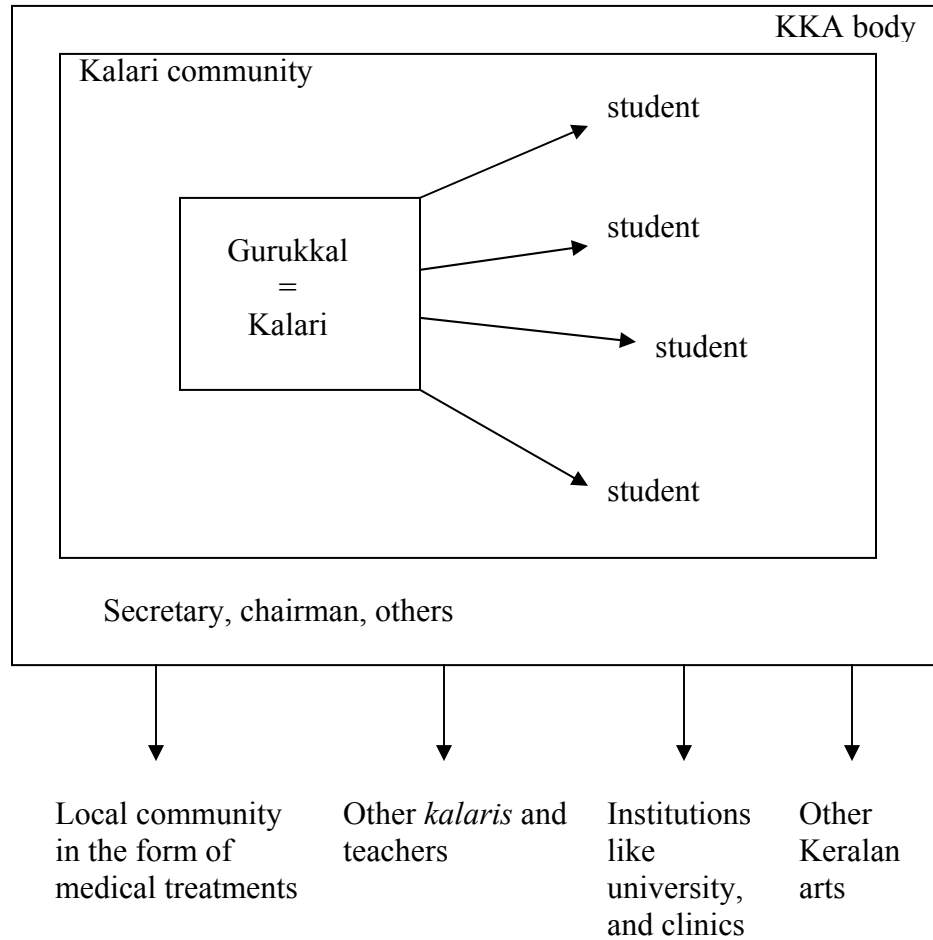
⁷³ Ibid., p.82

⁷⁴ Ibid., p.83

the picture, we notice how the institution as a whole pivots around the teacher. Others flock around him, and have different kinds of relationships with him.

From figure 0.1 we can see that there are two types of relationships: internal relationships and external relationships. The internal relationships reflect the internal (social) presentation of the art, while the external relationships deal with

Figure 0.1: Schedule of the relations of KKA *kalari*



the interactions between the Kalarippayat institution and the ‘world’, the ‘face’ of the KKA. The internal and external relations are:

Internal:

1. The art of Kalarippayat and the *gurukkal* (teacher). This is basically the relationship between the teacher and his predecessors, and in a certain sense his relationship with ‘God’, since the martial art is supposed to have a divine origin. This relationship forms the corpus of the art itself.
2. The *gurukkal* and his student. This relationship is more dynamic, because it is this relationship that forms the basis of transmission of knowledge. The teacher and his students together form what I will call the *kalari* community.
3. The students among each other.
4. *Kalari* community and the staff of the organization. The staff consists of volunteers, friends of Kalarippayat who are responsible for the finances,

organization of games, etc. The teacher, students, and those volunteers form what I will refer to as the KKA body.

External:

1. KKA and the local community. The local community benefits most from Kalarippayat when they use the medical facilities the art provides.
2. KKA and other *kalaris*. There are contacts with other *kalaris*, not only for games, but also for the exchange of knowledge, and the organization of seminars for teachers.
3. KKA and other institutions. The KKA tries to stimulate connections with other institutions. This can be in the area of sport, international and national. The KKA also pays attention to people related to the KKA working in useful positions. This helps the KKA to keep its status as an official institution under the ministry of cultural affairs in Delhi.
4. KKA and other Keralan arts. The KKA tries to see Kalarippayat as part of the cultural heritage of Kerala. The KKA promotes the exchange of knowledge with teachers of the other arts and the participation in cultural symposiums.

6. Method

By focusing on the KKA *kalari* I intend to discuss the meaning of Kalarippayat in correlation with its settings on the one hand and the practice and teachings of the martial art on the other hand. To obtain the necessary information I have followed the method of 'participant observation', as it has been established by scholars like Bronislaw Malinowski, Edward Evans-Pritchard, and Margaret Mead: I will participate in the rituals fulfilling not only a role as a participant, but also with the intention of an observant. Furthermore I have extended the basis of information by talks with students and teachers, and by studying the existing literature.

Since my teacher has passed the martial art of Kalarippayat on to me, I myself have experienced her teachings. Thus I look at the art through the eyes of an 'insider'. Moreover, I have lived and practiced with local students, and during my research periods I participated in many (important) events of their lives.

I have obtained my information from the following sources:

1. observations
2. teachings
3. interviews (or better: talks)
4. existing literature

Observations

With observations I mean what I have seen and experienced during my stays in Kerala.

Teachings

The KKA *kalari* aims to re-educate her students. With teachings I mean those subjects, which are used to accomplish this re-education.

Interviews

Besides generally available information, the basis of my presentation consists primarily of my own observations and experiences. My main informant is the KKA

gurukkal, who is the central and most important figure of the KKA *kalari*. I cannot always name exactly when I obtained a certain piece of information, since the teaching is such that the student will gradually come to know the information. This idea was a major obstacle in this research, because the teachers I have met refused to give any information at once. This is the reason why I was not able to take complete interviews with those teachers. On questions from my side they typically would smile, and mysteriously say “you will come to know this only when you have progressed enough”. They expected me to notice information which they would say casually, without indicating that they were saying something important. They left me no option than to be alert on any kind of information they would provide me at any moment. Therefore I have chosen to use ‘the method of the notebook’, which means that I have recorded what I have seen, heard, and done, in order to be able to reflect upon these. As a consequence the information given by one person is divided over several chapters (representing different subjects) of this research.

The second group of informants was my fellow students. I have tried to interview several of them, in order to catch their way of thinking, and their reasons why they chose to practice Kalarippayat. I noticed however that their answers were reflecting the ideas and opinion of the KKA teacher. For this reason I concentrated on their behaviour and activities, and recorded remarks and events in which students were involved. As I will do with the teachers, I will use (in general) the above-mentioned ‘method of the notebook’ to capture their sayings. Because I have no interviews in the classic (methodological) sense of the word, I prefer to indicate ‘interviews’ with ‘talks’.⁷⁵

Existing literature

Existing literature is the to me available books on the subject of Kalarippayat. I have also used a number of websites, available when typing ‘kalarippayat’ or ‘kalarippayattu’ in the search engine www.google.com. This provides the reader with numerous sites on the subject. By far most of these sites are written by students of the CVN *kalari*, the *kalari* from which Philip Zarrilli, one of the main authors on the subject, has taken his information. The CVN related websites contain usually the same photographic material and an enumeration of the subjects for practice. The most extensive information on CVN Kalarippayat can be found at <http://www.kalarippayat.com> and Zarrilli’s websites <http://www.spa.ex.ac.uk/drama/staff/kalari> and <http://www.phillipzarrilli.com>.

Apart from the CVN related websites, there are only a few sites providing more extensive information. An example is P.R. Suresh’ website <http://www.palmlandtours.net/kerala/tours/kalari/kalaripayatte/kalari.htm>. In general I have taken this thesis only those websites into account, which provide authentic materials.⁷⁶

In order to give the collected information coherence, I have used a model. I have suggested a model which comprises three degrees of freedom, namely, the freedom in choosing a scene, the freedom of choosing a timeframe, and as for the freedom of the relationships we intend to consider. These three components are interrelated and complementary to each other, because the choice of scene

⁷⁵ In order to protect the privacy of some of my informants, and to prevent any bad consequences coming from revealing some of the information presented, I have chosen in several cases not to mention any names.

⁷⁶ i.e. that the information can not to be found on other websites

incorporates a choice of date, and the chosen relationship should always be discussed against a certain scene. In order to study the time dependency of the subject, it seems to me best to give a description the phenomenon at a certain date (in our case during a certain period), and then to look at the same phenomenon at another date (or period). I was able to use three time-depending reference points, referring to the three periods of my stay in Kerala.

According to the model we have to choose a scene (the background) against which we should explain our subject. The information on a particular scene was taken primarily from the mentioned observations, teachings, and interviews (talks). When comparable information was available in literature, I have placed the latter next to my own data.

7. The chapters

According to my observations, KKA Kalaripayat consists of five parts. Whereas each of these components or parts provides a particular perspective, they assume different meanings, because and inasmuch as they relate to several backgrounds of Kalaripayat, providing their own scopes for the study. These parts are:

1. The teacher and his 'martial lineage' (*sampradayam*)
2. The teacher (*gurukkal*) as a representation of the divine source of the art
3. The actual training within the *kalari* (gym)
4. The medical theory and practice of Kalaripayat
5. The spiritual development of the practitioner

Each of these five components corresponds with a chapter of the same number. These chapters should give an idea of KKA Kalaripayat and her different aspects.

The first chapter aims to look at the art itself. The art is the art as it is, according to its 'tradition', because since ancient mythical times it has been handed down from teacher to student, down to the present day.⁷⁷ The art has been molded, as it were, by all the previous people in the lineage who have been teaching it and who have been, literally, living it. It is this supposed heritage through which the KKA *gurukkal* legitimates his authority. Therefore I will start with some legends and general stories belonging to the 'martial lineage' (*sampradayam*) of the KKA *kalari*. Some of these legends and stories are Keralan folk tales and are known throughout the state. They form the basis on which the tradition or lineage (*sampradayam*) is built. The stories also explain why Kalaripayat, as it is taught in the *kalari* I trained in, is as it is. Furthermore, I will also discuss the central ideas behind the movements of the art. This will not only give an understanding of how the art itself works, but also how Kalaripayat has been transmitted. The purpose of the first chapter, therefore, is to give an idea of the internal dynamics of this Keralan martial tradition.

The second chapter examines the role of the teacher, and describes the rituals expressing the relationship between teacher and student, the very core of the art of Kalaripayat. I will look at how a student is admitted to a school, the reasoning behind this process of admission, and the symbolic gestures accompanying the admittance. The same rituals and symbols are used over and over again in later stages of practice, and may form the glue within the Kalaripayat institution.

In order to get an idea what Kalaripayat is, and how the actual or daily transmission of Kalaripayat works, in the third chapter I will describe a training

⁷⁷ According to the KKA *gurukkal*, in a private conversation, second week of Oral Transmission Period II

session. This chapter starts with the *kalari* itself. The practice itself and the accompanying rituals can only be appreciated if it is preceded by a description of the basis of the art, the building of the *kalari*. I use the *kalari* I trained in as an example.

The fourth chapter is dedicated to Kalaripayat as a medical system. This is part of what gives Kalaripayat a place in Keralan society, because the *gurukkal* often functions as a local doctor. I will show that the medical side of the martial art is an integral part of the theory and philosophical ideas behind Kalaripayat.

The fifth chapter deals with the stages of self-development. I will connect this with some other repeating schemas in the *kalari*, such as the way the *kalari* practice and the *kalari* year are built up.

The description of the KKA *kalari* is not complete yet. In chapter six I will investigate the different relationships within the KKA *kalari* and within the KKA as a social institution. We will look at the place and task of the chairman, the secretary, the teacher, and the students, and the *kalari sampradayam* iconized in the different altars.

Apart from the relationships within the organization of the KKA, other relationships are important for our research. The KKA as an institution is not a closed entity; she has relationships with the world around her. These relationships have something to say about the place of the KKA within that surrounding world, or, in other words, the place of the KKA within a scope or a scene. In chapter six I want to place Kalaripayat within the society of Kerala by discussing the relationships of the KKA with the youth of Kerala, the government of Kerala, the different religions of Kerala, and Kerala's medical aid system. Next, I want to show the place of the KKA among other *kalaris*, other (non-Kalaripayat) institutions, and art schools.

Chapter six treats all relationships of the KKA, internal and external, which I have identified in figure 0.1.

The six chapters give a description of KKA Kalaripayat against several scopes (backgrounds). According to our theoretical framework, we should also discuss the existence of a hierarchy within the *kalari*, a task for which we have made a preparation in the chapters one, two, and six. Building on this information, I will show in chapter seven the working of the hierarchy in the *kalari* and the system of (KKA) Kalaripayat.

The second task we need to carry out, according to our theoretical framework, is to acknowledge that Kalaripayat has a time depending factor. I will show, in chapter seven, the changes within the KKA over several years.

1. The Sampradayam

In Kerala the Sanskrit words *sampradayam* ('tradition', 'established doctrine transmitted from one teacher to another')⁷⁸ and *parampara* ('one following the other', 'successively')⁷⁹ are used to indicate a transmission of a tradition, which involves a relationship between a student and a master of that particular tradition. In the case of the martial art Kalarippayat, the most common word used is *sampradayam*. *Sampradayam* refers to the lineage of a particular Kalarippayat style, and to the style itself. Thus the Arappukai substyle of Kalarippayat is usually called Arappukai *sampradayam*, which means 'the martial art according to the Arappukai lineage'.

A *kalari gurukkal* ('teacher', 'master' of Kalarippayat) uses the lineage of his teachers, the *sampradayam*, to legitimize the martial art he is teaching. Typically the lineage consists of a reference to one, two or three directly preceding teachers, a reference to certain persons who played a role in the legendary past of that particular *sampradayam*, and a reference to the mythical origin of Kalarippayat in general. In general, a Kalarippayat *sampradayam* consist of the following items:

- body movements, which are meant to be used in combat
- the philosophy behind the body movements: interpretation of the body movements for their use in combat
- the mystical interpretation of the body movements, indicating a path (of life) leading towards the divine
- the history of that *sampradayam*, interpreted within the tradition and viewed through the eyes of the tradition: the history of the *sampradayam* is real in the eyes of its followers
- a system for medical treatment
- the place of the divine and the gurukkal within the *sampradayam*

In this chapter I focus on the *sampradayam* of the KKA gurukkal. Since the KKA gurukkal was teaching several of those *sampradayam* – he fused several lineages together into one – I will cover those lineages on which he based his particular system.

The KKA teaches a *sampradayam* called Gurukkal Akattu, named after the maternal grandfather of the KKA gurukkal, who was training the Muslim forces at the court of the raja of Chirakkal. The *sampradayam* that the KKA gurukkal started with, the Gurukkal Akattu tradition, came to include several family styles throughout his lifetime.

In general, as we will see, Kalarippayat is divided into three main groups, the Northern Style, the Southern Style, and the Central Style. These groups refer to certain family styles that share particular fighting concepts – that is, concepts regarding the method of warfare.⁸⁰

The backbone of the Gurukkal Akattu system consists of three main parts, referring to the three branches of Kalarippayat mentioned above. The northern

⁷⁸ Monier-Williams, *Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, Kessinger Publishing, Whitefish (USA), 2004 (on internet available via the <http://webapps.uni-koeln.de/tamil>)

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ On the word 'concept' see paragraph 1.1 of this chapter.

branch Kalarippayat, as it is taught at the KKA, is made up of the Arappukai style, and major parts of several other northern traditions. The southern tradition of the KKA is based on one particular family style, and the central branch is mainly based on the Kalarippayat of the grandfather of the KKA teacher, with some additions from several other Central Style teachers.

In the next sections I will discuss the history of Kalarippayat as it is taught in the KKA *kalari*. By this I mean not so much the historical outlines of the art and the Kerala region, but the more legendary aspect of its history, i.e. the history as it is seen within the tradition. The official version of Kalarippayat's past is inextricably bound up with the history of the state Kerala itself. This story can be found in many other books.⁸¹ Here I will focus on what a teacher of Kalarippayat – in particular the KKA teacher – would say when he was asked about the origin of his art. Most of these stories are known by many Keralis as well,⁸² and the teacher uses these specifically to legitimate his lineage or tradition (*sampradayam*). This makes these stories very important for our purpose. Usually the history of the *sampradayam* is a mix of legend, historical facts, and the teacher's personal memories. That should not be read as a memory of an event in the life of the teacher, necessarily but can also be understood as a memory of an event in the life of one of the past teachers in the lineage of the present-day teacher.

The purpose of this chapter is to map the lineage of each of the *sampradayam* taught at the KKA, starting from the legendary past of Kalarippayat in general to the direct teachers of the KKA gurukkal. In addition, I will explain the ideas behind Kalarippayat, and specify these ideas for each *sampradayam*. First I will start off by introducing two terms which are used repeatedly by the KKA gurukkal during his lessons: the terms '(martial) concept' and 'technique'. The meaning of these two terms form the backbone of the Kalarippayat taught at the KKA *kalari*.

1.1 General ideas behind Kalarippayat in general: 'concepts' and 'techniques'

Initially, in the KKA *kalari*, Kalarippayat is taught by learning and practicing forms. A form is a set of movements performed in sequence. Each form has its own specifics and therefore shows a different aspect of Kalarippayat. These aspects are not only limited to the use of a variety of weapons, but they also teach certain combinations of movements, how to increase awareness in battle, body flexibility, breath control, fluency of body movement, controlling the body, endurance, and a certain way of automatic reaction, or 'instinctive movement' of the body, and so on.

The movements of the form are designed in such a way that they show 'concepts' rather than specific fighting 'techniques' (*adavu*). The principle behind

⁸¹ Cf. Zarrilli (1998: 24-60). In chapter 2 of his book Zarrilli tries to give an historical analysis of Kalarippayat. In my view he sometimes covers certain aspects a bit too briefly. It is, however, one of the most complete overviews. Menon gives an account of the most famous legends of the Keralan heroes, mostly taken from a group of poetical epics, called the Northern Ballads (*vadakkan pattukal*), which were originally transmitted orally. Almost any history book on Kerala has one or two chapters dedicated to the martial art. Other books, that give some details on the history of Kalarippayat are *Kalarippayattu* by Balakrishnan (first three chapters), and *Kalarippayattu* by Kurup and Varier (Kurup and Varier, unknown: 1-9).

⁸² This is based on my experience with the Keralis I met. In the bookshops of Malabar I saw many story books, containing these legendary tales, for children and adults alike.

this is to teach the student not to think about which techniques to use in combat, but to encourage spontaneous movement, which is a kind of instinctive reaction to the movements of an opponent.

The KKA teacher introduced the word 'concept' and a distinction between the words 'concept' and 'technique' into his teachings in order to clarify the ideas behind the art.⁸³ The word 'concept' and this distinction are used by no other Kalaripayat teachers,⁸⁴ as far as I know, except for the students of the KKA teacher. The reason for introducing this was that the KKA teacher wanted to create an international vocabulary to explain some of his ideas of Kalaripayat. This introduction became a necessity, according to the KKA gurukkal, because he wanted to internationalize the art of Kalaripayat (see chapter 6), and thus tried to find English words that have the capacity to carry the central ideas behind the art he is teaching. This enables the KKA teacher to compare these ideas with other martial arts, like Karate and Kung Fu. Internationally, the word 'technique' is to be understood as a certain way to attack or defend, such as a lock or a hold, a specific punch or kick.⁸⁵ In this entire research the words 'concept' and 'technique' are to be understood as the KKA teacher intended them, unless otherwise stated. In order to make it clear that I am writing about such a 'concept', I will use the term 'martial concept', if possible.

In order to explain the difference between 'martial concept' and 'technique', as the KKA gurukkal explained this difference to me, let's take an example. Imagine the following situation:⁸⁶ you have a fight with an opponent. At a certain moment you want to throw a fist. Technically, the throwing of a fist consists of two phases, starting with extending your arm. The extension of the arm is a movement which ends at a certain point (the finishing phase). This point is the moment of impact, the contact moment between the fighter and his opponent. However, according to the KKA teacher, a fight is never static, it is highly dynamic, because movements follow on each other rapidly. This means that if I want to hit somebody, I will not be able to predict if my blow will arrive at the point I want it to arrive. Suppose I aim at the face of my opponent, but this person ducks, then there will be no impact, or I will hit the person at a spot I was not intending to hit. At this moment, based on the failure of my intended action, my opponent can take advantage of this failure and set in a counter attack. According to the KKA gurukkal, this is a very undesirable situation from the point of view of a martial artist, or any fighter. I want to control my opponent, as well as all the events related to the fight, at all times. How can a martial artist remain in control, even though his action has failed? Kalaripayat, according to the KKA teacher, answers as follows.

⁸³ The word 'concept' is a free translation of the Malayalam word *murai*, which actually means 'a way of doing'. Source: KKA gurukkal.

⁸⁴ Examples are some of the Kalaripayat teachers related to the KKA gurukkal, such as Sri Jayan Gurukkal and Chandrashekar Gurukkal. I know these particular gurukkals very well, and I have seen them teach. Zarrilli, who is was a student of the CVN school (Zarrilli, 1998:5) never mentions these words, or words with similar meaning, in the articles and book on Kalaripayat, that I read (see Bibliography).

⁸⁵ See any book on any martial art. Good examples are the books of Paladin Press, a publisher whose aim it is to publish practical 'how to' guides on martial arts. See, for example, the usage of the word 'technique' throughout the book of T. Gambordella, *100 deadliest karate moves*, Paladin Press, Boulder, 1982. Other examples can be found in any issue of one of the most important magazines on martial arts, *Black Belt Magazine*, Palm Coast (USA).

⁸⁶ The KKA used this example several times during Oral Transmission Periods I, II, and III.

The KKA gurukkal stated that Kalaripayat tells its practitioners that the two phases of an action, in our example the extension of the arm and the moment of impact, are definitely separate, having different functions. The extension of the arm is called a 'martial concept', while the performance of the impact is called a 'technique'.

The KKA gurukkal told me repeatedly that the difference between a 'martial concept' and a 'technique' is even broader than just using the right application at the moment of impact. A 'technique' in its broadest sense is the interpretation of a 'martial concept', which depends on the situation in which the 'martial concept' is performed. The situation provides the external factors that determine the resulting 'technique' used in the 'martial concept'. A 'technique' is worked out, while a 'martial concept' is still in search of a 'technique'. This means that one 'martial concept' can change into just one of many different 'techniques'. A 'technique' is therefore borne of a 'martial concept'; it is an interpretation of that concept, which is determined by external factors, such as the movements and reactions of an opponent, and the environment in which the fight is held. Kalaripayat forms (any of the Kalaripayat forms) tell you to perform a 'conceptual' movement, like extending the arm, but not what position the hand should be kept in during the final phase, for example, representing the impact or result of the movement on the opponent. The advantage is that the 'technique' – which is done during the final phase – can be changed at any time, and depends greatly on the circumstances of the fight; it takes its shape from conditions created by the situation. If the opponent ducks away from your fist, but you keep your thumb of your hand in a hook, maybe he can be hooked in the eyeball or behind a muscle on another part of his body.

When practicing one of the Kalaripayat forms, the hands are always kept open, with the fingers closed and the thumb separated from the rest of the fingers. During the final phase the open hand can change into a fist or a chopping hand or any other hand position. As I have said, the hand position depends on the situation. It is therefore useless to practice the forms with a fist, for example, because you would not know if this would be the right application for a specific moment in the fight. Again, in the martial art it is acknowledged that a fight always shifts its direction of attack, so nobody can predict which technique would be the best in that particular situation.

All styles of Kalaripayat (the central, southern, or the northern system) teach only natural and fluent body movements (called 'concepts'), which, when used in a fight, flow into a specific technique applicable to that specific situation. The extension of an arm with the hand open can flow into a fist, but an elbow or even the shoulder could be used instead of the fist as well, as long as the direction of movement and the flow of the body (which is a certain fluidity of movement obtained after many years of practice, and which is recognized by the 'ease' with which a practitioner is able to perform the forms, indicated in Malayalam as *olukku* or 'flow') is kept intact.

A 'martial concept', given by the Kalaripayat tutorial forms, is defined by the direction of movement and its flow. As I explained previously, the concept of extending the arm can have different interpretations, i.e. the use of an elbow or shoulder instead of a complete arm, as long as the direction of and flow within the movement is maintained. This can be applied to the use of weapons as well, because weapons are, according to Kalaripayat, an extension of the body (usually the arm, because weapons are in general kept in the hands). The result

of this idea is that all forms taught by Kalarippayat can be used as empty-hand applications or as a way of wielding a weapon⁸⁷. That means, according to the KKA teacher, that though the *meippayat* is a preparatory empty-hand form, it can be changed easily into a form using sword and shield, for example. Conversely one can say that the Northern Style weapon forms can easily be done without the use of any weapon.

According to the teachings of the KKA teacher, focusing is another very important asset of Kalarippayat. A practitioner should focus on the opponent (or on one point on the body of the opponent) or, when practicing *meippayat*, focus on a point straight in front of the practitioner, such as the opposite wall. To focus, as the KKA teacher puts it, causes an increase in concentration. It also gives control over the brain. When fighting, it is very undesirable to bring up associations or worries. This diverts the attention from the action in the present moment, exposing you to the danger of being struck or hit by the opponent. The KKA teacher repeatedly stated that even to have emotions during a fight can be fatal, for the same reason. Hatred, grief and fear are the most effective way to lose a fight. They make a fighter tremble and decrease his attention. Movements should be done fluently, without effort, but emotions make the body rigid. According to the philosophy of Kalarippayat, focusing is one of the main tools to prevent associations and becoming emotional. This does not mean a fighter should see only one point; he should be aware of his greater surroundings, and notice any movement around him. One point focus is seeing one point, while its environment revolves, as it were, around that point; but that environment still remains clearly visible.

The idea of (body) movement itself, within the philosophy of Kalarippayat, is to contract the body while moving towards the opponent, and extend the body when the actual attack takes place. This is the reason why a lot of low postures are used, especially in Northern Style Kalarippayat. This principle can be found from the *meippayat* (long and ardent empty-hand forms; the basis of Northern Style Kalarippayat, see next sections) to the most advanced weapon forms. The KKA teacher taught me that the complete movement, from contracting to expanding the body, starts with focus. Because of the contracting and expanding movement of the body, the fighter is able to rush into the body of the opponent, using his *pranic* force.⁸⁸ The *pranic* or life force is the energy flowing through the body. At this point I want to refer to the word 'flow', which I have defined above as 'a certain fluidity of movement obtained after many years of practice, and which is recognized by the 'ease' with which a practitioner is able to perform the forms'. The latter is a good definition for the visible aspect of that flow. Within the KKA Kalarippayat tradition, flow ultimately equates with the *pranic* force.⁸⁹ If a practitioner performs the movements of the Kalarippayat forms in a fluent fashion, his *pranic* force will run freely through his body, making his movements convincing, which in turn strengthens the movement. As a result, the effect of the impact of the interpretation of that movement (the 'technique') on the opponent increases as well.

To summarize, we have seen some of the central ideas of the art of Kalarippayat:

⁸⁷ In the world of martial arts the term 'empty-hand fighting' is used for bare hand fighting. Following this agreement, I will do the same throughout this research.

⁸⁸ See also chapter 5

⁸⁹ In the interpretation of the KKA gurukkal, as he told me during the KKA *kalari* practice

- A movement taught within the forms of Kalaripayat is called a 'martial concept'. Depending on the circumstances, the 'martial concept' changes into a 'technique' applicable to that situation. A 'technique' is a possible interpretation of a 'martial concept'.
- A concept is defined by the direction of movement and its flow, the direction in which the *pranic* energy flows.
- Kalaripayat teaches that focusing increases the chances of a good result from a fighting action. It increases the fluidity of movement; i.e. it is said to increase the amount of *pranic* force that can be used.
- When the body moves toward an opponent (or actually toward the 'end' of that body movement, the 'technique'), the body should be contracted; at the moment of impact the body should be extended.

According to the KKA teacher, each (collection of) movement(s) done within the forms is a 'martial concept', which provides a basic framework for how to deal with an opponent. This basic framework can be used at any time. It provides information on how to move, in which direction, and toward which direction the *pranic* force is targeted. The situation provides the conditions for the interpretation of that 'martial concept'. As soon as the 'martial concept' is interpreted, it changes into a 'technique'. Focusing increases *pranic* force used by a concept. This *pranic* force is said to be released at the moment of impact on the opponent. The stated advantages of such an idea are that one does not have to worry about which is the right 'technique' to perform in a fight. The KKA gurukkal says that this kind of concern distracts the fighter from his main goal: to survive the fight and/or to eliminate the opponent. Kalaripayat tells her followers to just perform the learned concepts; techniques will follow automatically. This way of fighting increases 'spontaneous movement', the 'instinctive' reaction to a particular situation.

2. Kalaripayat divided into three different branches

The KKA *kalari* teaches the three main branches of Kalaripayat, the Northern Style, the Central Style, and the Southern Style. This division of Kalaripayat into these three branches is recent. It was introduced by Sreedharan Nayar in 1963 in his book *Kalarippattu*.⁹⁰ Before this date, or at least in the 19th and 20th centuries, the word 'Kalaripayat' indicated the total collection of martial systems, or the individual members of this collection, practiced within certain Keralan families. One can say that the word 'Kalaripayat', during roughly the last century, was the general term for a Keralan fighting system.⁹¹

Sreedharan Nayar realized that there are definite similarities between certain family systems. Looking at the ideas and fighting concepts behind those family systems, he recognized that they could be divided into three main branches.⁹² He named them after the region in which they occurred. Thus we find in the north of Kerala the northern styles, in central Kerala the central styles, and in southern Kerala the southern styles. There are some authors who have argued that the nomenclature is ill-chosen though, because looking at the current situation one can find many northern style schools in the south and vice versa.⁹³ Even the argument that each style could possibly be traced back to one of the three areas

⁹⁰ Sreedharan Nayar, pp. 9-11

⁹¹ Sreedharan Nayar, pp. 9-11; Zarrilli, 1998, p.27

⁹² The 'martial concepts' discussed in paragraph 2, as well as the basic ideas behind the art

⁹³ Zarrilli, 1998, p.27 et seq.

in the remote past does not hold, since Sreedharan Nayar himself remarks that a northern style system existed (and probably originated) in the deep south of Kerala. This system was called *dronamballi* and is now extinct.⁹⁴ The tripartition cannot be made on basis of caste either, because, according to the KKA teacher, in Malabar families belonging to different castes were practicing Northern Kalarippayat. However, the division into three branches works very well if we consider that the three styles representing three different types of warriors, as I will show in the following paragraphs.

Since the division into three branches of Kalarippayat is in common use today to indicate the different styles of the art, I will use that division.⁹⁵

The KKA *kalari* teaches all three branches of Kalarippayat, and therefore we should have a look at the main stories associated with those styles, as told within the KKA system.

3. Northern Tradition (*vadakkan sampradayam*)

3.1 Vedic times

The KKA teacher believes that the Northern Styles Kalarippayat were deduced from a fighting style practiced in the legendary times of the Vedas.⁹⁶ He told me that the oldest text that refers to this martial art is the Dhanur Veda.⁹⁷ The Dhanur Veda is a part of one of India's sacred texts, the Agni Purana.⁹⁸ The text covers all aspects of Indian martial arts: spear fighting, empty-hand fighting, sword fighting, etc. A common reference made repeatedly by the KKA teacher was to another ancient Indian text, the Vishnu Purana: it would mention the Dhanur Veda as one of the traditional 18 branches of knowledge.⁹⁹

It should be noted that those practices and traditions that are supposed to have an Aryan origin (and consequently come from the north of India) are held in more esteem than local practices and traditions. This idea is very clearly present within the northern systems of Kalarippayat as well, because the KKA gurukkal stressed over and over again the brahmanic origin of and influence on those systems.¹⁰⁰ In this light it is very natural that those people who represent the northern tradition refer to sacred texts like the Puranas to back up their claims.

3.2 Aryans and Dravidians

Thousands of years before Christ, wild Aryan tribes conquered northern India. At first surprised by their dazzling battle techniques, the indigenous people of India, the Dravidians, were pushed back to the south of the sub-continent. However, the Dravidians re-established themselves by developing a martial art which they used for a counter-offensive. This worked: a truce was reached. The Aryan way of fighting developed into those styles of Kalari included in the

⁹⁴ Zarrilli, 1998, p.27; Sreedharan Nayar, p.11

⁹⁵ The KKA *kalari* claims that she teaches each of these three styles as well

⁹⁶ Oral Transmission Period I

⁹⁷ The 'Veda of the Bow'

⁹⁸ Chapters 249-252; the Dhanur Veda is considered to be one of the five Upavedas.

⁹⁹ KKA teacher, Oral Transmission Period I and II; Zarrilli (1998: 33)

¹⁰⁰ This means that there is a contradiction within the KKA tradition: although on one hand the KKA teacher is convinced that Kalarippayat in general is a local, Keralan tradition, on the other hand he stresses the brahmanic origin of the northern systems, in particular. Culturally the people of the south tend to be a mirror image of the traditions and systems from the north: Clothey (1978: 60, 73-74, 89), for example, mentions that the South Indian kings tried to base their kingship on northern structures.

¹⁰¹ This story I have found to be a classic one among many Keralis from Malabar (especially those people who were connected to the KKA kalari, and the non-*kalari* people with whom I was very well acquainted during my stays in Kerala). However, I think it is unlikely that we will find the origin of the Northern Systems in northern India, though martial traditions of the north may have influenced Kalarippayat. There are several reasons to support this assumption. We should be aware that the present day strength of the martial traditions in South Indian states such as Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Karnataka – and the lack of such strength in North India may be an indication of the existence of a martial tradition before brahmanic influence gained importance in those areas (although there are some northern martial art systems still existing, such as Gatka of the Sikh and Manipuri's Thang-ta. See, for example, <http://winstonstableford.com/Indian.html>. This site offers a collection of links to sites on Indian martial arts). When studying early South Indian culture some points may give a clue to this hypothesis. Shulman (1980: 91, 92) mentions that blood played an important role in the culture of the people of South India. Blood was supposed to contain the life-energy of a person. By pouring blood on the statue of a deity, or by the act of drinking blood, this life-energy of the blood was transferred to the statue or the drinker. Blood was seen as a fertilizer, and new life could be generated from blood: life is born from death. Blood was poured for and associated with the village deities (especially the village goddess) of South India (Whitehead, 1976: 23-32). According to Whitehead, the village goddess was the protectress of the village, and the source of fertility. We see these aspects again in relation to the South Indian warrior. According to Clothey (1978: 48) between the 6th and 10th centuries the warrior was seen as a person upholding the *dharma* (order of the universe). Just as the gods destroyed their counterparts, the *asuras*, the warrior killed his enemy, thus protecting the *dharma*. By the act of killing he made the birth of a new life (or *dharma*) possible: he possessed the same ambivalence as blood did. Furthermore, we can recognize the blood-thirsty village goddess in the presence of the *kalari* goddess inside the *kalari*, embodied by the *puttara*, the chief altar of the *kalari* (cf. chapter 2.3). In South India similar goddesses referred to victory in battle, like the patron deity of the kings of Mysore, Chamundi, which is still venerated in the Chamundi Hill Temple, situated 3 km southeast of the city (I was there in the summer of 1997). Shulman (1980: 91, 92) points out a connection between fertility, death, and war: the act of making war can be viewed as an act of fertility, a starting point for the generation of new life (a new 'order'). The veneration of the warrior is also stressed by Zarrilli (1994: 14), who states that "the importance of the martial hero in the Sangam Age is evident in the deification of fallen heroes through the planting of hero-stones (*virakkal*; or *natukal*, 'planted stones') which were inscribed with the name of the hero and his valorous deeds and worshipped by the common people of the locality." He further states that young men were stimulated to become warriors because of the honor, and that "each warrior received regular military training in target practice, and horse riding, and specialized in the use of one or more of the important weapons of the period, including lance or spear (*vel*), sword (*val*) and shield (*kedaham*), bow and arrow." There is more evidence from Tamil classic literature (*cankam* or *sangam* literature). Literary texts dated 1st century BC-2nd century AD contain many references to the South Indian martial tradition (Zvelebil 1997: 42). According to Zvelebil, "the two main topics of early Tamil poetry are mating and fighting" (Zvelebil 1997: 21). The word *canror* has several meanings: 'warrior', 'the great' (in moral sense), 'the learned' or 'the noble' (Zvelebil 1997: 17). Zvelebil, following Venkataswamy, has difficulties to connect these four meanings. In my opinion, these meanings reflect the character of the ideal warrior, as it is still recognized by Kalarippayat practitioners: a warrior belongs to the upper class of society (he is nobility), he is learned, because he is traditionally supposed to know 64 arts (cf. ch. 1.3.3), and he is a morally great man (cf. ch. 7.2.3, Concl. §3 and §5). An example of the latter is demonstrated in *puram* 311, which states that a warrior should always be ready to help others (Zvelebil 1997: 16). Therefore I suggest that, in line with the South Indian martial tradition, the four meanings of the word *canror* are interchangeable, and refer to the same cultural concept. This shows that there are ideological similarities between the Indian martial tradition of today and in antiquity. In addition to these similarities, some people thought to have found a proof of the existence of Kalarippayat in antiquity because the word 'kalari' is mentioned in early *cankam* literature (e.g. Suresh, <http://www.palmlandtours.net/kerala/tours/kalari/kalaripayatte/kalari.htm>). Herman Tieken, Lecturer Sanskrit and Tamil of the University of Leiden, agrees that the word 'kalari' appears in several *cankam* anthologies (private conversation). However, in the *Natrinaï* (5 times), the *Akananuru* (5 times), and the *Purananuru* (8 times) 'kalari' seems to mean 'brackish ground', and has no reference whatsoever to the act of fighting. In *puram* 237 of the *Pattinappaalai* the word 'kalari' is mentioned several times. In one place it refers to a site where dead bodies were burnt, and in v.59-74 the word 'kalari' is part of a description of a group of noisy people (the group consists of several (family) groups, maybe fishermen) living on sandbanks on the *muram kalari* with old trees. Here the expression 'muram kalari' (v.59) has been interpreted as 'battlefield', but

3.3 Parasurama and the Brahmins

After the Aryans gained power in the north of India, some Brahmins went to South India and settled there. The Brahmin saint Parasurama¹⁰² is regarded as the mythical founder of Kerala. In ancient times he came to Kerala with a group of 3600 fellow-Brahmins. The Brahmins established 32 settlements. Parasurama divided the Brahmins into four groups. Due to his superior knowledge, Parasurama and his friends were able to gain power. Parasurama himself happened to have a very good understanding of the martial arts, despite being a sage. His martial art even had a divine origin, since it was taught to him by no one less than the mighty god Shiva himself.

Parasurama taught each of the four Brahmin groups a specific form of warfare.¹⁰³ Each group founded a learning center for martial art and religious education, called *kalakam*; these *kalakams* were situated in Payyanur, Perinkallur, Parappur, and Chengannur. These four Brahmin groups also formed the basis of the four Nambudiri Brahmin¹⁰⁴ families: Ugram Velli, Ghoram Velli, Ullutturuttiyyat, and Dronam Velli.¹⁰⁵

After Parasurama had taught his disciples, 21 members of these families founded their own training centers (*salai* or *ghatika*). These 21 people were the first masters of the art. Some of their students became masters themselves and established their own *salai*. The total number of *salais* grew to 108.¹⁰⁶ Several present-day *kalaris* are believed to be a continuation of these *salais*. Thus a number of *kalaris* (and their styles) can be directly traced back to ancient times.

The *salais* were not only places where one could learn the fighting arts, but they were very important as a kind of university or center of learning. The curriculum of these schools included religion, healing (*ayurveda*), mathematics, reading, writing, black magic, and acting. Traditionally there were 64 arts a

Tieken does not agree with this. He points out that the word *muram* means ‘to resist’, ‘to hinder’, but he interprets this as an indication that the beach was not a smooth terrain, but full of hillocks and pits. The group of noisy people eat fish and turtle, adorn themselves with flowers, and come together in the *manrattu* (v.69). There (in the *manrattu*) they fight with bare fists and weapons. The *manrattu*, where the fight takes place, is probably situated on the *muram kalari*. But this, according to Tieken, does not mean that the *muram kalari* is the battlefield. Interestingly, the KKA teacher gave me a similar description of the illegal fights of today, where people (noisy and drunk) can gamble on their favorite fighter. Again we may have found a similarity between the warrior traditions of the past and the present, but we cannot be sure of such proof on basis of linguistic evidence. Considering all this, the martial arts of South India are, in my opinion, so deeply intertwined with the culture of its people, and essential to the existence of the South Indian cultures, that the story of brahmanic origin of the art, and of a development caused by an Aryan invasion becomes quite unlikely.

¹⁰² Rama with the Axe (*parasu*), an *avatara* of Vishnu

¹⁰³ See also Balakrishnan, p.13

¹⁰⁴ Nambudiri is the name of the Brahmin caste in Kerala

¹⁰⁵ Ugram Velli: ‘atrocious spear’; Ghoram Velli: ‘horrible spear’; Dronam Velli: ‘Drona’s spear’ (referring to the great martial art master Drona of the Mahabharata)

¹⁰⁶ The story of Parasurama is written down in the Keralan chronicle Keralolpathi, a collection of Keralan myths and legends. There is not one version of this chronicle. In fact the KKA teacher and many other Kalaripayat teachers (and others) possess old manuscripts with an alternative version of the poetry (Cf. Zarrilli, 1998: 32). The most well-known version among the Keralis I have known was the one accredited to the priest Herman Gundert, a German priest who had become famous because he had made the first Malayalam-German dictionary. The script is, as far as I know, only available in Malayalam. Some of the stories about Parasurama can be found in other texts as well, like the Mahabharata, where he vows to kill all kshatriyas of the world twenty one times (book I, ch. 2 and 64). In the Mahabharata he is the teacher of Drona (book I, ch. 131 and 148) and the warrior Karna.

student was expected to learn.¹⁰⁷ The *salais* were under the patronage of the Perumal kings of the Cera Empire.¹⁰⁸

The KKA gurukkal believes that there was a stage of Kalarippayat before the *brahmins* took over power in Kerala. He thinks that the *salais* were originally not *brahmin* schools, but Buddhist (and maybe Jain) schools, founded in the heyday of Buddhism and Jainism in Kerala.¹⁰⁹ The *salais* were, according to the KKA teacher, taken over by Brahmins when the popularity of the other two religions declined. The KKA teacher believes that this is very important, because it provides serious evidence for the hypothesis that Chinese Kung Fu is evolved from the South Indian Kalarippayat. According to the Chinese story an Indian Buddhist monk named Bodhidharma came to China and established the famous Shaolin temple.¹¹⁰ Since the monk came from the south of the Indian subcontinent, where he was educated in one of the big Buddhist centers, it is likely that he came from Kerala, where martial arts and Buddhism were both part of the curriculum of the *salais*.¹¹¹

3.4 Medieval Kerala

In the 11th century Kerala was ruled by a dynasty called the Cera dynasty.¹¹² They were frequently at war with their neighbors, the Colas, the rulers of an area that is now largely Tamil Nadu. Kalarippayat warriors played an important role in these wars. Kerala's middle ages started at the moment when the Cera Empire collapsed. This was probably a result of the exhausting war between the Ceras and the Colas, and due to the pilgrimage of the last Cera emperor, Ceraman Perumal. This emperor became Muslim, and decided to go to Mecca on pilgrimage. Before he went, he divided his royal power into three. The northern part of Kerala, Malabar, he gave to Chirakkal or Kolthiri king. To the king of Venad, who was the ancestor of the Travancore Raja,¹¹³ he left the entire southern part of his realm. The third part, the city of Cochin (Kochi), went to his supposed son, the Perimpatappa king. But the fourth heir would become a source of unrest: the Perumal gave the Zamorin, the hereditary title of the ruler of the city of Kozhikode (present-day Calicut), his own sword, declaring that the amount of land he inherited depended on that sword.¹¹⁴ As we shall see shortly, the Zamorin followed his lord's advice.

¹⁰⁷ The 64 arts are listed in the Monier-Williams dictionary, under *kalā*.

¹⁰⁸ The KKA gurukkal meant the Second Cera Empire (9th-12th century AD) (Zarrilli, 1998: 31)

¹⁰⁹ Around the 8th and 9th century AD (Zarrilli, 1998: 31)

¹¹⁰ This is a well-known myth in the world of martial arts in general, propagated by many other styles of martial arts as well. We should take into consideration that in many Asian countries India is seen as a 'holy' country, and as such it possesses a certain authority. In general, many of the martial arts in Asia refer to a Buddhist past. In most cases a particular martial art is directly related to a Buddhist temple. Many Chinese Kung Fu styles refer to the Emei Mountain or Shaolin Monastery as their place of origin, for example, both of which are Buddhist centers. India is the land of origin of Buddhism, and places like Bodhgaya and Sarnath are well-known pilgrimage sites, housing many monasteries belonging to different nationalities. Therefore a martial art with a supposed Buddhist origin, sees its roots in India and India's martial arts.

¹¹¹ I noticed that many Keralis (at least those whom I have met), and Kalarippayat teachers specifically, are convinced that 'their' Kalarippayat is the basis of the Shaolin Kung Fu.

¹¹² Historically this dynasty was the Second Chera Empire of the Kulasekharas (Zarrilli, 1998: 31)

¹¹³ Travancore was the southernmost part of Kerala, with its capital Kollam (Quilon)

¹¹⁴ Cf. Bowring (1997: 43) says that the Zamorin got the sword, 'and as much country as the crowing of a cock could be heard over'. Bowring also says that Muslims and Hindus told different stories about how it was divided.

King Ceraman went to Mecca and never returned. He left his country in chaos. Kerala's old feudal system did not work anymore, with local chieftains starting to make war with each other. Under the Perumal kings Kerala was divided into *nadus* or districts, which were under the leadership of a *naduvazhi*. In turn, the *nadu* consisted of a number of counties, called *desams*. Each *desam* was a collection of a number of villages (*amsa*).¹¹⁵ The *desamvazhi* ruled over the *desam*, and, as each *desam* had its own *kalari*, he was the direct supervisor of the gurukkal in charge of that *kalari*. These gurukkals were known by their titles: they were called *panikkar*, *kurup*, or *nambiar*.¹¹⁶ Sometimes these titles became family names, and nowadays there are many Panikkars in Kerala.

At this point we should have a look at the caste system of Kerala. Apart from certain Brahmin groups, called Cattar Brahmins, there were also certain other castes involved in the martial business. Many people in Kerala belong to a caste called Nayar. Traditionally the Nayar practiced Kalarippayat, especially those styles of Kalarippayat indicated by the northern tradition. They were one of the castes that had the right to bear arms, a right withheld from most of the other castes. It should be mentioned that most of the Keralan chieftains were Nayar. The Nayar was Kerala's ruling and warrior class. Other groups who had the right to bear arms were a sub-caste of the Ezhava caste (or Tiyya), called *cekor*, and certain Muslims and Christians.¹¹⁷ According to the so-called Northern Ballads (*vadakkan pattukal*)¹¹⁸ the Tiyya community was a warrior caste that immigrated from Sri Lanka. They had their own style of martial art, although it may have been influenced by the martial arts of the Cera Empire.¹¹⁹

Those who bore arms in Kerala's middle ages were extremely loyal to their lords. Many of them made a pledge to serve their king to the death. A famous example is the dispute between the Valluvanad¹²⁰ king and the Zamorin of Calicut.

3.4.1 Mamankam

Every twelve years a festival called *mamankam* was organized by the king of the city of Valluvanad (Vadakara). During Cera rule it was the Perumals who presided over the festival. When the last Cera king went to Mecca, he bestowed this entitlement on the Velluvanad raja. The *mamankam* was the most important religious festival of Kerala. It was held to celebrate the descent of the river

¹¹⁵ Cf. Zarrilli, 1998, p.37-38; Cf. Balakrishnan, p.16

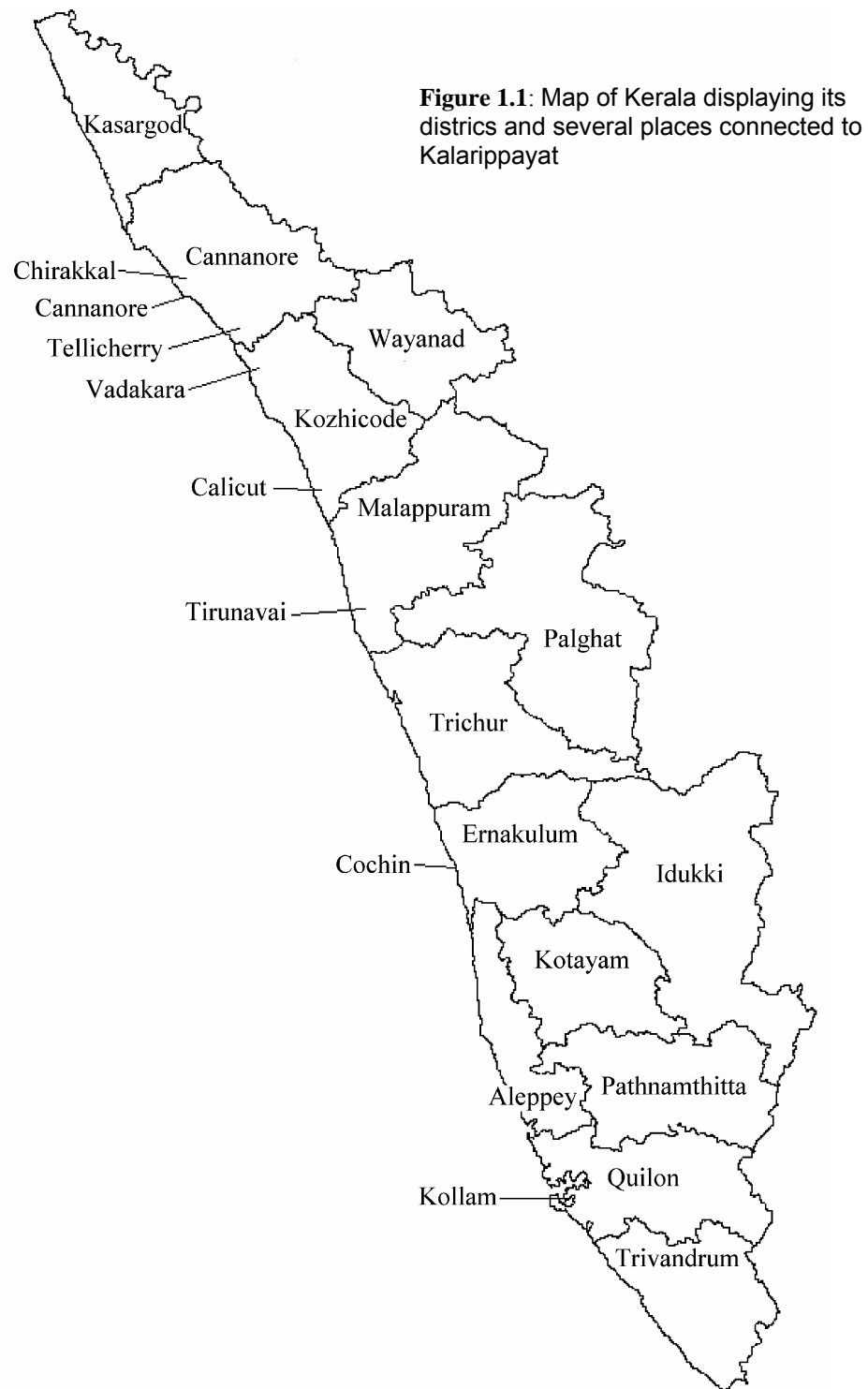
¹¹⁶ Cf. Kurup and Varier, p.8-9; Cf. Zarrilli, 1998, p.27

¹¹⁷ Cf. Zarrilli, 1998, pp.25-29

¹¹⁸ A group of ballads composed mainly in the 17th and 18th century. Cf. Zarrilli, 1998, p.260, n52

¹¹⁹ Balakrishnan (1995: 2) says that the Kandyan martial art *haramba salava* was probably imported from Kerala at an early stage. He bases this point of view on the similarities in body-movements between this Kandyan art and the northern styles, and on the fact that the 'technical vocabulary' contains the same expressions. Balakrishnan wrote his book from the point of view of a practitioner of the art. It is also possible to give an interpretation the other way around, that Kalarippayat is derived from the Singhalese martial arts, because, as far as I know, no direct evidence exists that would favor Balakrishnan's interpretation.

¹²⁰ Present-day Vadakara



goddess Ganga into the most sacred and important river of Kerala, the Bharatappula river. This point was located near the village of Tirunavai. For political reasons the Zamorin was determined to conduct the festival himself, because of its sacredness and the fact that it was a great honor to be the central figure at that festival. This would portray the Zamorin as the undisputed ruler of the entire area. He then conquered Valluvanad and killed the king. The Valluvanad king, however, had some warriors who were devoted to him with their lives. These warriors were called the *caver*,¹²¹ after the district they came from. The *caver* in fact formed the king's suicide squad. They were ready to give their lives for the king's sake at any moment. Robbed of their legitimate ruler, they sought revenge. As the Zamorin wanted to prevent a revolt against him, he sought a way to appease these people. He decided to conduct the sacred festival, the main cause of the dispute, in a slightly different way. Every twelve years the Zamorin had to present himself on a platform near the village of Tirunavai, where the festival traditionally took place, surrounded by a bodyguard 10,000 men strong. On this occasion the *cavers* of the former Valluvanad king were invited to avenge their lord and re-conquer the kingdom, by trying to kill the Zamorin. In order to prepare themselves for the battle, the *cavers* practiced Kalarippayat for twelve successive years very intensively. When the festival came, the *cavers* had twelve days to try to kill the Zamorin, who, behind his army of bodyguards, was an almost impossible target. Many young men lost their lives during each festival. The festival was held until the end of the 1766, when the British colonialist government put an end to it. No one was ever able to kill the Zamorin, though the Zamorin was wounded several times. Even this seems to be a miracle; as one can imagine, it would require a lot of skill on the part of the attacker to pass all those bodyguards.

Today the area where the *mamankam* was held is almost gone.¹²² A road splits the area into two. In the area to the south of this road, since the dawn of the industrial era, is an English factory, which, amazingly, is still operating. The factory itself has the air of a ruin dating from pre-historical times. In the factory yard, covered with grasses and hardly recognizable, is the platform where the Zamorin once stood.

On the other side of the road there is now a hospital with a big unmaintained garden. In this garden, near the river, there is a huge hole in the ground. The bodies of the dead warriors, fallen during the *mamankam*, were thrown into this pit. It is an interesting coincidence that a hospital was built on top of the graveyard of the *mamankam*.

3.4.2 The *cekors*

In medieval Kerala it was common to solve disputes by means of an *ankam* (duel). These quarrels could be about anything. The only requirement was that it be about something that was valued by the two bantams, since a fighter would be hired to do the job. These fighters were called *cekors*, and usually came from Ezhava families,¹²³ which were lower in rank within the caste system than the Nayers. If people decided to end the dispute by means of an *ankam*, they needed to get permission from the *naduvazhi*. The *ankam* was held on a

¹²¹ *caver*: one who serves. Source: KKA gurukkal

¹²² I have visited the spot during Oral Transmission Period II

¹²³ Tiyyas and Ezhavas are related subgroups in Kerala (Zarrilli, 1998: 36)

platform, and surrounded by rituals. These rituals were meant to be a preparation for death, since an *ankam* was not over until one of the opponents was killed. Therefore the fee for a *cekor* was very high, since his family had to be compensated for the loss.

Outside the legal system there was another form of *ankam*, called *poyttu*, which was held without the official representation in the form of the *naduvazhi*. This more or less illegal fight was usually set up to end personal grievances.

The main subject of the Northern Ballads (*vadakkan pattukal*) is the duel, in any form. The ballads tell the stories of the heroes of Kolathunad, Kadathanad, and Kottayam principalities. One of the most famous heroes of these ballads is Tacholi Otenan. Tacholi Otenan¹²⁴ was the child of a Nayar family, and was raised near Badagara. He was extremely gifted at learning Kalarippayat. Apart from these physical arts, he had an interest in magic and witchcraft. Otenan liked to match with other Kalarippayat practitioners in order to put his strength to the test. His victory in the *poyttu* with the famous warrior Chindan Nambiar made him instantly famous throughout Kerala. He is depicted as the ideal warrior, chivalrous, brave, ready to help, and courteous. During his life he never lost a fight. He did not die in old age; he died of a gunshot wound to the back. After having won a duel with Matilur Gurukkal he returned to the battlefield, since he had forgotten his weapon. There he was shot by one of the students of the Gurukkal. The most famous place associated with Otenan is the Lokarnakavu temple in Vadakara, where the hero used to pray before setting off to battle.

3.5 The KKA gurukkal and his lineage (northern systems)

The gurukkal of the KKA *kalar*i told me that he was originally educated in two styles of Kalarippayat, the Central Style system, which was his maternal grandfather's heritage, and one of the northern family styles, called Arappukai.¹²⁵ After having mastered these two systems, he roamed around Kerala learning other family styles. His aim was to create and to discover the most effective way of fighting that Kalarippayat could offer. It was not uncommon in the past for a master to roam around gathering the best fighting styles – according to the oral tradition of the KKA *kalar*i – as we will see below.

The choice to learn Arappukai Kalarippayat may not have been made consciously by the KKA teacher, because it is the main form of the art taught in Cannanore (Malabar) and surroundings, the area where he was raised.¹²⁶ According to the KKA teacher, this style is currently the most popular and well known in Kerala. This is due to two people, Karnaran Gurukkal and his student C.V. Narayanan Gurukkal. The story of this particular style, as it was told to me by the KKA gurukkal, is as follows.

At the end of the 18th century the English controlled most of Kerala. Fearing riots, they understood the danger of having an active warrior caste in Kerala. It became prohibited for Keralis to wear weapons and even to practice Kalarippayat. Families continued to pass their knowledge on to their children and

¹²⁴ Cf. Menon, p.86-87

¹²⁵ According to the KKA gurukkal Arappukai means 'hand (*kai*) of obstruction (*arapp*)'; the style is supposed to originate from Tulunadu, the southern part of the state Kanara, which borders to the north of Kerala.

¹²⁶ Several times I saw the styles of all the *kalaris* in the area in and around Cannanore during the annual games, held on the police sports grounds in Cannanore. Arappukai was by far the most common style practiced.

train them secretly. It was due to this prohibition that several Kalarippayat styles died out. At the start of the 20th century, however, a major movement in the defense of Keralan culture came into existence. Along with this movement, some teachers started a *kalari* little by little. Karnaran Gurukkal and C.V. Narayanan Gurukkal were among the first to come out into the open. C.V. Narayanan Gurukkal started to give demonstrations and became well known throughout Kerala. In the 1920s and 1930s both gurukkal were working to introduce a new way of looking at Kalarippayat. They decided to add new techniques to their basic style, Arappukai. They created a composite of several styles of the northern branch, which was based on their own martial background. This resulted in the foundation of the CVN *kalari*, named after C.V. Narayanan himself, and in 1958 in the foundation of the Kerala Kalarippayat Association. This association was under the leadership of Govindankutty Nayar, and started with fifteen members. C.V. Narayanan also made a syllabus, which described all the forms and techniques taught within the CVN system.¹²⁷

Following C.V. Narayanan's lead, the KKA gurukkal also made the decision to put together a composite version of several Kalarippayat family styles. Like C.V. Narayanan, he added a second style from the northern group to his repertoire, the Pillatangi style practiced in the Badgara region.¹²⁸ However, in my opinion, the KKA teacher approached this a bit differently from C.V. Narayanan. I noticed during my stay that many stories related to Kalarippayat were familiar to a lot of Keralis. It seems to me that the KKA gurukkal was acquainted with those stories, and picked out those Kalarippayat styles that were mentioned in those stories and had become legendary.

The reason the KKA teacher chose to learn Pillatangi, I believe, is that this was practiced by Tipu Sultan of Mysore, known in India as the toughest adversary of the English. Haider Ali, Tipu's father, had sent his son to Kerala for a while to learn the art of Kalarippayat, by that time famous.¹²⁹ The descendant of the gurukkal of Tipu Sultan was the late V.K. Madhava Panikker, according to local lore. The KKA gurukkal claimed that the *kalari* where Tipu trained is still in Badgara. For the Keralis a *kalari* is the equivalent of a temple and thus many ancient *kalaris* have survived, because it is the duty of the family of a master to take care of that temple.

A second style added to the KKA basic curriculum was Kadathanad Kalarippayat. This branch was practiced by the invincible and chivalric Otenan.

But the Arappukai style of the KKA also differs from the CVN version.¹³⁰ Arappukai Kalarippayat comes from Tellicherry, and was originally taught by the Chankampally Gurukkals, as that lineage is called¹³¹. Tellicherry was also the birthplace of C.V. Narayanan.

¹²⁷ Cf. Zarrilli, 1998, p.95

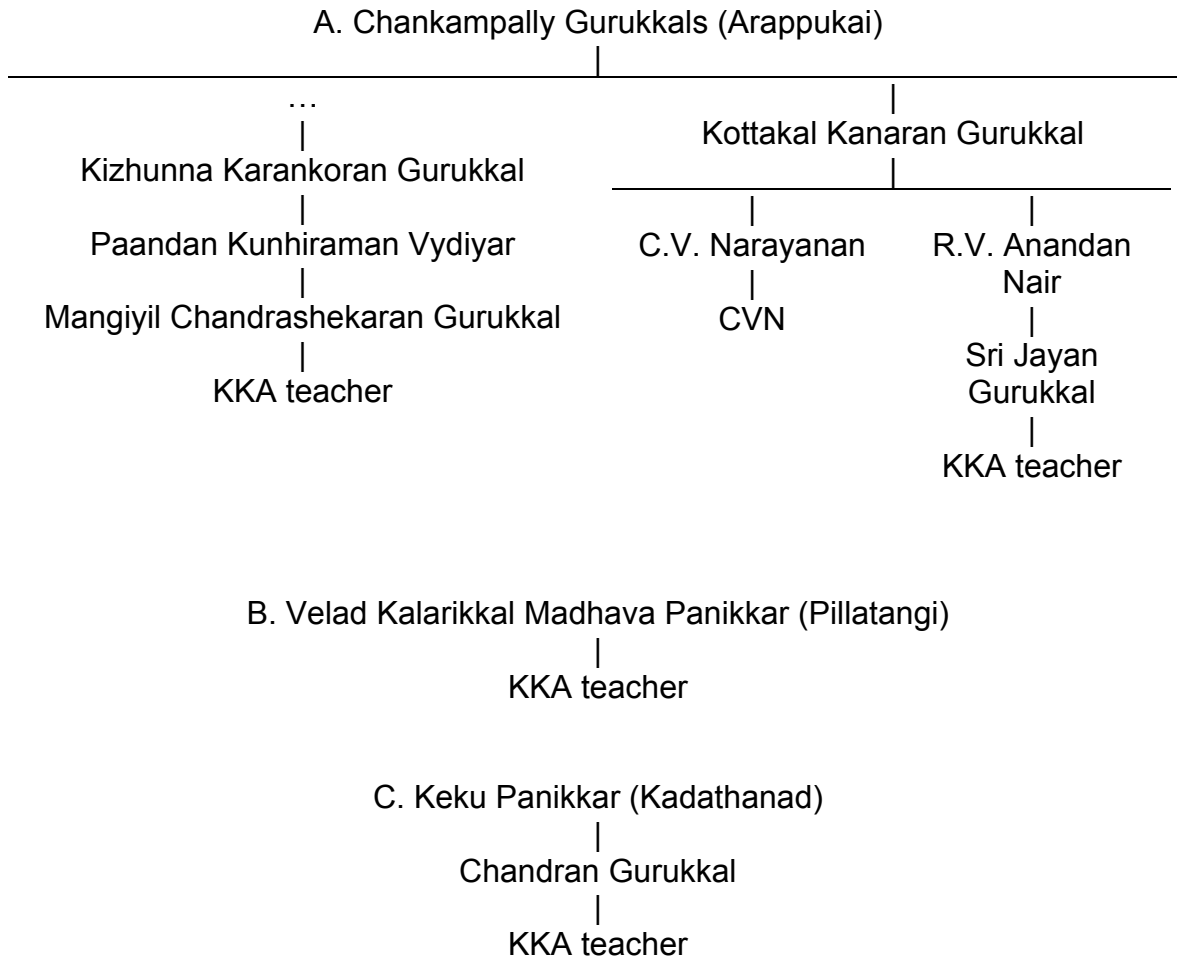
¹²⁸ *Pilla* means 'baby' and *tangi* means 'carrying'. The 'baby' refers to the *pranic* force (see chapter 1.1.1). Source: KKA gurukkal.

¹²⁹ According to the KKA gurukkal himself, he had learned Pillatangi because her exercises are 'opposite to Arappukai training'. For more on this opposition see paragraph 3.7 of this chapter.

¹³⁰ The differences are clear during the annual games held on the police sports grounds in Cannanore, which I visited several times. I also saw some demonstrations of the CVN *kalaris* of Calicut and Trivandrum.

¹³¹ The Chankampally Gurukkals were teaching the Arappukai family style. The family's website (www.changampally.com) explains that the "Changampally Gurukkal Family is considered as one of the oldest and renowned Ayurveda practitioners specialized in *asthi marma chikitsa* (treatment based on vital

Regarding the Northern Styles, the KKA teacher gave me the following ‘martial lineages’ (in parentheses is the name of the lineage), from which he claims to have inherited his knowledge:



In addition to these teachers, the KKA gurukkal claimed to be very close to the son of the Chirakkal raja, Sreedharan Gurukkal, the man who introduced the division into three branches of Kalaripayattu. From him the KKA teacher learned some sword-drawing forms.

If we compare the stories behind the three northern systems taught by the KKA gurukkal, we notice that each story affirms that that particular style is the best, supported by evidence from part history and part legend.

3.6 Northern Style specifics

In their concept the Northern Styles bear clearly a stamp of their medieval past, the era when disputes were settled by duels.¹³² The fighters who participated in these duels belonged to the upper class of the Keralan society. As a result the

points of the body and that of bone). Their ancestors were Tulu Brahmins. Centuries back Cheraman Perumal, the king of ancient Kerala hearing about their prowess in Kalaripayattu, the martial art of Kerala, brought them from Tulunadu for performing Kalaripayattu at the legendary Mamankam held at Thirunavaya.” The KKA gurukkal told me that it was not Cheraman Perumal, but the Zamorin who invited the family to northern Kerala. Nowadays the KKA gurukkal has still very close contacts with the family.

¹³² See paragraph 3.4

importance of the individual fighter was stressed. Successful warriors became very famous. So famous, in fact, that the stories about these illustrious fighters still live in the hearts of the Keralan people. The Northern Styles stress the heroic combat. Since the outcome of the duels was decided only when one of the parties perished, the Northern Style system incorporates rituals involving preparation for death.

Peculiar to the northern systems is that weapon training is usually practiced through pre-arranged partner forms. This has several advantages. The fact that a martial artist has practiced empty-hand fighting does not imply that he or she is able to use any kind of weapon. The reason is that if a combatant has never felt the impact of, for example, a heavy spear attack on a shield, in reality the combatant has already lost the fight. This highlights the usefulness of partner training with weapons.

Weapon training also teaches the student speed and the ability to react. An attack initiated by an opponent should immediately be taken over by the defender. In this way the defender is not defending anymore, but he becomes the attacker.

Different weapons teach the student different abilities, useful in a fight. For example, the long stick trains the eyes in such a way that after some practice the practitioner is able to develop a breadth of vision of almost a 180 degree angle. Another very important weapon is the short stick, a stick of about 40 cm. Short-stick training is useful to gain speed, accuracy of hitting, and controlling fear of the opponent's weapon at close range.

The northern systems of Kalarippayat incorporate very highly developed martial skills. This necessity evolved from the fact that it was used in man-to-man combat, in which only high qualified fighters participated.

Weapons take a dominant place within the northern traditions. All empty-hand exercises, like the *meippayat*, are preparation for and an introduction to weapon training. Thus in general when practicing one of the northern systems, the body movements are broad and extended, which is useful when wielding weapons like a sword or a spear.

The Northern Styles are the most detailed and elaborate of the three branches. Each aspect of the style, be it empty-hand or with the various weapons, is elaborated in many forms. For example, within the Arappukai style there are only eighteen long and heavy forms for empty-hand fighting, while the use of each weapon is taught in between eight and twelve of these forms. To do even one of these forms requires being in optimal physical condition. Each training session is usually started by between four and twelve empty-hand forms, which are done non-stop one after another.

This is in contrast to the southern and central systems, in which forms are light, short, and less elaborate. The reason for this difference may lie in the use of arms. The central and especially the southern styles accentuate empty-hand, knife, and stick combat, while the northern styles stress the use of the more heavy weapons, like sword and shield, axe, spear, and Indian club. These weapons were indeed usually very heavy because of the iron components they contain. The use of the different kinds of weapons resulted in a traditional schedule for the teaching and training of the northern styles. First empty-hand training (*verumkai*) is taught, then training with wooden weapons (*koltari*), and finally the sharp weapons (*ankamtari*). This schedule is applied not only in the

way a student is taught during his learning period, but it is also the order of the exercises in a single training session.

3.7 Shiva and Shakti

The *meippayat* forms are divided into two groups, called Shiva (*shiva swarupam*) and Shakti (*shakti swarupam*).¹³³ Shiva refers to one of the main gods of the Hindu pantheon, who was the creator of the universe. According to the philosophy of Kalarippayat, Shakti is the power of the god, through which he was able to create the universe. Shakti is imagined as the wife of Shiva, and as such she embodies all that is female. Shiva himself symbolizes the male principle. As the Shiva forms represent the male forces of nature, they are hard, strong, and steady in nature. They are built up of linear movements. The Shakti forms consist of circular and fluent movements, and include more jumps than the Shiva forms.

Some family styles stress Shiva, while others stress Shakti. From the styles the KKA *kalari* is teaching, the Pillatangi and Kadathanad emphasize the Shiva aspect, while the forms of the Arappukai style give more importance to the Shakti aspect.

As for the use of the forms as a basis for weapon training, Shiva forms do teach mainly the stabbing movements, while the circular movements of the Shakti forms are mainly useful for exercising cuts.

Within the Arappukai tradition, there are three kinds of Shakti forms: *meippayat*, *pakarcakkal*, and *tanjam*. The *pakarcakkal* and *tanjam* forms can be considered advanced *meippayat* forms. Each group has its own purpose.

The first group, indicated as *meippayat*, teaches the student the basic and most important ideas upon which the Arappukai Kalarippayat fighting system is built. Many combat techniques and the use of *marma* point attack are hidden within every movement. The latter are attacks on certain places on the opponent's body in order to take him down faster. An example is the eyes: an attack on the eyes is aimed at diminishing the opponent's view. I will come back to this subject in chapter 4.

The second group of Shakti forms, the *pakarcakkal*, stresses the use of the legs. The student is taught how to kick accurately and how to change the direction of the body instantaneously, which results in a change of the direction of attack. The *pakarcakkal* is in fact a method to increase the speed of the legs.

The third group of Shakti forms is *tanjam*. *Tanjam* indicates the position of the forearm in front of the forehead, preferably done in the so-called lion pose. The lion pose is a stance in which the longitudinal axes of the two feet are perpendicular to each other. The heels of the feet are kept in one line, while the distance between them is bit more than shoulder breadth. The knees are bent to almost ninety degrees. The spine is kept almost parallel to the line between the heels. The *tanjam* forms are meant to be directly applicable to the fight. The low stance of the lion pose plays a major role. The student is taught how to apply this pose in all its variations. The *tanjam* forms, in particular, are the basis of sword and shield fighting.

One should bear in mind that there is another important purpose of practicing the Shakti and Shiva forms besides learning fighting techniques, or even fighting

¹³³ During annual Kalarippayat tournaments in Cannanore, Calicut, and Trivandrum, I saw the Kalarippayat of other Kalarippayat schools. Though I saw that other *kalaris*, such as the CVN *kalari*, teach similar forms, I did not come across a similar explanation as I will provide here.

concepts. Shiva and Shakti forms prepare the body for a fight: they increase strength, fluidity of movement, and speed. They give the practitioner a method to train those specific muscles in such a way that they are able to withstand and endure a fight. Thus the Shiva and Shakti forms get the body in excellent shape as well.

3.8 Battle frenzy

The main power of the *meippayat* lies not only in the fact that these forms lead to good condition and flexibility, but that they can also change the state of mind of the practitioner. According to the KKA teacher, the *meippayat* can be used as a tool to enter a state of 'battle madness'.¹³⁴ When entering this state of mind, the fighter is said to feel no pain or fatigue, and his strength increases dramatically. This is because in this state of frenzy, the body is believed to draw its energy directly from our 'animalistic nature', which forms the core of our existence, according to the philosophy of Kalarippayat.¹³⁵

There are certain exercises, which when done frequently bring the practitioner into an almost continuous state of such 'battle madness'.¹³⁶ The person who practices these exercises experiences an increased awareness. A nasty side effect is that it is said to stimulate aggression.

According to the KKA teacher, it is very important to have an empty mind in a fight, in order to fight spontaneously.¹³⁷ When a fighter is in a state of 'battle frenzy', his mind has become empty, and he will fight with instinctive movements. These instinctive movements are the movements that the practitioner has trained in over and over again: they are the 'martial concepts'. 'Techniques' can be also practiced in such a way that they become instinctive movements. But, as I explained in paragraph 1.1.1, 'martial concepts' provide the practitioner with more than one 'technique': many techniques can evolve from a 'martial concept'. Only the situation within a fight determines which 'technique' will be chosen.

In short, the KKA gurukkal teaches that in a state of 'battle frenzy' the mind of the warrior has been emptied. Not hindered by distracting thoughts, not feeling any pain or fatigue, the warrior acts automatically with instinctive movements, improving his accuracy in the fight.

4. Central Tradition (*madhya sampradayam*)

4.1 Origin and concepts of the Central Style

The tradition says that the Central Style is an offspring of the Northern Style. According to the KKA gurukkal, weapon training is basically the same in both the central and northern systems. The main difference is that within the northern styles the attack takes place over a straight line, which results in a straight-line footwork pattern, while the Central Style teaches a footwork pattern that can take any shape, from a straight line to a square and even an octagonal. Because of its footwork (*chuvadu*) and the body strength and flexibility developed, the Central Style is ideal for a multiple opponent attack. According to the KKA *kalari*, the martial system developed by the *caver* contributed to the emergence of the Central Styles of Kalarippayat. Since only a handful of warriors had to pass the

¹³⁴ This 'madness' is supposed to be controlled by the mind.

¹³⁵ This expression was used by the KKA teacher, literally, and he meant 'related to the self-survival instinct of human being'. This information was given to me during Oral Transmission Period II.

¹³⁶ This information was given to me during Oral Transmission Period II

¹³⁷ See paragraph 1.1.1. This is the basis of the 'martial concept' as formulated by the KKA gurukkal.

10,000 men of the Zamorin, the main aim of the *caver* was not to kill the opponent, but to pass him. Evading and sneaking away from multiple opponents is the goal of the central styles. This idea resulted in a style emphasizing footwork. Moving in squares, octagons, triangles, straight lines, etc. is part of the basic training. The footwork is given by the teacher in 'seed' form: it is up to the student to cultivate a relatively simple footwork pattern. Only gradually the student will understand the given footwork in all its facets. The teacher usually shows the student some steps, and then sends him home to think about them. The problem with this teaching approach is that if the student cannot come up with an explanation of the steps, the teacher will hardly help, because he will simply consider the student unfit to be taught. As a result, the study of the Central Style takes years of patience.

This somewhat 'unclear' way of thinking may have contributed to the fact that the style can be found among the mystics, especially Muslim mystics or Sufis. For those mystics the footwork pattern (*kalam*) are like *yantras*, mystical diagrams constructed out of

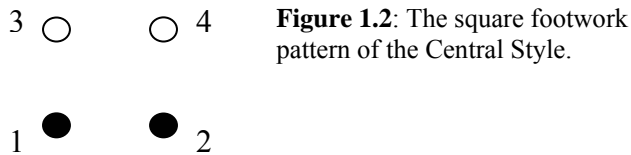


Figure 1.2: The square footwork pattern of the Central Style.

geometrical patterns, which are often seen as a plan of the universe, and at the same time they provide a 'map' or a path towards spiritual liberation.¹³⁸ An example of the way to look at the art is the following exercise. Stand straight, and the feet should be shoulder-width apart, as in figure 1.2. In this figure the right foot is placed on dot two, and the left on dot one. By taking a special step, both feet should be placed on dots three and four. To accomplish this, move the right foot to dot three, pivot towards the right on the right leg, so that at the end of this body-turn the left foot is placed on dot four. The same action is repeated, but in the other direction: the left foot on dot four goes to dot one; after pivoting on the left leg, the right foot is moved from dot three to dot two. Of course the movement can also be initiated from the other side. The point of this exercise, from a mystical point of view, is that the practitioner steps around the center of the

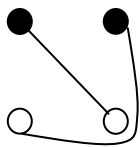


Figure 1.3: The same dots as in figure 2.1, now including the paths of movement of the feet. The Arabic word *la* has appeared.

square. The Sufi teaching says that this center is in fact similar to the Ka'aba, the central point of worship in Mecca. Performing the exercise in a meditative manner is like circumambulation of the Ka'aba¹³⁹.

Mystical letters and numbers are involved with this style as well. When moving along a straight line, the feet trace

the Arabic letter *alif* (ا), hence the crossing movement along the diagonal of the square in figure 1.3, as from dot one to dot four. The following body-spin movement causes the other foot to move from dot two to dot three. The path of that foot resembles the Arabic letter *lam* (ل). The *alif*, as the starting letter of the alphabet, is the letter symbolizing God. In combination with the *lam* the Arabic word *la* (لا) is exactly written as the pattern displayed in figure 1.3.

¹³⁸ Cf. Zarrilli, 1998, pp.148-153

¹³⁹ As a remark it should be said that Muslims turn only counter-clockwise around the Ka'aba.

The KKA gurukkal did not give further explanation of the footwork pattern. However, according to Schimmel, the word *la* is often compared to the two-pointed sword of 'Ali, the son-in-law of Mohammad.¹⁴⁰ This sword is called *dhu'l-faqār*, and is a central symbol for many Sufi groups. It is the sword of righteousness, courage, and chivalry. It cuts away ignorance, and thus makes God visible.¹⁴¹ I am not sure though, if we can go so far as to add this explanation to the mystical interpretation of the footwork pattern, because first of all, the KKA teacher and the teacher from whom he obtained his information, the Sufi *sheikh*¹⁴² Abdul Kader, are Sunni Muslims. Usually 'Ali plays a more important role in Shi'a Islam.¹⁴³ I have never noticed that form of adoration for 'Ali from the KKA gurukkal, which is so typical for Shi'a, nor did he make any connection with 'Ali's sword. On the other hand the KKA gurukkal once told me¹⁴⁴ that 'Ali is very important to him, because he was the fourth *khalifa*.¹⁴⁵ I was not able to ask the Sufi *sheikh* Abdul Kader for further explanation.

In addition Zarrilli¹⁴⁶ gives yet another interpretation of this diagram. Besides the Islamic mystical interpretation, he also compares the two symbols of *alif* and *lam* with the Shiva lingam and the Shakti yoni. By performing the described exercise Shiva and Shakti become one, and the original pre-creational unity is restored. The consequence is that the practitioner is able to make use of a source of unlimited power. Zarrilli did not mention his source of information on this subject, but he himself writes that he got the footwork pattern itself and the Islamic interpretation of it from the same source as I did. The KKA gurukkal never mentioned this explanation to me. However, since he believes that all religions have the same goal, and just prescribe a different path to reach that goal, he likes to provide a similar interpretation to somebody of a different religion, and to put it within the context of that person's religion.¹⁴⁷ He takes this approach especially towards Hinduism, probably because all his (Indian) senior students are Hindus.

¹⁴⁰ Schimmel, p.419

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² The central man among a group of Sufis

¹⁴³ Richard Y., *Shi'ite Islam*, Blackwell Publishers, Cambridge (USA), 1995, pp.15-21

¹⁴⁴ During a private conversation in the second week of Oral Transmission Period III

¹⁴⁵ After the death of Mohammad four people in succession led the young Islamic community: Abu Bakr, 'Umar, 'Uthman, and 'Ali. These are the four main *khalifas* of Sunni Islam (Waines D., *An Introduction to Islam*, Cambridge University Press, 1995, p.35).

¹⁴⁶ Zarrilli, 1998, pp.148-149

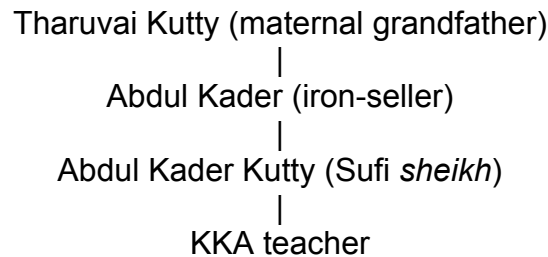
¹⁴⁷ He told me this often during the last few months of Oral Transmission Period I, and during Oral Transmission Periods II and III

4.2 The lineage of the KKA teacher

Many of the Muslims of Kerala in general are called Mappila Muslims.¹⁴⁸ The teacher of the KKA *kalari* is a descendant of a high-ranking Mappila family. His maternal grandfather was a central style gurukkal at the court of the Chirakkal raja. He was engaged with training the raja's Muslim soldiers. He learned his first *kalari*-steps from his grandfather, but unfortunately his grandfather died when the KKA teacher was ten years old. From that moment he became the student of some of his grandfather's students. His most important Central Style teacher was by that time the Sufi *sheikh* Abdul Kader, who greatly influenced his way of thinking and his way of understanding Kalarippayat.¹⁴⁹

The Kalarippayat of the Mappila Muslims is mentioned in the Northern Ballads in relation to Otenan, the man who practiced Kadathanad Kalarippayat. He defeated some of the Mappila masters of Chirakkal because they failed to show due respect to the Chirakkal raja.¹⁵⁰ Today the KKA teacher, though a Mappila Muslim, teaches Kadathanad as well as the Kalarippayat of those same Chirakkal Mappila masters.

The 'martial lineage' of the KKA teacher in terms of the Central Style is as follows:



Other Central Style teachers, whom were mentioned by the KKA gurukkal, were Krishnan Gurukkal and Edappal Hassan Gurukkal. He did not give me any specific details on their 'martial ancestry'.

4.3 Lo-Har

The Central Style of the Chirakkal region consists of the mystical footwork patterns mentioned above, and of some exercises resembling certain aspects of the *meippayat* forms. It looks like as if the Central Styles teach the highlights of the *meippayat* without putting them in a sequence. The weapon forms are similar to the ones found within the northern system as well.

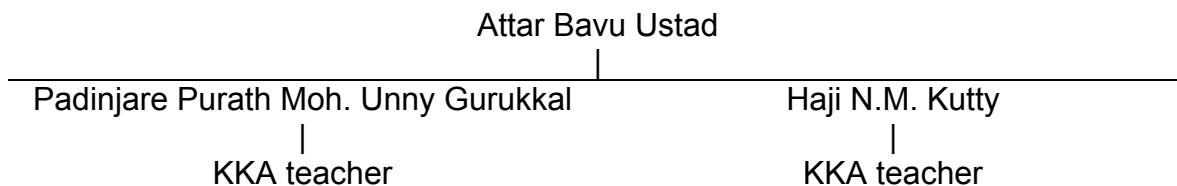
¹⁴⁸ Mappila is the name for the Muslim community and the Syrian Malabar Nasrani Christians in Kerala. The word 'mappila', derived from *amma* ('mother') and *pilla* ('child'), refers, in case of Mappila Muslims, to the matrilineal descent system of this group (cf. <http://webapps.uni-koeln.de/cgi-bin/tamil>: 'daughter's husband', 'maternal uncle's son', 'paternal aunt's son', 'younger sister's husband'). Following this matrilineal system, the KKA gurukkal has inherited his lineage from his maternal grandfather, Tharuvai Kutty, whose mother's family was Kurumthiru-akattu. Hence the KKA gurukkal presents his lineage as Gurukkal Akattu. There are several social groups of Mappila Muslims. There are for example *thangal*, claiming to be descendants of the prophet Mohammad through his daughter Fatima, and *arabi*, who claim to be of Arabic origin. The KKA gurukkal belongs to the *malabari* Mappila Muslims, who are (descendants of) Keralan converts. In general, Mappila Muslims follow the Shafi'i school of jurisprudence, as does the KKA gurukkal.

¹⁴⁹ I have met this man at the end of Oral Transmission Period I

¹⁵⁰ Cf. Menon, p.87

Apart from the Chirakkal Central Style system there are other versions of the art. Apart from the *cavers* ('suicide squads') there was another fighting force, the so-called Lo-Har.¹⁵¹ Lo-Har is pronounced in colloquial language as Lo-Kar. The Lo-Kar were recruited by the Zamorin from one of the municipalities under his administration, probably with the name Lo-Kar.¹⁵² The Lo-Kar were encamped near the capital Calicut, and were available to the Zamorin on short notice. The exercises practiced by the Lo-Kar are done standing in place. This is in contrast to other Northern and Central style exercises, which are based on dynamic movements. Altogether there are 96 Lo-Kar exercises, but only 18 of them are selected for each training session.¹⁵³ The exercises aim to strengthen the body and develop speed and flexibility. All the exercises are constructed so that they are easily applicable in a fight or other martial purposes. By this I mean that the purpose of the exercises is not only limited to a combat situation. For example, there is a set of exercises that teaches the student how to move low to the ground. This enables the warrior to creep up on enemies to spy and obtain information. For this purpose various kinds of push-ups are taught, as a part of the 96 exercises.

The 'martial lineage' of the KKA teacher for the Lo-Har exercises is as follows:



5. Southern Tradition (*theakkan*¹⁵⁴ *sampradayam*)

5.1 Differences between the northern and southern styles

While the northern and central traditions trace their lineage back to Parasurama, the southern tradition sees the sage Agastya as its founder. This sage was not only a martial artist, but a famous medical practitioner and scientist as well. It is said that he obtained his knowledge only through the practice of austerities. According to the KKA gurukkal, the Northern Style is closely connected to the theory of Ayurvedic medicine, and the Southern Style derives its medical basis from the southern Siddha system.¹⁵⁵

While the northern and central systems are mostly connected to Nayars and other high caste warriors, the Southern Style is more common among some of

¹⁵¹ In Rajasthan, when a battle was about to be lost, *rajput* families fought themselves to death (*lohar*), while women threw themselves into the fire (*sati*).

¹⁵² I have never found hard evidence for the existence of a municipality of that name.

¹⁵³ 96 is an 'ideal' number. I have never found more than around fifty exercises. According to the KKA teacher, "the rest got lost in time".

¹⁵⁴ 'Thekkan' refers to the Deccan area

¹⁵⁵ It should be noticed that Agastya, according to my informants (KKA teacher and senior students Soman and Ramesha), came originally from North India. He moved to the South, where one of the main gods of Tamil Nadu, Murugan, instructed him several sciences. Murugan himself, despite being one of the most important gods of the South, related to the identity of the people of the South, is seen as the son of Shiva, and moved from his northern dwelling place to the hills of South India (Shulman, 1980: 48, 49; Clothey, 1978: 119). This means that in the eyes of the South Indians Agastya's knowledge has an Aryan and North Indian basis. A possible interpretation for this is that indirectly the southern systems are backed by a northern prestige. See also paragraph 3.1 of chapter 1.

the Sambavar and the Nadars, the descendants of ancient Indian tribes of the deep south of Kerala, and its area of origin is situated in the Travancore region of south Kerala and adjacent Kanyakumari district (Tamil Nadu).¹⁵⁶ Southern Style Kalarippayat is closely related to the Tamil martial arts, like *silambam* (a name, which refers to the flexible bamboo stick used in that art), *ati tata* (hit and defend), *marma ati* (hitting vital spots), or *chinna ati* (Chinese hitting).

The Southern Styles are not practiced in a pit *kalari*, like the other two styles,

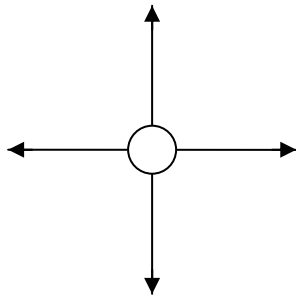


Figure 1.4: Basic footwork pattern of the Southern Style. The practitioner stands on the circle with the hind leg, and delivers attacks to four directions.

but just within an enclosure of palm leaves. The Northern and Central Styles involve many rituals, which are lacking in the southern systems. Simplicity and effectiveness are the keywords of the southern styles. While a training session of the northern and

central system is started by applying oil to the body, the southern schools do not follow this practice. Southern style teachers are known as *asan*. Nowadays the words *asan* and *gurukkal* are arbitrarily interchanged, however.

The southern styles have a different philosophy than the other two styles. The southern styles contain mainly battlefield techniques. The southern part of Kerala is less protected by natural boundaries than the northern part, because most of Kerala is separated from Tamil Nadu by several hill and mountain ranges¹⁵⁷. Therefore the people of that region were more involved in battles with neighboring countries. The southern styles are designed to be easy to learn by anybody in a short time. Moreover, these styles offer a very accurate and highly efficient way of fighting, suitable for mass combat. Basically the student is taught some empty-hand forms that can be used immediately for weapons. In southern style Kalarippayat there is no place for very advanced techniques characteristic of the northern and central Styles. A Southern Style practitioner attacks the vital points of the body directly, the *marmas*. Most forms are taught in a cross-pattern, repeating the same movements in four directions. This pattern is illustrated in figure 1.3. This refers to the battlefield origin of the style, which trains the practitioner to deal with an attack from all directions.

5.2 Training

Southern Style stresses empty-hand training, the use of knives, and wooden weapons, including the long stick and short stick, but no iron weapons other than the knife. The wooden weapons of the south are quite different from those of the north. While the northern long stick is made of a thick piece of wood taller than the practitioner, its southern counterpart is more flexible, made of bamboo, and reaches up to the shoulder. The southern short stick is thinner than the northern long stick and is equipped with a point to be able to attack *marmas* easily. Some masters teach the use of a weapon made of two deer horns.

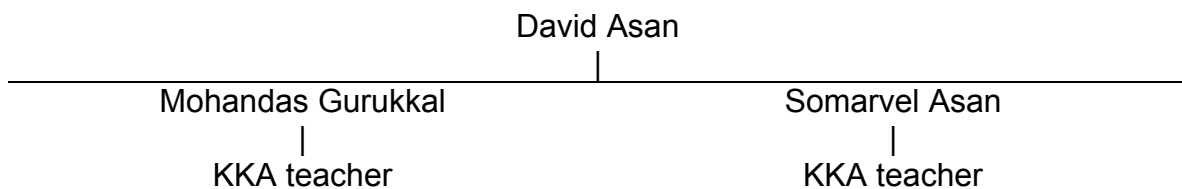
¹⁵⁶ Oral Transmission Period II; cf. Zarrilli 1998, p.29

¹⁵⁷ From north to south: the Coorg Plateau, the Malabar Uplands, the Nilgiri Hills, the Plaghat Hills, the Nelliampathi Plateau, the Cardamom Hills, and the Agastya Malai. Below the Agastya Malay there is a piece of land without mountains, which is stretching out to the seashore, to a place called Kanyakumari, the most southern tip of India. This is the area of origin of the southern systems, according to the KKA teacher.

The 'martial concepts' behind long stick fighting of the Southern Styles differ a lot from that of the Northern Styles. Since the weapons themselves are of different sizes and made of different kinds of wood, each stick must be handled differently. Northern stick fighting is a preparation for the spear, while in Southern Style we find the long stick to be one of the primary weapons. Looking at the 'martial concepts' behind the two different long stick systems, one can observe that southern long stick has more movement within the forms; it appears almost as a dance. The blows in southern long stick tend more towards whip-like hits, and the footwork is swift and light. The long stick is held differently as well. In the Northern Style the stick is held with the thumbs of both hands directed towards each other. Usually, when practicing, the distance between the hands is a bit wider than shoulder width. The southern systems teach one to minimize the distance between the hands and to keep the thumbs of both hands directed towards the head of the stick.

5.3 The lineage of the KKA gurukkal

The KKA gurukkal teaches a southern tradition called Ati Murai Neyyatinkara (law of hitting from the town of Neyyatinkara¹⁵⁸). This must be distinguished from the Tamil martial art bearing the same name. According to the KKA teacher, the southern system, which he teaches, originated from Kerala itself.



The KKA teacher learned some aspects of the Siddha medical system, which is mainly Southern Style massage (see chapter 4), from a teacher named Kumara Swamy, in addition to some empty-hand applications.

6. Summary

In the previous section I discussed the (partly) legendary origin of the different styles of Kalaripayat, taught in the KKA *kalari*. These stories are used to show that these styles have ancient roots, originating from a divine source. They are also used as a proof that those particular styles provide the most advanced way of fighting. The intention of the KKA gurukkal is to bring together styles belonging to the three main branches of Kalaripayat, because he thinks that a different perspective on the subject brings more understanding of Kalaripayat itself.

The three branches of the art are different in 'martial concepts', philosophy, and background. In the following table I have summarized those differences. We see clearly that the three different branches of Kalaripayat represent three types of warriors.

| | Northern Style | Central Style | Southern Style |
|-----------------|--------------------------------|---------------|------------------------|
| Way of teaching | Long forms; highly conditional | 'Seed'-forms | Short, practical forms |

¹⁵⁸ Near Trivandrum

| | | | |
|---------------------|---|------------------------------------|--|
| Characteristic | Elaborated forms | Forms with a tendency to mysticism | Straight forward; simple and effective |
| Martial specialty | Variety of weapons | Footwork | Boxing and wooden weapons |
| Purpose | Duel | Evasion; multiple opponents | Multiple opponents; battlefield |
| Footwork | Straight line | Multitude of patterns | Cross; square |
| Teacher | Gurukkal | Gurukkal | Asan |
| Medical system | (based on) Ayurveda | (based on) Ayurveda | (based on) Siddha |
| Gym | Pit- <i>kalari</i> | Pit- <i>kalari</i> | Enclosed area |
| Surrounding rituals | Highly ritualistic | Highly ritualistic | Simple rituals |
| Caste | Warrior castes Local (o.a.): Nayar, Ezhava 'Aryan': Nambudiri Brahmin | Mappila Muslims | 'Dravidian' castes Nadar (Nayars of Tamil Nadu), Ezhava (a.o.) |
| Divine origin | Via Parasurama | Via Parasurama | Via Agastya |

Northern Style: as a defender, you can use the lion stance to dive away from an opponent's attack.



Step forward, move under the arm towards the back of the

opponent...



...jump up and catch the opponent's head...



...come down and break the neck by twisting it.

2. The Gurukkal

The gurukkal (the title for the teacher or ‘master’) is the center of the *kalari* (gym or training hall). He is considered as one of the manifestations of the *kalari* in general, and of his *sampradayam* (lineage) in particular. In the following I will explain the place and role of the gurukkal towards his students and vice versa, and how he manages to earn the extra ordinary loyalty and trust of his students. This analysis requires a description of the method of teaching and the transmission of knowledge. The ritual performed when the teacher accepts a person as his student plays a central role. This rite characterizes the place of teacher and student, and their roles in relation to each other.

We will see that the gurukkal is identified with the tradition of his lineage (*sampradayam*), and that, because the lineage has a divine origin, the gurukkal becomes the representation of the divine on earth. In the tradition of Kalarippayat the gurukkal has a similar status as a priest. I will show why and how the tradition, the divine, and the *kalari* itself as a building, are embodied by the gurukkal, and how a student can become such central pillar of a Kalarippayat *sampradayam* as well.

1. Way of teaching

Kalarippayat is taught like a second parental rearing. When a child is born it knows nothing of culture and ways of behavior. Parents teach their children their own language, and together with that language a certain way of thinking and expression shaped by the (cultural) background of the parents. One day some parents will take their children to a temple or a church, or to other communal activities – resulting in interaction with other families – so that little by little the children get used to the culture in which they grow up, and little by little they gain knowledge of their culture.

When a student (*shishya*) is accepted by a teacher, he or she will consider this teacher a second parent. This implies that the teacher sees his pupils as a second father. In the case of the (KKA) Kalarippayat tradition, he will teach his students the same way a parent would teach his or her child. He will let his pupil grow, or rather mature, into the martial art. He introduces the new student to the first steps of the art, and gradually shows him or her more and more. This depends on the progress of the student, which is assessed by the teacher. The gurukkal estimates what a student needs to learn just by looking at his student’s body movements and understanding. By repeating the exercises and ideas of the art over and over again, these exercises and ideas become second nature to the student. In this way the teacher ‘molds’ and ‘polishes’ the pupil. According to tradition, the learning period for Kalarippayat is twelve years, but this is not a rule. This period can be longer or shorter; this is up to the teacher.

According to the KKA gurukkal there are advantages and disadvantages of this system. The advantage is that a student always learns what is required; the study never comes down to an ability to merely pass the exams and get a diploma, a situation that we recognize often in schools in Malabar modeled on the western educational system. The Kalarippayat student becomes familiar with what he or she has to know in a natural way. By this I mean that a student learns Kalarippayat in a ‘playful’ way, i.e. learning while ‘playing’ (that is: practicing), just

as a small child learns from its parents and environment. Grades and the nervousness associated with exams are thus omitted, because there are no exams. The teacher watches the student and assesses what knowledge and how much of it to give.

Despite these advantages, there is one major disadvantage. That is that everything is in the hands of the teacher. Some teachers leave their pupils on their own for years, hardly teaching them anything new. I have known some Kalaripayat students who changed their *kalari* for this reason; after having been with a teacher for four years, they had not progressed beyond the first elements.

A reason for the reluctance of some gurukkals to teach their pupils is that when there is a very good student a teacher might feel threatened. Many gurukkals feel it will be dangerous for them if a student reaches the same level of knowledge as the gurukkal very fast.

This fear haunts many teachers. A lot of knowledge has been lost because a teacher gave no more than eighty percent of his knowledge; the rest he gave on his deathbed. During my stay in the KKA *kalari*, the KKA teacher was once called to the deathbed of one of his teachers. The dying gurukkal wanted to share his most secret knowledge with the KKA teacher. But the dying man's condition was so bad, that he was unable to talk properly or to point out what he meant. Nobody knows up to the present day what techniques the old gurukkal had concealed. Nowadays, because of lack of interest of the Keralan population for the art, many of the ancient traditions have been lost. A teacher does not have a successor and his *sampradayam* dies with him. The KKA teacher always opposed this behavior: he says that it hurts him when a piece of the art is again lost.

2. Gurukkal is *kalari*

By the time a student is allowed to open his own *kalari*, he or she has been taught many things. First of all, the student must be able to perform all forms and techniques almost flawlessly. He or she must also know the ideas and concepts of those body movements: the student must be able to explain the meaning of each movement of those forms and techniques. Next, the student must be able to perform and explain all ritual actions belonging to the *kalari* of his teacher. Furthermore, the student has to grasp the idea behind Kalaripayat, i.e. to understand the concept of fighting behind the art, and to apply a certain way of life rooted deeply in the basic philosophy of Kalaripayat. The student must also know how to teach according to the tradition. Last, but certainly not least, the student should have made some progress on the path to becoming one with the art. As I mentioned above, according to the traditional way of teaching, only by repetition and practice does Kalaripayat become second nature to the student. According to the teaching approach at the KKA *kalari*, there are three main levels of learning for a student. The first level is learning the forms and techniques of the art by heart. This means that the focus is on doing the exercises correctly. After having completed this level, the student is able to perform those forms and techniques technically without mistakes. More depth is given to the form in the second level, in which a student learns the meaning behind the learned forms and techniques. The student is taught how to apply each movement in real combat. As each movement is said to represent a 'concept', the student is taught how to create actual 'techniques' from those 'concepts'¹⁵⁹. The third level is the

¹⁵⁹ See paragraph 1.1, chapter 1

most advanced one. The student not only understands the meaning of each step and each action of Kalaripayat, but also realizes what the forms and techniques are in a real life situation. We then reach a point at which the 'practical' Kalaripayat gradually changes into the 'metaphysical' Kalaripayat. At this point the role of the teacher becomes more and more advisory, and the teachings become more like an exchange of experiences. The teacher no longer tells the student how to do Kalaripayat technically; the student should become autodidactic and focus on self-development.

Some teachers have progressed so far on this level that the Kalaripayat which they themselves practice has changed into mere meditation. This, according to the KKA gurukkal, is the fourth level of the art. This level consists of four sub-levels. That means that the KKA *kalari* teaches that there are in total seven stages. I will come back to this number in the next paragraph.

When a student has started the third level, he is usually considered fit to have his or her own *kalari*. This does not mean that the student has become a gurukkal himself. For this the pupil must wait until he or she has reached the age of 42. According to the tradition, people tend to be a bit wild and impulsive until that age. Above that age people have more self-control and are better able to see through the events of life¹⁶⁰.

When a student has reached the third level, related to the realization of the essence of the art, he has 'earned' the legitimacy to be a teacher. Then and only then has the student reached a certain union with the Kalaripayat style of his tradition. At this point the student has become the embodiment of the tradition itself; he *is* Kalaripayat. His teacher and the whole lineage of teachers who have taught the art before him are accumulated into his very being. Since his Kalaripayat equals his lineage, it is very important to have an ancient lineage backing up the student's Kalaripayat. Usually, as we saw in the previous chapter, this lineage starts with a divine origin. Many times I have heard the KKA gurukkal talk very respectfully about the divine hand that created such a system with such a deep meaning in the body-forms and its concepts.

This idea has far-reaching consequences. Since the gurukkal is the embodiment of the art, he is the absolute authority on the subject. His words with respect to Kalaripayat are beyond doubt. If he thinks that some things should be done in a certain way, there is no one to question him. Anybody who wants to learn from the teacher has to do exactly as that teacher has told him. This attitude requires that a student must have a complete, unquestioning, trust in his teacher.

The fact that the teacher is the living embodiment of his art is caught in symbols. When the teacher builds his own *kalari*, the measurements are taken in feet. But it is the foot size of the teacher that determines the length of the foot used for the measurement. The *kalari* is made according to the body size of the gurukkal; the *kalari* is the teacher, as it were.

The word 'gurukkal' means 'teachers'. The suffix '-kal' is in Malayalam used to indicate a plural, as well as indicating politeness and respect. According to the KKA teacher, the term 'gurukkal' is used for a Kalaripayat teacher for two reasons. It is believed that in the past a Kalaripayat teacher was (probably according to legend) not only an expert in the martial arts, but in other arts as well. The KKA teacher told me of black magic, witchcraft, religion, dance, rhetoric

¹⁶⁰ I will discuss this point more in paragraph 7, chapter 5, in which I draw a parallel between the stages in the life of a student/gurukkal, as described here, with the stages in the life of a Hindu man (*ashrama*).

and politics. As a matter of fact, the KKA gurukkal stated that the Northern Ballads say that the greatest hero of Kerala, Otenan, was an expert in black magic, witchcraft, and some other arts as well¹⁶¹. The KKA teacher told me that “altogether there were, according to the tradition, in those legendary times 64 arts compulsory for a Kalarippayat teacher to learn”.

A second reason for the use of the plural for the Kalarippayat teacher, according to the KKA gurukkal, is that the plural refers to his (Kalarippayat) lineage. The gurukkal is the cumulative result and the embodiment of all the previous teachers of his lineage. He is the container of their thoughts and ideas with respect to the art. The teacher is thus not only one individual, but also many individuals collected in one visible body.

3. The *puttara*

In the southwest corner of each *kalari*¹⁶², in which one or more northern styles are taught, stands the *puttara*, the heart of the *kalari* and of Kalarippayat itself. The *puttara* has the shape of one-quarter slice of a round pyramid with seven steps, made of clay. The mound is the manifestation of the *kalari* goddess. The name of the goddess often varies, but the most widely used name is Bhadrakali or Bhagavati ('mistress'). Zarrilli¹⁶³ covers several of these names, and gives an interpretation of the seven steps as a representation of seven mother-goddesses¹⁶⁴. This interpretation is supported by Kurup and Varrier¹⁶⁵.

The KKA *kalari* does not give a name to the goddess, though. It is just mentioned as the goddess presiding over the art of Kalarippayat. The reason is that the KKA gurukkal is a Muslim, and though he wants to have a 'traditional' *kalari*, by his definition, he prefers to dissociate himself as much as possible from the Hindu religion.

The goddess of the *puttara* is not only the Kalarippayat goddess, representing the art itself, but she is also the earth on which a practitioner trains¹⁶⁶. In the KKA *kalari* as well, she is considered to be the art of Kalarippayat and the *kalari*¹⁶⁷. The goddess is seen as pure *shakti*, or power, and is the female half of the *shiva-shakti* opposition. Shiva is the male principle, hard, straightforward, linear, passive, while Shakti is the female principle, soft, flexible, circular, and active. The principle of *shiva-shakti* is expressed in many exercises of Kalarippayat, such as in the division of the *meippayat* into Shiva and Shakti forms (see chapter 1.3.7).

Though the goddess is certainly not malevolent, because she is *shakti*, she is ferocious and destructive. Zarrilli noticed that in some *kalaris* she was called Kali, the black, destructive and deadly mother goddess¹⁶⁸. The corner in which the *puttara* is situated is called *kanni mula*, or place (root, *mula*) of the virgin (*kanni*). The goddess may be the equivalent of the wild virgin goddess¹⁶⁹ whose worship

¹⁶¹ Cf. Menon, p.86-87

¹⁶² At least, in the *kalaris* I have seen (most of the *kalaris* in the Cannanore and Tellicherry area), and the CVN *kalaris* (Zarrilli, 1998: 68-72)

¹⁶³ Zarrilli, 1998, pp.68-72

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., p72

¹⁶⁵ p.15

¹⁶⁶ Zarrilli, 1998, pp.68-72

¹⁶⁷ There is a possibility that the place where the KKA *kalari* was built was already connected to a goddess related to that particular place (*bhu devi*). I was not able to verify this.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., p.69

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.; the goddess possesses a wild, untamable, power, called *ananku*.

is deeply rooted in the cult of the village deities of South India¹⁷⁰. According to Whitehead the ground of the village was protected by a local village goddess¹⁷¹. The inhabitants of the village lived on her and with her. She was the generative power necessary for the growth of crops. The goddess was the protectress of the village. In the KKA *kalari* the *kalari* goddess is considered the protectress of the *kalari* as well, as she is the *kalari* and the ground on which the *kalari* is built. In the same way that the villagers used the village goddess' power to grow their crops, the *kalari* practitioners use the *kalari* goddess' power to grow their skills.

Often the village goddess was imagined as a group of seven sisters¹⁷². This confirms the Zarrilli, Kurup and Varrier's interpretation of the seven steps of the *puttara* mentioned earlier. The KKA gurukkal equated the seven steps with the seven *chakras* of the body. A *chakra* is an energy center in which the life energy of the body is concentrated. Life energy flows through the body in *nadis*. This system can be compared to blood running through blood vessels. There are seven places where many such *nadis* cross each other, and where there is therefore a lot of life energy present. Meditating on these *chakras* may result in a stimulation of the flow of life energy. When a person is able to stimulate all seven *chakras*, this person will attain liberation or unity with 'God'. One can compare the opening of the *chakras* with reaching seven different stages on the way to 'God'. These stages are levels of self development: the more *chakras* open, the more one advances in the 'understanding' of 'God'. 'Understanding' is seen by the KKA gurukkal as progress in learning. According to him, the seven steps of the *puttara* therefore equal seven stages of 'learning'. This 'learning' is attaining liberation with help of the philosophies underlying Kalarippayat: the more one learns/understands of Kalarippayat, the closer one is to 'God'. In other words, a practitioner advances towards 'God' by practicing Kalarippayat. On each of the seven stages of this process the apprentice is supposed to be able to use certain skills. These skills correspond to a specific *shakti*. This means that the seven stages of self-development are indicated by seven *shaktis*. As each of the seven goddesses is sometimes mentioned as *shakti* as well, we find an indirect confirmation of the interpretation of the steps of the *puttara* as the seven village goddesses¹⁷³.

In the second paragraph of this chapter, I mentioned three stages in the learning process of Kalarippayat. This corresponds to the idea of the seven steps of the *puttara*. The three stages are comparable to the first three steps of the *puttara*. The KKA gurukkal maintained that there is yet another stage, which encompasses the next four steps. The last five stages are internal changes. The difference between stage three and stage four through seven is that the third stage still involves Kalarippayat, while stage four through seven are merely meditative. As I mentioned above, some teachers have reached a point in which they have exchanged Kalarippayat (an 'outer' exercise) for meditation (an 'inner'

¹⁷⁰ See also the book written on this subject by Whitehead (*The Village Gods of South India*, Sumit Publications, New Delhi, 1976). On the subject of the virginity of village goddesses, see, among others: D. Shulman, 1980, *Tamil Temple Myths*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey; G. Obeyesekere, 1981, *The Cult of the Goddess Pattini*, Motilal Banarsidass, New Delhi, part 4-6

¹⁷¹ Whitehead, pp.23-32

¹⁷² Whitehead, p.32 and many other places in his book. Sometimes the village deities appear in a group of eight, but one is opposing the other seven (see D. Shulman, 1980, *Tamil Temple Myths*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey). This opposition does not exist in the *kalari*, unless one wants to see the *shiva-shakti* principle as a specific manifestation of such opposition.

¹⁷³ Whitehead, pp.31-32

exercise). Those people are supposed to have reached the higher steps of the *puttara*.

The *puttara* is the representation of the *kalari* goddess. The mound constitutes the very heart of the art. The *kalari* goddess presides over the *kalari*, in much the same way as the South Indian village goddess presides over a village. The *kalari* goddess is a true deity, which makes the *kalari* a temple. Having lived in Kerala for several years, I have never encountered any Kerali who did not consider the *kalari* as a house of god, and as such the *kalari* is treated by Keralis with the uttermost respect¹⁷⁴.

4. The gurukkal as a ritualist¹⁷⁵

There are two different types of *kalaris*: ritually permanent *kalaris*, and ritually temporary *kalaris*. The difference between these two types is the way and by whom the *puttara* is consecrated. First I will discuss the temporary *kalari*, because the KKA *kalari* is an example of the latter.

In general, the *puttara* does not automatically represent the *kalari* goddess. The goddess should be invited and 'drawn' into the mound, so that the mound 'comes to life'. A gurukkal, being the embodiment of the tradition, has the power to 'infuse' life into the *puttara*. He accomplishes by this act the sacramental union of the *puttara* and the goddess. This act should be performed at the start of the training season. When the training season is finished, the gurukkal releases the *shakti*. From this moment it is no longer necessary to pay the daily respects to the *puttara*. This makes this type of *kalari* ritually temporary.

The KKA gurukkal, however, is a Muslim, and as such he leaves the consecration ritual of the *puttara* to others. In 1997 I saw the KKA gurukkal ask his teacher, Chandrashekar Gurukkal, to perform the consecration for him.

Some *kalaris* are consecrated by a professional priest. This makes such *kalaris* ritually permanent, since the *shakti* will always remain inside the *puttara*. As a consequence, the family of the gurukkal will remain responsible for the daily *puja*, even though such *kalari* is not in use anymore¹⁷⁶.

During the period in which people are practicing in the *kalari*, the goddess should be worshipped each day. In the KKA *kalari* this is done by lighting an oil lamp and burning incense. In my opinion, the complete training itself can be considered as worship of the goddess. The training starts with greeting the *puttara*. In the KKA *kalari* the practitioner should empty his mind and concentrate solely on Kalarippayat. The system of Kalarippayat and the goddess are one and the same (see paragraph 2), because Kalarippayat originates from the divine: the *puttara* is the representation of the divine source of the martial system. Concentrating on Kalarippayat means concentrating on the goddess. When the mind of a practitioner is concentrated on Kalarippayat, the art herself becomes

¹⁷⁴ The presence of the *kalari* goddess within the *kalari* has its counterpart in the deity that protects the house in which one lives (*vastupurusha*). A similar thing can be seen in the architecture of many Hindu temples in India: they are built according to a ground plan, which is equaled to a deity (*vastupurusha mandala*) (Khanna 1981: 143-146).

¹⁷⁵ The following information I obtained during Oral Transmission Periods I, II, and III. I collected this information by observing several ceremonies conducted by a priest in the KKA *kalari* during the festival of Navaratri, and during talks with gurukkals with a Hindu background, such as Sri Jayan Gurukkal and Chandrashekar Gurukkal (more about the Navaratri festival in chapter 5.2). The KKA gurukkal was also a good source of information about Hindu customs.

¹⁷⁶ Cf. Zarrilli, 1998, pp.65-66

for him actual through his knowledge of the art. If the art is actualized, so is the goddess: this means that for that practitioner time and space are transformed into the sacred space and time of the goddess. At the end of a training session a similar act is performed by the practitioner: again the practitioner pays respects to *puttara*. Then, for him, secular time is restored again.

I have never seen the KKA gurukkal light the oil lamp and the incense for the *puttara*. His most senior students, who are Hindu, always do this job. Though I did not directly ask him why, he made it clear when talking about the subject that as a Muslim he would not perform such acts. Though he expressed his deep respect for Hindu customs, he said to me that “everybody should follow their own path, but this is not my way”.¹⁷⁷

The KKA gurukkal performs his ‘meditation’ on Kalarippayat not in front of the *puttara*, but in the direction of Mecca. The hands are fold in the same way as in the *naemaz* or Islamic prayer of the Sunni¹⁷⁸. By this act the KKA gurukkal performs the *niyyaet*, a part of the prayer (*naemaz*). Someone who wants to pray in accordance with Islamic tradition should first empty his or her mind and focus or concentrate solely on God¹⁷⁹. This, according to the KKA gurukkal, is called *niyyaet*. The deed of meditation in front of the *puttara*, and the *niyyaet* are, in the view of the KKA gurukkal, equal to each other.

Because the gurukkal has reached a certain union with Kalarippayat, which has a divine origin, he is a medium or a bridge to the metaphysical powers that created the universe. The tradition (*sampradayam*) has become one with his soul. The size of the *kalari* is measured in ‘feet’. The size of these ‘feet’ is the size of the foot of the gurukkal, which identifies him with the building itself (see chapter 3.1). The gurukkal *is* the *sampradayam*, he *is* the *kalari*, he *is* the manifestation of the divine, i.e. the *kalari* goddess. In this light, he is therefore able to transcend the limits of space and time, and, through his teachings, he helps his students enter the space and time of the divine. Kalarippayat, as we see it now, is the product of a culmination of the divine origin and the voices of all the masters in the lineage of that *sampradayam*. All are presented and made present by the gurukkal: the gurukkal opens the door to the (mythical) history of the *sampradayam*. The gurukkal is said to convert the open space with its mud walls into a place where the divine is present: he is able to convert a piece of land miraculously into a *kalari*.

The gurukkal, supposed to be closely related to the divine, has the ability to invoke the divine as well. He is able to invite the *kalari* goddess and he is the embodiment of the divine martial tradition. He is, to a certain degree, *the* ritualist of the *kalari*¹⁸⁰.

5. How to enroll as a student (shishya)

Traditionally, it is not easy for somebody to become a student of a teacher. In the past, children belonging to certain strata of society may have been easily accepted by a *kalari* teacher. But nowadays family ties and the caste system

¹⁷⁷ Private conversation with the KKA gurukkal in fourth week of Oral Transmission Period II

¹⁷⁸ The *naemaz* is done for Sunnis and Shi’ites in a similar way, with one difference: when standing straight realizing the intention of the prayer (*niyyaet*), Sunnis fold their hands, while Shi’ites let their arms hang alongside their body.

¹⁷⁹ Private conversation with the KKA gurukkal in fourth week of Oral Transmission Period II

¹⁸⁰ Ritualist is defined here as somebody who represents the divine, and who is able to act as a bridge between the followers of that divine and the divine itself.

hardly seem to play a role. An aspiring student has to pass a kind of examination. The teacher will check the character of the aspiring student, and see if he or she is really willing to learn the art. Several gurukkals told me that they did this test because they are afraid that some people will misuse the knowledge of the art and will harm others¹⁸¹. From my experience, this is partly true, but the real reasons are deeper than the one mentioned.

As I explained in the first paragraph of this chapter, many teachers are very afraid to teach his students certain techniques. It is possible that a student will turn against his teacher and beat him. This does not have to imply any physical contact; just the fact that a student would surpass his teacher is often not appreciated by the gurukkal. The gurukkal does, on the other hand, need talented practitioners with whom he can show off in competitions, so that the fame of his *kalari* will rise. The solution is to pick out talented students, but also students who are naturally very loyal to their gurukkal.

A second reason is in line with what the above gurukkals told me. The political climate of Kerala is very explosive. In the few years I was living in Malabar, at least every month there was a one-day transport strike. This meant that not only did the public transport not work, but also private means of transport were not allowed in the street. If a vehicle would drive on a road, the locals would force the vehicle to stop. The strikes were well organized by political parties or groups who wanted to protest against certain measures of the local, state¹⁸², or national government. Several times I witnessed that such a strike was a protest against the murder of a (usually Keralan) politician. When I was living in Kerala, such a situation existed almost every few months. I remember that in 1997 a politician was murdered by somebody with a small sword. Furthermore there were tensions between Muslim and Hindu extremists. Most teachers want to avoid at all cost that their *kalari* be involved in any way with those people who want to express their political or religious opinion by violent means. Foreign students are not involved in all this, so it is safe for a gurukkal to teach them.

For these reasons a student will not be accepted right away. One of my senior fellow-students got permission to start a *kalari* of his own. At first he was only teaching small children and some neighbors he had befriended. Then a boy came along and wanted to be taught. My senior fellow-student let him watch the training, and told him to come back a week later. When the boy appeared at the appointed date, he was sent home, with the excuse that my senior fellow-student had no time to teach him at that moment, because something had intervened. The boy got another appointment, this time for three days later. Again the boy appeared at the training hour, and this time he was only allowed to watch. For five months the boy was sent off none the wiser. At last he was accepted, because he had shown himself to be loyal and able to persevere.

The KKA *kalari* never made problems for foreigners, however. If a foreigner was willing to stay at the KKA *kalari* for a longer period, loyalty and perseverance were already proven. Moreover, a *kalari* with an international name automatically gains more status than a *kalari* with only a local reputation. I have seen that often more techniques were taught to senior foreign students than to local senior students. When I asked the KKA gurukkal what the reason for this was, I was told that foreigners go home, and pose no danger to the *kalari*, since they are far away. They are just an advertisement for the art. Local senior students are

¹⁸¹ Soman Gurukkal, Sri Jayan Gurukkal, and Chandrashekar Gurukkal

¹⁸² The state of Kerala

dangerous, because many of them become arrogant and do things against their own gurukkal and *kalari*. This opinion of the KKA teacher confirms the first reason I gave for the reluctance of gurukkals to teach students: a certain fear of problems with their students.

These considerations also played a role in my own acceptance as a student. As I mentioned in paragraph 3 of the Introduction, another reason for this was the fact that I was introduced to the KKA teacher by one of his senior students, whom I had met by chance in Sri Lanka.

6. The ritual of acceptance¹⁸³

When a teacher decides to accept a person as his student, the aspirant has to undergo a short ritual. The following description of the ritual is based on what takes place in the KKA *kalari*.

The apprentice has to go to the *puttara*, stand straight in front of it with the palms of his hands pressed together pointing upwards, like the well known Indian greeting. Both hands should be either in front of the chest or, preferably, held in such a way that the thumbs are the corner of the eye socket next to the nose. The lower arms and the legs should be closed. The aspirant should empty his or her mind, and fill it with concentration on the art. A few moments later the aspiring student touches the floor with the right hand while stepping one step forward with the right foot. Then he or she touches the forehead and the heart with the right hand. A one-rupee coin is put on the lowest step of the *puttara*.

The student now steps in front of the Ganesha altar (*ganapatittara*), which is located to the right of the *puttara*, at the base of the western wall¹⁸⁴. Respect is paid to the elephant-headed god in the same way, with the exception of the coin. Then the student likewise pays respect to the altar of the past gurukkals of the *sampradayam* (*guruttara*), located on the right side of the altar Ganesha, at the base of the western *kalari* wall.

Then it is the teacher's turn. The aspirant goes to the gurukkal, and the teacher places his hands on the head of the student. Then both take each other's right hand in such a way that the thumbs are hooking into each other. The palms of the hands are then pressed together, while keeping them in front of the chest. Both teacher and student bow their heads towards each other. Then both bring their right hand to the forehead and then to the hand, in the same way as the gesture performed in front of the altars of the *kalari*. Hereafter I will refer to this particular handshake as the *kalari* handshake.

This simple ritual is observed by all the masters I have known¹⁸⁵. The Hindu teachers add a small thing to it, though. After the gurukkal has placed his hands on the head of the student, the student reaches to touch the feet of the teacher. The aspirant touches a foot of the gurukkal with each hand. Since Islam says, according to the KKA teacher, that everybody is equal in the eyes of God, nobody should bend down for another person. For this reason the KKA teacher,

¹⁸³ I collected this information partly through talks with several gurukkals (Soman Gurukkal, Sri Jayan Gurukkal, Chandrashekar Gurukkal and the KKA gurukkal), and partly through observations during the KKA *kalari* practice.

¹⁸⁴ Because the KKA *kalari* has a Muslim teacher, there are no statues within the building. See also the next chapter for a description of the *kalari*.

¹⁸⁵ Though I have seen more teachers observing the same ritual, my main informants are Soman Gurukkal, Sri Jayan Gurukkal, Chandrashekar Gurukkal and the KKA gurukkal. The first three persons are Hindu, and the last is a Muslim.

being a Muslim, has omitted that part of the ritual in which the student touches the feet of the gurukkal.

I want to give the meaning of this ritual by dividing it into the following parts:

- The greeting to the *puttara*, the *sampradayam*, and the gurukkal
- The greeting to Ganesha
- the handshake
- the presentation of the coin

6.1 The greeting to the *puttara*, the *sampradayam*, and the gurukkal

I explained in paragraph 3 of this chapter that the *puttara* represents the *kalari* goddess and the system of Kalarippayat itself, with its seven stages of ‘learning’ and ‘understanding’. In other words, the *puttara* is the embodiment of the *kalari* as a building and of Kalarippayat as an (martial) art. The altar of the past gurukkals (*guruttara*) represents the lineage or *sampradayam* through which the art has been handed down to the present student. The gurukkal is the last chain in this lineage. By greeting the *puttara*, the *guruttara*, and the gurukkal, one pays respect to the origin of the art, the ‘martial lineage’, and the present-day embodiment of the art, respectively.

6.2 The greeting to Ganesha

The role of the Elephant-headed god Ganesha is threefold. Firstly, he is the lord of obstacles. He creates them and he takes them away. Before any undertaking one should seek Ganesha’s help. Secondly, Ganesha is seen as the tutelary deity of Kalarippayat, because he is the god of wisdom as well. Furthermore one can observe Ganesha’s connection with Kalarippayat in many forms¹⁸⁶, because in some postures the trunk and tusk of Ganesha is mimicked by stretching one arm out (this arm is not kept tight: it should be flexible like a whip), while the other arm is kept tightly bent, with the fist next to the ear and the elbow pointed forward¹⁸⁷. Nobody could give me an explanation in terms of a practical application for the occurrence of these kinds of poses in the exercises. The KKA gurukkal told me that it might be a cultural aspect within the forms.

6.3 The handshake

According to the KKA gurukkal, the meaning of the handshake is the following. When the teacher places his hands on the head of the apprentice, he accepts him or her as his (*kalari*-) child. The status of such child is considered very important, and very close to the status of the teacher’s own children. As a confirmation of this relationship, the mutual trust is symbolized by the handshake. Both teacher and student bow towards each other, because both are equal in this relation: the bond of the father towards the child is equal to the bond of the child towards the father. The hands are clasped together in a specific way. This allows each others’ ‘life energy’, which flows through a *chakra* located in the center of the palm of the hand, to mingle¹⁸⁸. This creates symbolically a bond between these two people.

¹⁸⁶ According to the KKA teacher. I have noticed this only within the Northern Style forms, however.

¹⁸⁷ Sri Jayan Gurukkal’s version of the Arappukai style has another ‘Ganesha posture’: keep both hands open and bring the thumb of the right hand to the left earlobe, and the thumb of the left hand to the right earlobe. This posture indicates the ears of the elephant god (source: Sri Jayan Gurukkal).

¹⁸⁸ On ‘life-energy’, see chapter 1.1.1

The handshake as a sign of a bond between two people also plays a role between the students. The KKA gurukkal insisted that the students had to greet one with the handshake: this, according to the KKA gurukkal, would confirm the bond between the students and create a kind of 'brotherhood' between them.

6.4 Giving the coin

The interpretation I give here of the act of the giving the coin is based on interviews with several teachers, such as my own teacher and some of the teachers of my teacher¹⁸⁹. The explanation given to me dealt with a particular type of symbolism, which I will call the symbolism of the beggar. To beg is a sacred act, because the beggar shows that he is not attached to earthly goods. To be unattached by earthly desires is a necessary condition to reach union with the Supreme Being. The idea is that if a person lives like a beggar, he or she is never sure to have shelter for the night or to have something to eat. This implies that the beggar has to have trust that the Supreme Power will provide everything necessary to live.

The KKA teacher, a Muslim, gave me an example from the point of view of his Sufi background. The Sufi shows that he is not attached to earthly goods, and that he trusts that God will take care of him at all times. In Sufism this trust (*taewakkol*) is centralized in its belief system; it denotes the state of mind (*maeqam*) that the Sufi has reached. The mystic has reached the highest state of mind when there is no doubt that God will provide help. One of the main symbols of Sufism is the begging bowl. This bowl symbolizes the *taewakkol* in God. Before going to sleep the Sufi turns the bowl upside down, to be sure that nothing remains inside the bowl. The next day, after all, God will provide the mystic again with His help.

Chandrashekar Gurukkal, a Hindu, gave me another example from a Hindu point of view. When Hindus go on pilgrimage in India, they should only wear a *longi* (Indian loincloth)¹⁹⁰. They go with hardly any other possessions and hardly any means to live. With this they emphasize their trust in God, and they show that they relinquish any possession. God will provide any necessary means to undertake the pilgrimage; He will take care of food, means of transportation, and if necessary a shelter.

Thus the true beggar is a man of God, a 'saint' so to speak. The beggar is also able to help other people to reach the same state as he or she has reached. When a person gives something to a beggar, for example, that person divests himself of the given money or item. When giving, the giver renounces earthly desires at that moment, in the same way that the beggar does. The beggar helps the normal man to a higher state of mind by giving anybody the possibility of giving, and thus relinquishing worldly goods¹⁹¹. Therefore, to give and to receive are two sides of the same coin. To give helps the giver to become the receiver. In other words, the receiver (beggar) brings the giver close to God. By giving, one shows nonattachment to worldly goods and affairs, a readiness to *become*

¹⁸⁹ This means, that the explanation remains within the *sampradayam*.

¹⁹⁰ This dress code is observed in South India, at least

¹⁹¹ I noticed that in Malabar money is often given in order to avoid having a beggar begrudge somebody's wealth. This begrudging can cause bad luck and bring disaster to one's wealth and health. This interpretation, to my knowledge, does not play a role inside the KKA *kalari*, when one of its own students (who have been already through a 'screening' process) wants to participate in certain lessons.

humble. It is an honor to give, and a display of mental enlightenment to receive without expectation.

Begging has a twofold meaning. On one hand begging is to be humble, but humbleness is the way to reach divinity. By putting oneself in a lower position, one is, on the other hand, elevated, as it were, to divine status. To be humble is not caring about one's position in society, not to care what others might think, not to care about possessions, being unattached to worldly matters. When one has become a beggar, only two entities are important, the beggar, that is the human, and the (ultimate) giver, the divine.

The trust in God and the relationship between giver and receiver is mirrored in the ritual of acceptance of a student by a Kalarippayat teacher. The student asks for tuition, and is therefore a beggar. When a student is accepted, he should have trust in his teacher, and obey him with this trust in everything his teacher tells him to do. On the other hand the teacher receives money from the student. With this act the system (by means of the teacher) puts itself in the receiving position; it shows its humbleness and places itself on a lower level than the student. As mentioned, to become humble is the main step toward divinity. By showing itself as lower, the system turns out to be on a higher level of consciousness. The teacher then becomes the one who has, with respect to Kalarippayat, a higher state of mind. By becoming the receiver during the short ritual, the gurukkal shows that he is the 'master beggar', who provides the apprentice with the possibility of reaching the same level of expertise as he himself has.

The teacher-student relationship is equal to the divine-man relationship, because the teacher is the embodiment of a tradition rooted deeply in the divine, while the student comes to the teacher to be uplifted from his ignorant state, and eventually to acquire the relationship with the divine him- or herself, and to participate in that divine.

The crux of the story is that the teacher is not only giver, but also a receiver, symbolized by the acceptance of the coin. Traditionally a student gives a donation to the teacher as a fee. That means that there is no fixed price for the teachings. A student gives what he wants and is able to give, and the teacher should accept the gift without looking at it. This is an ideal situation, however: most of the (present-day) teachers who are trying to use traditional ways of teaching do look at the amount of the gift; and, more commonly, the gift has been replaced by a fixed tuition fee.

A ritual similar to the acceptance rite of the KKA *kalari* is described by Barbosa, a Portuguese who lived in Kerala for a period in the 16th century. He observed the following custom when a young Kalarippayat warrior wanted to join the forces of a local king:

The youth who wishes to become a knight, calls together those of his kinsmen who are already knights, that they may come to do him honour, and thus may join to him, and take him honourably to the palace, having had a time appointed for this by the king. When he is come to the king's palace he commands him to enter with as many as are with him, whereupon he lays before the king on a leaf three small coins (...).

The king then asks him if he will maintain the customs and rules of the other Nayres, and he and his kinsmen respond 'Yes'. Then the king

commands him to gird on his right side a sword with a red sheath, and causes him to approach near to himself and lays his right hand on his head, saying therewith certain words, that no one may hear, seemingly a prayer, and then embraces him saying 'Paje Bugramarca', that is to say 'Protect cows and Bramenes' (...).¹⁹²

We recognize a similar ritual performed today in the *kalari*. The following table maps the events:

| Act no. | Barbosa | <i>Kalari</i> |
|---------|-----------------------------|--|
| 1. | Entering on command of king | Entering on command of gurukkal |
| 2. | Giving three coins to king | Placing one coin on <i>puttara</i> |
| 3. | Asking pledge | - |
| 4. | King gives weapons | [Gurukkal gives weapon] |
| 5. | King blesses young knight | Gurukkal blesses apprentice |
| 6. | King says secret words | Not known to me, may be observed in other <i>kalaris</i> |
| 7. | King embraces new knight | Gurukkal gives handshake |

Looking at the table, we see that the gurukkal in the KKA *kalari* has the same place in the *kalari* as the king in Barbosa's time. The first act is the same in both cases. The second act of the giving of three coins in Barbosa's time has been replaced by one single coin in the KKA *kalari*. The pledge (the third act) is not asked in the *kalari*, but it is already assumed that the student should be loyal to his teacher. Though the pledge is not taken within the ritual itself, it is indirectly taken during the teacher's acceptance test, as I have described in section 5 above. In the case of the fourth act of giving the weapons, we should realize that the same acceptance rite is repeated each time a student starts to learn the use of a new weapon. On that occasion the weapon is solemnly handed over to the student. The act of giving a particular weapon to the student is performed before the blessing, which means that the same sequence is performed for the introduction of a new knight to a king in Barbosa's description. In the table I showed this event by putting it between square brackets.

The fifth act is that in the KKA *kalari* the apprentice is blessed by the gurukkal, which is similar to Barbosa's description. In the case of the sixth act, while the king says secret words to his students, according to Barbosa, I have not seen the KKA gurukkal do so. The king's embrace of the seventh act is replaced in the KKA *kalari* by the *kalari* handshake, the sign of 'brotherhood'¹⁹³.

Though there are differences, the scheme of the acceptance ritual and its intention is the same for the king and the gurukkal. The biggest difference is that the KKA gurukkal does not say any secret words to the student. The connection between the acceptance rite of the *kalari* and the king becomes even more clear when Barbosa says further that in Kozhikode (Calicut) the ritual even took place in the *kalari*, and not in the palace of the king¹⁹⁴.

Whatever meaning is given to the acceptance ritual, it is clearly a part of the martial culture of Kerala, expressing loyalty and the bond to the *kalari*. Through

¹⁹² Barbosa , Vol. II, pp. 45-46

¹⁹³ See above, paragraph 6.3

¹⁹⁴ Barbosa , Vol II, p.47

this ritual we are able to connect the past and present of Kalarippayat. Furthermore we can say that apparently the ritual is not specific for the KKA *kalari*: it is more commonly used, at least within the cycles of the local (i.e. Malabarian) martial arts. We can learn from this comparison that at least partially the Kalarippayat of the KKA *kalari* is embedded in the broader context of the culture and history of Malabar, and that this comparison can help us to understand and analyze KKA Kalarippayat in this context.

7. Hierarchy

The trust in and loyalty to a teacher by a student borders almost on worship and veneration. What about the teacher of the teacher? What status does he have? In my experience the teacher of the gurukkal has a more or less ambivalent position. On one hand the student of the gurukkal does not give his trust and loyalty to the teacher of the gurukkal, but only to the gurukkal, on the other hand that teacher of the gurukkal represents the system as well, and he is the man whom the direct teacher of the student should obey. In practice the advice of the teacher's teacher is taken very seriously, and it is usually decisive. I will illustrate this point with a case in which a student fell into disgrace.

When a student learns Kalarippayat, the teacher does not directly interfere with the training of the student. The student learns the art initially from a senior. Even when the teacher wants to correct a student, he does not tell the correction directly to that student, but he tells the senior, who, in turn, should correct the student. A senior does not have the authority to teach the student something new without having received specific orders from the gurukkal to do so. It is the gurukkal, and no one else, who is responsible for his students.

Some of the seniors got permission to establish a *kalari* themselves, though they did not attain the state of gurukkal. Formally their *kalari* is under the supervision of the gurukkal. A senior is not permitted to give indications to his fellow-senior's students, or even to correct their mistakes. This should always go via the gurukkal himself.

The case I want to refer to is a senior student whom I will call 'A'.¹⁹⁵ 'A' got several warnings from the gurukkal, because he was not careful enough with younger students. He had caused several small accidents. One day a student of a fellow-senior of 'A' trained in the *kalari* of the gurukkal. 'A' and one of the gurukkal's teachers were also present in the *kalari*. The gurukkal's teacher was the highest in rank. The senior in question, 'A', started to teach new things to his fellow-senior's student, without consulting the elder gurukkal. The man felt insulted, and went to his pupil, the gurukkal of the *kalari*. He told him what happened, and that the senior was not careful with younger students. The old gurukkal demanded that the senior be expelled from the *kalari*. Without questioning it, the gurukkal of the *kalari* went to the senior and told him that he was no longer welcome.

We learn from this example several facts with respect to the hierarchy inside the *kalari*. Firstly, the eldest teacher in the line has the highest authority, which often overrules the authority of younger teachers in that line. Secondly, branches within the *sampradayam* are not permitted to have authority over each other: when two fellow students become teachers themselves, they are not permitted to have any authority over each other's students. The idea behind the latter is that each teacher of that *sampradayam* has his own personal view on the art. This

¹⁹⁵ This story I witnessed during Oral Transmission Period III

view is shaped by personal convictions and bodily abilities. For example, some people can kick well, and will develop a specialization in this direction, while others have very strong arms, and will develop their abilities in another direction of the art. Within the system it is not possible that one interpretation of the art takes precedence over another, nor does any person behind those interpretations take precedence over another. Because Kalaripayat is taught by means of ‘martial concepts’ and not by actual ‘techniques’, personal views will not affect the result of the transmission of the art as such (according to the KKA gurukkal)¹⁹⁶. I will come back to this idea in the next paragraph.

Within the relationship between the students of a *kalari*, seniors and young students are always regarded as equals. In addition to two foreign students, about twelve people who came on a regular basis were housed in the KKA *kalari* (in 1998). Usually it was only crowded on Sundays, while in the week there were at maximum six people present. When somebody starts the training, first respects are paid to the three altars on the western wall, just as during the acceptance rite, and then the teacher is greeted by using the *kalari* handshake. The student should then approach his seniors and apply the same handshake. Those who are junior to the student should come themselves. It is important that the *kalari* handshake is used as a sign of ‘brotherhood’, because, as during the acceptance ritual, the life energy is exchanged via the *chakra* on the palm of the hand. Moreover, it is a display of mutual respect. It acts as a confirmation of being part of a particular Kalaripayat institution. Even when students meet each other on the street, the handshake is performed very quickly – almost imperceptibly.

8. Means of transmission

The Kalaripayat of the KKA *kalari* is taught through the practice of ‘martial concepts’. As I explained in chapter 1.1.1, the idea behind teaching such ‘concepts’ is, that when a Kalaripayat practitioner is attacked, he or she will automatically move the body according to the learned ‘martial concepts’. They are repeated so many times during practice that they become second nature to the student. During a defense or attack the ‘martial concept’ flows into a ‘technique’. The chosen ‘technique’ depends solely on the situation in the fight. This means that ‘martial concepts’ can be interpreted in a variety of ways (or ‘techniques’).

The teaching through ‘martial concepts’ gives space for a mystical interpretation of the forms as well, because the interpretation and application of such movement is given only *according to the actual situation*. I mentioned in sections 2 and 3 of this chapter that when a teacher (or student) reaches the higher levels of knowledge within the Kalaripayat system, the importance of body movements decreases, and the importance of meditation and contemplation increases. In this light the meaning given to the ‘conceptual’ body movements – the ‘martial concepts’ – of the art shifts from a practical fighting application to a more metaphysical interpretation. Body movements are no longer a means to survive a fight, but practices to reach enlightenment: they are a *sadhana*¹⁹⁷, a way or manner to uplift yourself towards the divine.

¹⁹⁶ On ‘concepts’ and ‘techniques’, see chapter 1.1.1

¹⁹⁷ Sanskrit. Some meanings of *sadhana* given by the Monier-Williams dictionary are: any means of effecting or accomplishing worship, leading straight to a goal, proceeding (Monier-Williams, *Sanskrit-*

Such interpretation is made possible because a 'martial concept' does not have a clear prescribed meaning, but can be freely explained, as long as it obeys the boundaries laid out by the philosophical foundations of the art.

The KKA gurukkal advises students who attain the level of gurukkal to perform the exercises in a slow manner, contemplative and meditative, in order to become one with the art. Union with the art, which has a divine origin, ultimately evolves into union with the divine itself. The 'martial concepts' are interpreted in such a way that they are used as a means to reach this goal.

The KKA teacher told me that the transmission of 'martial concepts' instead of 'techniques' should positively influence the student's trust in the originality of the art. The KKA gurukkal maintained that though 'techniques' can become distorted during the transmission from one teacher to another, errors during the transmission of knowledge will not do irreparable damage to a 'martial concept', because a 'concept' is about an idea. Even when a student learns that 'martial concept' from a bad teacher, who does not really understand the art himself, it will not be 'lost lessons' for that student: according to the KKA teacher, somebody who understands the essence of the art can restore the original. The KKA teacher stated frequently that the reason why Kalaripayat is generally taught by means of 'martial concepts' is to secure the 'purity' of its exercises.

On the one hand, the fact that the art has an almost sacred status makes teachers try to transmit their knowledge as correctly as possible. On the other hand, one cannot deny that some changes in the art have taken place. In the following I want to put forward a reason for how this could happen.

The art of Kalaripayat is handed down from one teacher to another. As I have indicated before, the (Malayalam) plural form of the word *guru* indicates the gurukkal, because he represents all teachers who were living and teaching before him in the *sampradayam*. This may imply that one should be able to hear an echo of the voices of these teachers within the exercises. In my own opinion we can surely see the thoughts of past teacher within certain forms. I will show this by using the example of the forms as taught in the KKA *kalari* for wielding a short stick. There are in total eight forms. The first three forms contain different 'martial concepts', while the structure of these three forms show a similar build-up. The rest of the forms are basically the same as form number three, with some additional movements. The table below lays out the structure of the short stick forms. The meaning of the symbols used in this table is as follows. A form from the Northern Style short stick consists of what I will call 'lines'. A 'line' is a part of the form in which a practitioner moves from the eastern side to the western side of the *kalari* and back (that means up and down the longitudinal direction of the *kalari*). In the table the information in the column 'actions in a form' says something about the different 'martial concepts' used in the short stick forms. The first action of short stick form 1 is 1.1A. The first number says that the line occurs for the first time in form number 1. The second number refers to the line itself, and the letter (in this example the 'A') refers to a set of actions or 'body movements'. The total of all actions of form 1 is '1.1A; 1.1B; 1.2A':

- all three sets of actions appear for the first time in form number 1, because the first number is a '1'
- line 1 consists of two different sets of 'martial concepts', A and B

- line 2 consists of one set of 'martial concepts', A, which is the same as set A of line 1

As a second example I want to explain the fourth form. In the fourth form the total of all actions is '4.1A = 3.1A; 4.1B = 3.1B+C; 4.2A = 3.2A; 4.2B = 3.2B; 4.3A = 3.3A'. 4.1A has the following meaning: set of actions A (which is *not* the same set of 'body movements' as set A in form 1, but refers to the first set of actions in form 4) are performed in line 1 of form 4. '4.1A = 3.1A' says that this set is the same as the set of actions A performed in the first line belonging to form 3. Likewise, '4.1B = 3.1B+C' means that set of actions B of line 1 in form 4 is the same as both sets of actions B and C performed in the first line of form 3. The rest of the row 'actions of a form', belonging to the form 4 in the table, have a similar explanation.

As a last example I want to explain '5.2B = 3.2B (part 1)+E+3.2B(part 2)', to be found in the table under the fifth form. This means that 'body movement' set B, performed in line 2 of the fifth form is the same as the first part of 'body movement' set B belonging to line 2 of form 3, plus addition E, plus the second part of 'body movements' B belonging to line 2 of form 3. In other words: set of actions '3.2B' is broken into two and an addition is placed between the two parts. The result of this has become set of actions '5.2B'.

| Short stick form | Actions in a form |
|------------------|---|
| 1 | 1.1A; 1.1B; 1.2A (repeat all 3 times) |
| 2 | 2.1A; 2.1B; 2.2A; 1.1B; 1.2A |
| 3 | 3.1A; 3.1B; 3.2A; 3.2B; 3.3A |
| 4 | 4.1A = 3.1A; 4.1B = 3.1B+C; 4.2A = 3.2A; 4.2B = 3.2B; 4.3A = 3.3A |
| 5 | 5.1A = 3.1A; 5.1B = 4.1B+D; 5.2B = 3.2A; 5.2B = 3.2B(part 1)+E+3.2B(part 2); 5.3A = 3.3A |
| 6 | 6.1A = 3.1A; 6.1B = 5.1B+F; 6.2A = 3.2A; 6.2B = 5.2B(part 1)+G+5.2B(part 2); 6.3A = 3.3A |
| 7 | 7.1A = 3.1A; 7.1B = 6.1B+H; 7.2A = 3.2A; 7.2B = 6.2B(part 1)+I+6.2B(part 2); 7.3A = 3.2A; 7.3B = 6.2B(part 1)+J+6.2B(part 2); 7.4A = 3.3A |
| 8 | 8.1A = 3.1A; 8.1B = 7.1B; 8.2A = 3.2A; 8.2B = 7.2B; 8.3A = 3.2A; 8.3B = 7.2B(part 1)+K+7.2B(part 2); 8.4A = 3.3A |

From the table it becomes clear how forms four to eight are based on form number three, and that for each following form some extra steps are added, usually at a resting point in the form. A resting point is a moment in which there is a short stop in the form, because at that point the movements do not flow from one into another. An example of such point is at the end of a line.

The repeating pattern is not only found in the short stick forms, but in all weapon forms of the KKA Northern Style, except the dagger or *katara* form, because there is only one. However, the KKA teacher was not satisfied with the *katara* form, so he introduced a second form, which was basically the same as the original one, with some additional movements. When I confronted the KKA teacher with my findings about the weapon forms, and asked him if the teachers of the past could have passed on their view on the art through extra forms based on an existing form with their own additions, he thought this was unlikely.

However this contradicts the fact that he himself added a second form for the *katara*, which is based on the original and includes his own additions. In short, this kind of change within the forms of the art can be described as follows. The transmission of the art took and takes place through the teaching of ‘martial concepts’. But at the same time there is and was a certain reluctance on the part of some teachers to change certain forms. This is probably because of the sanctity of the art. Instead they just added their ideas to an existing form, and created an extra form in the group of forms related to a specific item of the art.

Nevertheless there were teachers who did change existing forms, because there is a difference between the *meippayat* of the various Arappukai¹⁹⁸ schools. When looking at all these different *meippayat* forms, one must admit, however, that the ‘martial concept’ and the pattern of these *meippayat* forms are always maintained. Such changes often involve merely a shift in (for example) hand positions (*mudras*), which will not affect the form as a ‘concept’. This is in contrast to the kind of change I described above for the short stick form, in which because of the extra additions, the pattern (of footwork) is not maintained. A technical analysis of the *meippayat* is, however, beyond the scope of our subject.

9. Gender and Kalarippayat

The transmission of knowledge does not necessarily follow a male line. I have seen several girls practice Kalarippayat, especially in the Hindu *kalaris*¹⁹⁹. During the periods in which I trained in the KKA *kalari*, only for a few months did I see a little Hindu girl. Moreover, I have never seen a female gurukkal in Kerala²⁰⁰. This is very peculiar, because one of the most famous Kalarippayat warriors was a woman called Unniyarcha²⁰¹. Though no gurukkal I have met has ever objected to girls in the *kalari*, there are, in my opinion, some other reasons why there are so few female compared to male students.

We must take into account that Malabar is a very strict society regarding the place of women, in my experience. Many Malabaris prohibit their daughters from going out alone in the street. As an example I will mention the following incident, which happened in the last month of Oral Transmission Period I. Sri Jayan Gurukkal owned a medical clinic for *kalari* treatment (see chapter 4). A girl was working there. Because I used to know Sri Jayan Gurukkal very well, I was also acquainted with that girl. For a few months I did not see her. Then, by chance, I met her somewhere in Cannanore. I greeted her, and asked how she was doing. She was startled and walked away. Two days later I saw the girl again in the office of Sri Jayan’s clinic. She apologized for her behavior, and told me that unmarried Keralan women are not allowed to talk on the street to strange men. This story illustrates my experience that there is a certain strict attitude towards the way a girl is supposed to behave. For Muslim girls this is even more true. I was often invited for a visit by my Muslim friends, and by the KKA gurukkal. Although they knew me very well, I never saw any women or girls in their houses; the women and girls always remained in the kitchen or another closed part of the house. I never experienced this with Hindu friends; in their houses the woman of

¹⁹⁸ I have seen the Arappukai style of the KKA gurukkal, Sri Jayan Gurukkal, and the CVN *kalari*

¹⁹⁹ Examples are the *kalaris* of Soman Gurukkal and Sri Jayan Gurukkal

²⁰⁰ Though I don’t know all the *kalaris* in Kerala, I know the name of many gurukkals in Kerala (a list of 64 *kalaris* and gurukkals can also be obtained from Zarrilli (1998: 248-253), and none of them are female.

²⁰¹ Unniyarcha played an important role in the Northern Ballads, see Menon, pp.84, 85

the house, and sometimes young girls, welcome the guests. I will place the training of girls in the *kalari* against this background.

In the KKA *kalari* the dress code for women is different than that for men. The men wear a *langutti*, a loincloth, which covers solely the buttocks and the genitals. I saw that the KKA gurukkal had some special suits ready in case there might be some female students. The suit for women consists of a pair of trousers and a shirt. The shirt is very wide, and falls well over the hips. The sleeves cover two thirds of the arms, and are wide as well. It is interesting that one of the explanations the KKA teacher gave me for the use of the *langutti* for men is that it is safe for the student: since the student hardly wears any clothes, weapons cannot be caught behind those clothes. Apparently the wearing of wide clothes is considered safe for women, though.

I have seen girls only up to the age of puberty practicing Kalarippayat²⁰². Sometimes girls train separately from the men. During Oral Transmission Period III I learned that the KKA gurukkal was teaching his daughter, a teenage girl, together with another girl in the late afternoon (the common training in the KKA *kalari* is in the morning). He did not train them every day, though, because the KKA gurukkal usually had to work at that time.

Although there are some girls practicing Kalarippayat when they are young, I think it is very difficult for a girl to become gurukkal. Probably one of the reasons is that, in general, girls in Malabar marry between the age of 18 and 22. After being married a girl soon has children and is expected to take care of the household²⁰³.

In my opinion the present way of life and the strict values within Malabaran society with respect to women in particular are the reason that there are so many fewer female students than male, and that there are hardly any female gurukkals.

10. Conclusion

The gurukkal is the only living authority in the *kalari*. Though the *puttara* and the *guruttara* represent a higher authority, they are merely considered as abstract entities. In terms of the practice theory of Bell, he is “the only knowledgeable agent” of the system for his students²⁰⁴. He is the mediator between the system of Kalarippayat, which has a divine origin, and the students. The gurukkal is interpreter of the system, he defines the tradition.

Through the simple acceptance ritual, the gurukkal becomes the second father to the student. This relationship goes in two directions. The direction going from the student towards the teacher is equal to absolute trust in the teacher, respect for the teacher, which comes very close to veneration and devotion. From the teacher towards the student, the teacher is a father to the student and has the duty to help him or her, and to give advice on problems. I will come back to this relationship in chapter 6.

The acceptance ritual consists of several parts, of which the rite of giving the coin and the *kalari* handshake are essential. The interpretation the KKA *kalari* gives to the coin ritual is the following. The teacher is the provider of knowledge, while the student wants to have the knowledge. The student is the receiver and

²⁰² A good overview of the kind of people practicing Kalarippayat is during the annual games: district championships and (Kerala) state championships. I visited the Cannanore District games four times, the Calicut District games one time, and the Keralan State games one time.

²⁰³ At least, within those Malabaran families I have been acquainted with

²⁰⁴ Bell, 1997, p.82

the gurukkal is the giver. During the acceptance ritual these roles are reversed: by receiving the coin from the student, the student now becomes the giver, while the teacher is the receiver. In this way the teacher will symbolically bring the student to a higher state of mind: from a state of ignorance to full knowledge of the art. As the art has a divine origin, the teacher brings the student closer to the source of power of the art.

The teacher is the embodiment of the art; he is the living example of how to perform Kalarippayat. The gurukkal refers to an ideal model warrior, which is legitimized by the semi-historical legends about his *sampradayam*. This model warrior is not only an example for the physical aspect of the art, but also its philosophical aspect: he is the 'master beggar' as well as the 'master giver'.

The second rite, the *kalari* handshake, is a means of bonding: it symbolically creates a kind of brotherhood, since the handshake is not only used during the acceptance rite, but also as a sign of mutual respect and bonding between the students of the school. The handshake is given to all those who are part of the *kalari* and repeated each training session.

The transfer of knowledge from the teacher to the student is done through a transfer of a set of ideas, dressed in 'conceptual' body movements – the 'martial concepts'. Only the one who is familiar with the philosophy and structure of Kalarippayat is able to unlock the meaning of these concepts. Once unlocked, the practitioner is able to apply them freely, and to use them as building blocks for new forms. The use of ideas and concepts induces a somewhat mystical interpretation of the art, whose meaning will be revealed to that practitioner who has progressed on the way of learning the art. This mystical interpretation also creates a promise to the student that someday he or she will reach enlightenment or union with God, provided that he or she adheres to the path offered by the art. The teacher, as a 'master beggar', the mystical interpretation of the concepts of the art, and the divine origin of Kalarippayat coalesce to provide a climate of expectation for exaltation, creating a bond between the teacher and student on the one hand, and between students on the other.

3. The Kalari

The focus of this chapter is a description of *kalari* training as it is done in the KKA *kalari*, from the start to the end. Since the KKA Kalarippayat is practiced in a *kalari*, I have included a description of the KKA *kalari*. I obtained the information I present in this chapter from observations of daily practice in the KKA *kalari*, during Oral Transmission Period I, II, and III.

First I will start with a description of the outside and inside of the KKA *kalari*. Then I will give a description of the daily practice in the KKA *kalari*. This practice can be divided into several parts: the start of the practice, the paying respect to Kalarippayat as a system, and the exercises. The latter is divided into four parts as well. I will cover each part of the training separately.

1. The building

Kalarippayat is practiced in a special building called *kalari*. According to the KKA gurukkal there were ‘traditionally’ several different types of *kalaris* in Malabar, used for different purposes²⁰⁵:

1. The *kurum kalari* was used for guerilla training
2. The *ankam kalari* where duels were fought
3. The *ceru kalari*, used for (medical) treatment (*kalari cikitsa*)
4. The *kodum kalari*: a *kalari* where practitioners used to meditate
5. The *totum kalari* was used for teaching the location of and the attack on *marmas* (vital points) of the body
6. The *kuzhi* (pit) *kalari*, used for daily practice

Though the KKA gurukkal told me that nowadays only the *kuzhi kalari* is still in use, he had a *ceru kalari* built on a different place than his *kuzhi kalari*.²⁰⁶ ‘Traditionally’, all of these different *kalaris* look similar, but their sizes are different²⁰⁷. Because I did not see any examples of four of the six kinds of *kalaris*, I will only cover the *kuzhi* and *ceru kalari* here²⁰⁸.

The *kuzhi kalari* of the KKA has a thatched roof of coconut and bamboo leaves. Its three-foot high walls are made of mud. The walls and the roof are constructed around a rectangular pit, which is three feet deep. The *kalari* measures 42 feet in the east-west direction and 21 feet in the north-south direction. The foot used for the measurement is taken from the foot size of the gurukkal, the master and usually the owner of the *kalari*. Wooden pillars support the mud walls. These pillars support the wooden framework of the sloped roof. The roof itself is made of coconut leaves, and should be replaced with fresh dried leaves each year before the rainy season starts. The height from the floor to the top of the roof of the *kuzhi kalari* is at least 30 feet (or around 10 meters). This kind of construction is called *anavayan* (elephant-mouthed). According to the KKA teacher it is not

²⁰⁵ Cf. Balakrishnan, p.23; Kurup and Varier, pp.10-11; Zarrili (1998: 263) mentions two different *kalaris*: the *payattu* and *ankam kalari*. From the definition Zarrilli gives of the former, we can compare the *payattu kalari* with the *kuzhi kalari*.

²⁰⁶ This *ceru kalari* was built during Oral Transmission Period III. I have not seen it being used yet; I only saw some people getting treatment in this *kalari* in some photographs given to me by the KKA teacher.

²⁰⁷ ‘Traditionally’, that is, according to the KKA teacher

²⁰⁸ According to Kurup and Varier (p.10), there are several types of *kalaris* mentioned in folk songs and the Northern Ballads. Among these are the *tutum*, *kurum*, *ceru kalaris*. Kurup and Varier say that in none of their sources were any specifics mentioned regarding the size of these *kalaris*.

easy to install such roof: only a specialist can do this. The KKA teacher complained several times to me that people with this skill have become very rare, because this kind of roof is becoming uncommon nowadays. As a result the fees for those specialists have increased, and therefore maintenance of these roofs has become very expensive. Many present-day *kalaris* have therefore shifted to a modern building of stones and tiles. The KKA teacher, however, wants to preserve the traditions of the art, including its building, at almost any price.

The *kuzhi kalari* is a pit where the cold earth of the floor and walls has a cooling effect, which makes the space good for practice. This effect is reinforced by the fact that above the mud wall the upper part of the building has large open spaces through which the wind can blow freely.

The floor of the *kuzhi kalari* is made of tamped down mud. The mud is medicated with special oils and herbs. It is believed that those oils and herbs have disinfectant qualities. This may be true, because during one period of extensive footwork training, almost all the skin disappeared from my feet. Though blood ran out of the wound each day I was practicing, I never had to deal with any infection.

As I have mentioned before, the *kuzhi kalari* described above is the KKA *kalari*, and its rectangular ground plan is typical of the *kalaris* found in the Malabar region²⁰⁹. There are variations in *kalaris* depending on the area. In the Kadathanad region the depth of the pit is not three feet but seven feet. In the south of Kerala, where the Southern Styles are more common, the *kalari* is called a *nilakkalari*. According to the KKA gurukkal this type of *kalari* is a rectangular enclosure without a pit. The KKA teacher did not give me any other specifics, nor have I seen such *nilakkalari*.

During Oral Transmission Period III the KKA teacher started to build a *ceru kalari*. The ground plan of this *kalari* was square, and one side measured around four meters; its height was around two meters and thirty centimeters. It was not constructed in the 'traditional' way, of mud and palm leaves; the KKA teacher had used bricks instead. The floor was made of cement. The KKA teacher told me that this *kalari* was only to be used for treatment and *marma* instruction.

2. The interior of the KKA *kalari*

A ground plan of the KKA *kalari* is given in figure 3.1.²¹⁰ The entrance of the *kalari* is in the eastern wall, on the north side of the middle. Three steps lead down inside. Before entering the *kalari*, everybody has to remove his or her shoes. One must enter the *kalari* itself with the right foot first. The practitioner then bends down, touches the ground with the right hand, then touches his forehead, followed by touching his heart. The KKA gurukkal told me that this is done for several reasons. Bending down is a sign of humbleness. What is learned inside the *kalari* (symbolized by touching the floor) is understood first with the brain (touching the forehead), and then embraced by the heart (touching the heart). This resembles the three stages of learning (see also section 2.3). From a cultural point of view the special way of entering the building is to ask forgiveness from the earth goddess for the fact that the practitioner trains within a sacred space dedicated to her. The earth goddess is no other than the *kalari*

²⁰⁹ I saw a similar *kalari* in Chirakkal and Tellicherry

²¹⁰ Other ground plans can be found in Zarrilli, 1998, p.75 (based on the Northern Style CVN *kalari*, Trivandrum), Balakrishnan, p.25 (a general picture of a Northern Style *kalari*), Kurup and Varier, p.14-15 (based on the Northern Style CVN *kalari*, Calicut)

goddess mentioned in section 2.3, whose presence is symbolized by the *puttara*, the seven-tiered, conical shaped²¹¹ altar, which looks like a step-pyramid, located in the southwest corner of the building. The *kalari* is seen as a temple in which several gods reside, but the chief deity is this earth or *kalari* goddess²¹². The first person to enter the *kalari* in the morning lights a small oil lamp and burns some incense at the base of the *puttara*. He or she may offer flowers to all holy spots in the *kalari*. The latter is done every day in a Hindu *kalari*,²¹³ but occasionally in the KKA *kalari*.²¹⁴ The same person who lights the lamp in the early-morning is also usually the one who has to sweep the *kalari* floor before the training starts. The KKA teacher, because he is Muslim, never lights the oil lamp himself; and on special occasions, he will never offer flowers to the *puttara* himself. I have seen that when an offering (*puja*) is made to the *puttara*, complete with flowers,²¹⁵ incense, and oil lamps, the KKA teacher asks a *pujari*, usually a friend or senior student, to perform the ritual.²¹⁶

Next to the *puttara*, on the western wall, there are two other altars: the *ganapatittara* and the *guruttara*. These altars have the shape of small square platforms, in contrast to the conical shape of the *puttara*. The first is an altar for the elephant god Ganesha (*ganapatittara*), the tutelary deity of Kalarippayat. Ganesha is the god of wisdom and the remover of obstacles. Before starting any undertaking, Hindus first pay homage to this god, to assure that everything will go smoothly. In contrast to other, Hindu, *kalari*s,²¹⁷ there are no images of the deities the KKA *kalari*, since the KKA teacher is Muslim, and images of the divine are prohibited for him.²¹⁸

Next to the *ganapatittara* is the altar representing the lineage of teachers (*sampradayam*) through whom the art was handed down to the KKA gurukkal. This altar is called *guruttara*. The weapons of the *kalari* are placed around the *guruttara*. The collection of weapons is seen as a representation of the art and the *sampradayam*. Weapons are therefore always treated with the highest respect.

A small table is placed in the southeastern corner of the KKA *kalari*. A variety of oils are placed on and under this table. According to the KKA teacher, these oils have a medicinal effect, because they are prepared with herbs, that have a medicinal effect.

3. The training²¹⁹

A complete training session of the KKA *kalari* can be divided into three blocks.

²¹¹ See figure 3.1

²¹² Cf. Zarrilli, 1998, p.62

²¹³ KKA gurukkal; Cf. Zarrilli, 1998, p.78. Zarrilli got his information mainly from the Hindu CVN *kalari* at Trivandrum.

²¹⁴ Mainly at the end of Navaratri, see chapter 5

²¹⁵ The used flower is a red variety of the Hibiscus. This flower symbolizes courage and fire.

²¹⁶ Though the KKA gurukkal tries to keep all Kalarippayat-related traditions within his own *kalari*, he does not perform all the rituals himself. If there is a ritual which he cannot perform due to his religious convictions, he will ask one of his senior (Hindu) students or befriended *pujaris* to perform the ritual.

²¹⁷ Cf. Zarrilli, 1998, p.75; Balakrishnan, p.25; Kurup and Varier, p.14-15

²¹⁸ The KKA gurukkal told me that the *ganapatittara* in his *kalari* is empty: the altar is only meant as a place of concentration for the Hindu students. Throughout the text I will refer to this place as the *ganapatittara*, since it is at exactly the same place where usually Ganesha's altar is located.

²¹⁹ I observed the following forms and exercises in the KKA *kalari* during Oral Transmission Periods I, II, and III, and the explanations of those forms and exercises express the view of the KKA gurukkal, which I collected during Oral Transmission Periods I and II.

Block I

Before the actual training a student of the KKA *kalari* observes several introductory exercises and rituals:

1. Changing one's clothes and applying oil
2. Salutation or paying respect to the system of Kalarippayat and her representatives

Block II

The training schedule of the KKA *kalari* consists of four parts²²⁰:

1. Empty-hand training (*mei-abhyasam*)
2. Training with wooden weapons (*koltari*)
3. Training with iron weapons (*ankamtari*)
4. Empty-hand training, focusing on the vital areas of the body (*marmas*) (applications)

Block III

When leaving the *kalari* after practice, respect is again paid to the system of Kalarippayat and her representatives.

Though block I (the introductory exercises and rituals) and block II (paying respect to the system of Kalarippayat and her representatives when leaving the *kalari*) is compulsory, not every student goes through each of the four parts of the actual training. Those students who did not reach a proficient level of Kalarippayat are only allowed to participate in the first part, the empty-hand training (*mei-abhyasam*). Then they have to leave. The training is only resumed when all the less advanced students are gone. They are not even allowed to watch, because, as the KKA gurukkal told me, they might learn the wrong ideas, and it would take a lot of effort to correct the mistakes later on. Only the gurukkal decides what can be practiced and what not.

In the following I will try to give a complete description of a daily practice session at the KKA *kalari*. This session involves the complete curriculum, which is a composite of several different family styles (see chapter 1). The Arappukai, Pillatangi, the central and southern traditions were already merged into one at an early stage of the KKA *kalari*. The Kadathanad Kalarippayat was just added a few months before Oral Transmission Period II, and was never fully integrated,

²²⁰ Several internet sites provide a similar description of these four parts of Kalarippayat training. By far most internet sites on Kalarippayat are maintained by people who have connections with one of the many CVN *kalaris* of Kerala. The following sites are from different schools of Kalarippayat, and offer a description of their curriculum (i.e. the four parts): www.kerals.com/kerala/kalari.htm (Thulunadan Kalarippayat), www.kalariworld.com (Kathina Yoga Kalarippayat), www.kalarippayat.com (CVN Kalarippayat), www.panchendriya.com (Kadathanad Kalarippayat)

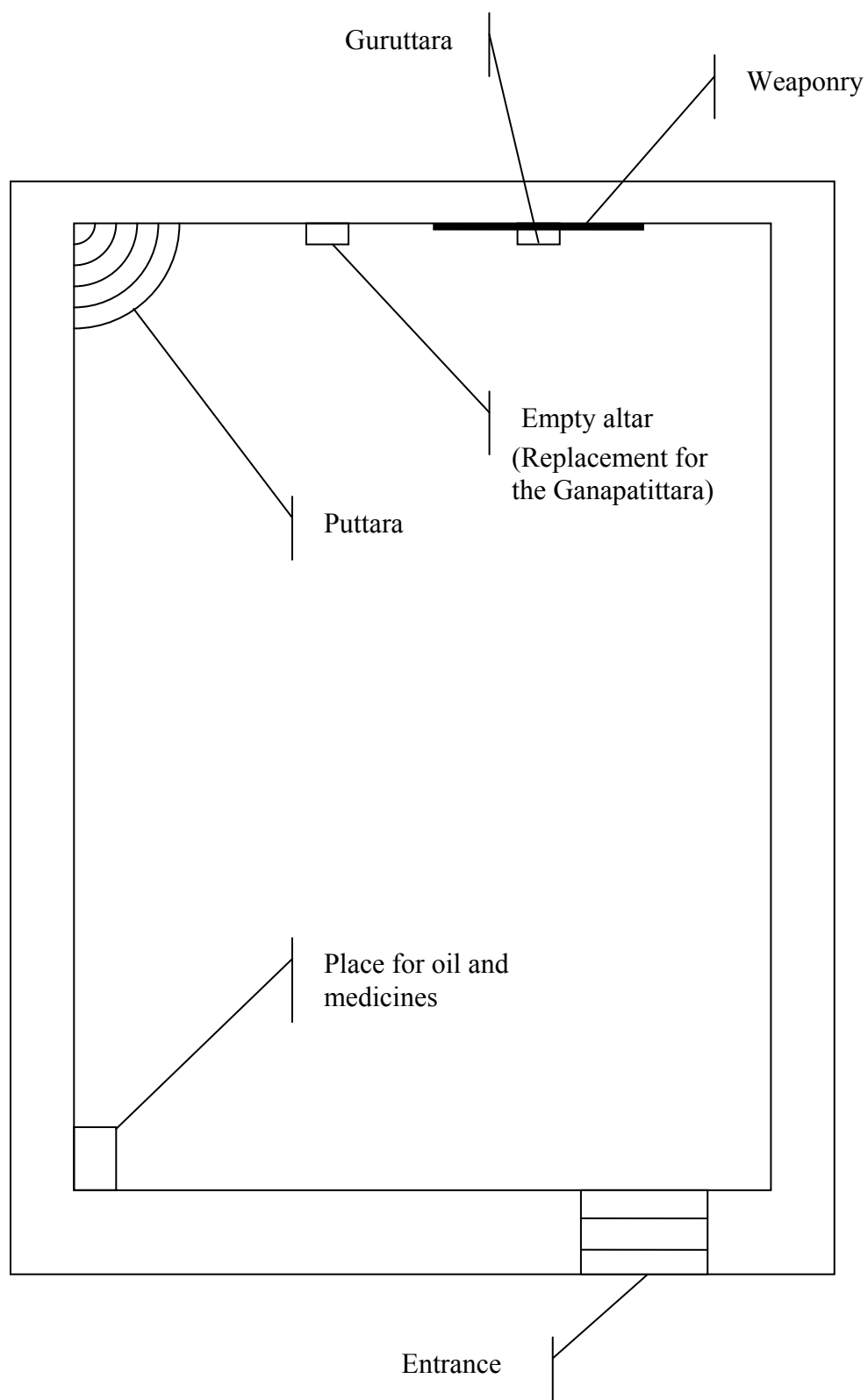


Figure 3.1: The interior of the KKA *kalari*

as far as I know. When Kadathanad Kalarippayat is practiced, part 2 of block I (the exercises, that express the paying of respect) and part 1 of block II (the *mei-abhyasam*) are completely replaced by their counterparts from the Kadathanad tradition. I will describe these exercises in paragraphs indicated by an 'a'.

3.1 Start of the practice: changing clothes and applying oil

After having entered the *kalari* in the specific way described in the previous section, preparations for the practice are made, such as changing one's clothes. Usually training is done without any clothes except for a loincloth, a *langutti*, the Indian underwear, which is a long and narrow piece of cloth with a pair of ropes. The *langutti* is knotted in a special way and covers only the buttocks and the genitals. The actual practice is started by applying specially prepared oil on the whole body.

According to the KKA gurukkal there are several reasons for the use of oil. Because of its medical qualities, the oil helps the body to cool down when it is heated up due to ardent practice. When the climate is colder, for example during the monsoon season, the oil helps to protect the body against the cold as well. When the oil covers the entire body, it works "in the same way as a protective bag".

There is yet other reason to use oil: the KKA gurukkal told me that it is supposed to increase flexibility. According to the KKA gurukkal, the oil applied on the body acts as a disinfectant as well: in case of a wound, because of a fall on the ground, or a cut with a weapon, the wound will not develop an infection. Thus, as the KKA teacher told me, the use of oil is preferred over that of clothes, because oil is useful in the warm and the cold season alike, and "it has a positive effect on the body".

When I asked why the *langutti* is used during training instead of a suit, the KKA teacher gave me the following reasons²²¹. Firstly, it is not convenient in the hot climate to sport fully dressed. Secondly, instead of clothes, the body is 'covered' by a layer of medicated coconut oil, specially prepared for *kalari* practice. Thirdly, the KKA gurukkal maintains that the frequent use of weapons can be dangerous when dressed fully: a knife or a sword can be caught behind a sleeve of a dress. Oddly enough, I noticed that the KKA gurukkal had garments ready for any female students who might come: women wear a loose tunic that falls over the hips, and a pair of trousers. When she is fully dressed, you cannot see the female student's figure. The KKA gurukkal's argument that (wide) dresses are dangerous is apparently less important than the demand for a modest way of dressing for women.

I have observed that in the KKA *kalari* practitioners sometimes wear a *kaccha* over their *langutti*. A *kaccha* is a very long piece of cloth, which is wrapped very tightly around the waist (*kacchakettu*). According to the philosophy of KKA Kalarippayat, the center of the life energy of the body is located just below the navel. The tight *kaccha* supports this point, and keeps the life energy there. The story goes that even when a combatant is mortally wounded, he will not die

²²¹ Private conversation during third week of Oral Transmission Period II

before the *kaccha* is opened. In the KKA *kalari* the *kaccha* is worn only when a practitioner does not feel completely well, or in case of back problems.

3.2.1 Paying respect

After having applied the oil, the student pays respect to the system itself and her representatives. In the KKA *kalari* this is done in five steps. First the student heads to the *puttara*, and stands there for some moments in meditation with the hand palms together in front of the chest. According to the KKA gurukkal, the idea behind this short meditation is not only to pay respect to the goddess of the *puttara* (which in fact is the art itself), but also to allow the practitioner to empty his mind. When starting the *kalari* practice, all things that could trouble the mind are left behind. The mind and the body should only be concentrated on Kalarippayat. When the student is disturbed by thoughts about personal problems, he or she is not able to practice well. This is especially a necessity when using weapons: when a student does not fully concentrate on the practice, a dangerous situation can occur. Therefore, one of the central pillars of Kalarippayat training is to develop a strong focus. Distracting thoughts are disastrous for the concentration and the focus. The short meditation is closed in the same way as when entering the *kalari*, by touching the base of the *puttara*, then the forehead and the heart, with the right hand. When the student has emptied the mind, the student steps from the *puttara* to the altar of the elephant god Ganesha (*ganapatittara*) and stands again for a moment with the palms of the hands together in front of the chest. Again the student should empty his mind. Here again, touching the ground, forehead, and heart ends the salutation.

Then the student steps in front of the *guruttara* and repeats the same procedure. After the salutation to the three altars (the *puttara*, *ganapatittara*, and the *guruttara*), respect is paid to the gurukkal himself by giving him the *kalari* handshake. The sequence of the first four steps of salutation is similar to the ceremony admitting a new student (see section 2.6), except for the presentation of the coin and the blessing of the gurukkal, which are left out. At this point the student has paid respect to the entire system of Kalarippayat and her representatives (the *puttara*, *ganapatittara*, the *guruttara*, and the gurukkal).

Finally the last step is to pay respect to the other students through the *kalari* handshake. The student should go first to his seniors, and then his juniors should approach him or her. This, according to the KKA gurukkal, is not so much a part of paying respect to the system of Kalarippayat, but more a salutation to those who are equal, the other 'children' of the gurukkal.

The sequence of salutation is in fact the lineage the art follows to reach the student. The art finds its roots in the divine, symbolized by the *kalari* goddess (the *puttara*). When the knowledge travels from the goddess to the student, it must not be impeded on the way. The elephant god is invoked to accomplish this by asking the help of Ganesha when paying respect in front of the *ganapatittara*. The art travels via the *sampradayam*, the lineage (the *guruttara*), and the latest embodiment of the art and lineage, the gurukkal, and in some cases via senior students (the embodiment of the art to be), to the student himself.

For the Muslim members (including the KKA teacher himself) the greeting ceremony of the *puttara*, the *ganapatittara*, and the *guruttara* are replaced in the KKA *kalari* by one simple greeting. They stand in front of the western wall, between the *ganapatittara* and the *guruttara*. This direction faces Mecca (see section 2.4).

3.2.2 *Puttara vandanam* and *kalari vandanam*

After having paid his or her respect to the system, the student can begin the actual training with the salutation to the *puttara* (*puttara vandanam*), which is carried out in a low squatting position in front of the *puttara*. The arms and hands make circular motions in front of the body, synchronized with the breathing. The eyes are focused on the tip of the pyramidal *puttara*. The purpose is to practice single point focus (*ekagrata*), which is an important part of the Kalaripayat training. Single point focus helps the practitioner empty his mind, so that he can fight spontaneously, applying the 'martial concepts' in the real-life fight (see section 1.1.1), and can enter a state of 'battle frenzy' (see section 1.3.8).

The practitioner squats on the ground in the warrior position (*virasana*), placing the full bodyweight on the right leg. The arms are crossed in front of the chest so that the left hand touches the right knee and the right hand the left knee. Then the hands spread out in a circular movement via the chest. This movement is an example of the cultural background of Kalaripayat: the KKA teacher told me that this form represents the mythical bird Garuda, spreading its wings.²²²

After the wing-like movement the practitioner brings the hands together in front of the abdomen and, with a scooping movement towards the body, turns them upward, until the arms are completely stretched out above the head.

Then the arms, still stretched out and together, are brought down until they are in front of the abdomen. Next the hands are brought in front of the face, with the palms of the hand together, while the fingers are pointing upwards. All the movements I have mentioned are performed in sequence, and comprise the actual greeting of the *puttara*. After this the complete sequence starts again, and is repeated seven times.

The KKA teacher told me that the number seven refers usually to *shakti*, or power. This concept is used in the *shakti* forms and the *kalari* massages, for example (see chapter 5). The *shakti* forms are based on a footwork pattern of seven steps, while most strokes in the *kalari* massages consist of seven repeated strokes that are thought to stimulate the energy system of the patient.

Shakti is the *kalari* goddess who resides in the *puttara*, the pyramid-like structure with seven steps, as well. The KKA teacher explained to me that symbolically the practitioner climbs the seven heavens on the back of the bird

²²² Compare Zarrilli quoting Vasu Gurukkal (1998: 147). Vasu Gurukkal does not mention Garuda, but calls this movement *uddiyanabandam*: a movement which locks or binds the breath (*bandam*) in order to increase pressure on a *chakra*. This is believed to cause a *chakra* to open (see chapter 2.3).

Garuda and finally reaches oneness with God. These indicate the seven stages of spiritual self-development, which starts with the art itself (see section 2.3)²²³.

After the *puttara vandanam* there is another salutation, the salutation of the *kalari* itself, the *kalari vandanam*. Breathing and one-point focus is important in this exercise as well. However, the *kalari vandanam* differs from the *puttara vandanam* in that the first is seen as an expression of the idea behind all the forms and exercises of Kalarippayat. It is an introduction and a summary at the same time. The *kalari vandanam* is performed ideally on the southwest-northeast diagonal of the *kalari*. The student, by means of this form, salutes the *puttara* or *shakti* and the northeast corner, the residing place of the *shiva* or male component of the *shiva-shakti* dualism (see section 1.3.7). When performing the form, the *shiva* and the *shakti* of his existence are united for the practitioner. This means that we encounter again a symbolic set of movements aimed at union with the art and ultimately with the divine.

Yet both the *puttara* and the *kalari vandanam* are explained as having yet another function. They represent the fight with our own being, our problems, good and bad sides, and our attachments to the events of life. The warrior symbolically liberates his mind from these worldly attachments and difficulties. This makes him see the true essence of the things, even of death, and allows him to overcome his fear of death, which is an obstacle in a fight and often the main reason for losing one. According to the philosophy of the art, a fight is not only lost because one person is a better fighter than another, but also due to the lack of concentration and focus. When a person does not focus his or her attention, there will be more than one thought in his or her mind. Therefore actions are not performed convincingly, so that the target of the action is lost (see section 1.1.1). Emotions such as fear of death and the fear of getting hurt lead to distractions (the KKA teacher called this 'doubt'), and may result in death or wounds. The two *vandanams* prepare the warrior for battle and for death. They do make the practitioner realize that the first and most important battle is fought within one's own mind. This idea is not oppose any religion, so it is no problem for he KKA gurukkal, as a Muslim, to perform the *vandanams*.

3.2a Salutations according to Kadathanad Kalarippayat (I)

At this stage of the training we are concerned with the introductory greeting forms. The training of the Arappukai en Pillatangi combination starts with the two *vandanams* of the previous paragraph. The Kadathanad practice begins with its own greeting forms, which are six in number. In the KKA *kalari* not much attention is paid to the esoteric meaning of the Kadathanad salutation forms, but more to their practical application. This may be because the philosophical system of the KKA *kalari* was already shaped before the relatively late introduction of the Kadathanad style into the syllabus of the school.

The six salutation forms are the following:

²²³ The reference to seven heavens may be a result of the Muslim background of the KKA teacher. One time he mentioned to me that the seven steps of the *puttara* were related to the seven *chakras* (energy centers; see chapter 2.3) of the human body.

1. *Guru vanakkam* (salutation to the teacher)
2. *Ishvara vanakkam* (salutation to God)
3. *Naga vanakkam* (salutation to the snake deity)
4. *Dik vanakkam* (salutation to the directions)
5. *Ayudha vanakkam* (salutation to the *kalari* weapons)
6. *Surya-chandra vanakkam* (salutation to the sun and the moon)

This list has two peculiarities. Firstly, notice the use of the number six. Numbers are very important in Kalarippayat. The Kadathanad system makes frequent use of the number six. There are six salutation forms, six hand mudras, six foot mudras, and six *meippayat* forms. I will come back to the subject of the use of numbers in case of the Arappukai and Pillatangi styles below. When looking at all the styles taught in the KKA *kalari*, each system seems to be identifiable by its own number.

Secondly, the six salutations may refer to the *kalari* deities of that particular style. We find that the *naga* (snake) and *dik* (direction) have their own place in most Hindu *kalaris*²²⁴. The *guru* and *ayudha* salutations are meant to pay homage to the gurukkal, the embodiment of the system, and the weapons, which are seen as a representation of the art itself or as the *sampradayam*. The *surya-chandra* or sun-moon salutation, according to the KKA teacher, pays respect to no other than the *shiva-shakti* principle of Kalarippayat. God (*ishvara*), as the ultimate source of Kalarippayat, should evidently have a place in the salutations.

Though the KKA gurukkal is a Muslim, he has no problem performing any of the salutations.

3.3 *Mey-abhyasam*

The first part of the actual training in the KKA *kalari* is called *mey-abhyasam*. The KKA gurukkal translates *mey-abhyasam* as 'body practice'; it is, according to him, the most important part of the entire Kalarippayat practice. The *mey-abhyasam* gets the body into shape; it makes it flexible and strong, and makes the body able to move fluently. Within the system of KKA Kalarippayat the *mey-abhyasam* consists of two parts: the preliminary leg exercises (*kal etup*) and the practice of ardent and long exercises, the Shiva and Shakti forms. The following descriptions are based on my observations in the KKA *kalari* during Oral Transmission Periods I, II, and III. The explanations of those forms and exercises express the view of the KKA gurukkal, which I collected during Oral Transmission Periods I, II and III.

3.3.1 *Mey-abhyasam: Kal etup*

The student of the KKA *kalari* starts with the preliminary leg exercises (*kal etup*). These exercises are done with the hands stretched upwards, in order to work the muscles of the shoulder as well. This is done to be able to keep the arms up in a fight to defend the face, as in western boxing. Training the shoulder muscles is also important for wielding weapons.

The eyes are kept looking straight ahead at a particular spot as an aid for concentration. The exercises are done forward and backward across the floor

²²⁴ Cf. Zarrilli, 1998, pp. 66-83; Kurup and Varier, pp. 14-15

from east to west and back from west to east, the direction of the longest side of the rectangular ground plan of the KKA *kalari* (see figure 3.1). Within the system taught at the KKA *kalari*, there are six basic kicks and six advanced kicks. The advanced kicks are combinations of the basic ones. These kicks, especially, contribute greatly to the physical conditioning. The six basic kicks are:

1. Straight kick (*nerkal*): the kick is delivered above the head, with a straight knee and the toes extended.
2. Circling kick (*vitukal*), from outside to inside: the stretched leg is circled in front of the body, with the foot reaching above the head.
3. Circling kick (*akamkal*), from inside to outside: similar to the *vitukal*, but now the other way around.
4. Straight cornered kick (*konkal*): similar to *nerkal*, but the right kick now goes towards the left shoulder, and the left leg to the right shoulder.
5. Swinging kick (*tiriccukal*): three straight kicks thrown by the same leg, while pivoting two times 180 degrees on the other leg.
6. Sitting leg (*iruttikal*): after having thrown a straight kick, the kicking leg sweeps back a bit behind the body. At that moment the practitioner shifts body weight to the hind leg, and squats down on that leg, while the inactive leg is kept forward.

3.3.2 *Mey-abhyasam*: Shiva and Shakti forms

The training continues after the *kal etup* with the Shiva and then the Shakti forms. Both forms consist of a series of *adavu*. The *adavu* is a compound body movement based on a 'martial concept' (see section 1.1.1). The *adavu* is composed of a combination of *cuvaduvu* (footwork) and *vadivuvu* (body postures); a *vadivuvu* flows into another *vadivuvu* or into the same *vadivuvu* via a specific *cuvaduvu*. This is to be understood in the following way. KKA Kalarippayat does not teach static forms: the body does not remain in a posture it assumes, but it changes immediately into another posture. The connection between these postures is made with a specific step. I mentioned that both of these postures can be the same; one can assume a posture, make the intermediary step (the *cuvaduvu*), and assume the original posture again. An example of the latter we can find within the Shiva forms. Shiva forms make exultant use of the so-called horse pose (*ashva vadivuvu*), in which the hind leg is stretched completely backward and the knee of the front leg is bent ninety degrees, and the elephant pose (*gaja vadivuvu*), in which the feet are positioned parallel to each other shoulder-width apart, and the body goes into a low position until both knees are bent ninety degrees. One of the common combinations of *vadivuvu* and *cuvaduvu* within the Shiva forms is *ashva vadivuvu*, step, *ashva vadivuvu*, which starts and ends with the same *vadivuvu*.

Shakti forms of the KKA *kalari* use many different kinds of *vadivuvu*, such as

- *gaja vadivuvu*, elephant pose
- *simha vadivuvu*, lion pose (low position, both knees about ninety degrees bent, feet are a bit more than shoulder width apart, and are placed perpendicular to each other)
- *ashva vadivuvu*, horse stance

- *kukkuda vadivu*, the cock stance (right leg raised and big toe pointed upwards)
- *sarpa vadivu*, snake stance (similar to the horse, only the upper body is more upright, so that the complete body can easily change direction)
- *marjava vadivu*, the cat pose (a crouching pose)

The Shakti forms emphasize very light movements, and include many kinds of jumps, as well as high kicks. There are three kinds of Shakti forms (see section 1.3.7): the *meippayat*, *pakarcakkal* and *tanjam* forms. Each *meippayat* and *pakarcakkal* form consists of several basic patterns of *vadivu* and *cuvadu*, grouped in seven steps. Each form is completed by specific kicks. The difference between *meippayat* and *pakarcakkal* is that the latter contains kicks that are immediately followed by a turn (i.e. the direction of the body changes). In the *tanjam* forms the kicks are replaced by movements in low postures, such as *simha* and *ashva vadivu*.

The basic footwork patterns of the Shakti forms are based on the number seven, because almost each ‘part’ of the Shakti form consists of a series of seven *vadivu*²²⁵. According to the KKA gurukkal, the Shiva forms are thought to be based on the number five. This would imply that most ‘parts’ of the Shiva forms consist of a series of five *vadivu*. Though the latter is true for the structure of some of the Shiva forms, I have not seen this in all the forms. All the Shiva forms, however, end with five powerful stamps on the floor.

The number five is also connected to the symbolism related to the god Shiva, whose maleness is expressed in the *shiva-lingam*, the erect penis of the god. This sexual symbol of the god can be directly compared to the powerful and straight movements of the forms of the *shiva* type. The number seven, related to the female goddess Shakti, is in essence characterized by round, soft, and circular movements, which are directly sexually related to the feminine way of moving and to the *yoni* or female genital of the goddess²²⁶.

The instructions for how to perform the Shiva and Shakti forms are called *vayttari*. The teacher recites the *vayttari* aloud, and the student does the exercises according to the commands. Those commands were as new to most Keralis as they were to me when beginning the practice of Kalarippayat, because most words refer to specific *vadivu* and *cuvadu* combinations, which are not used in the language of daily life of the Keralis. The *vayttari* is always written in poetry, so that the student can hear from the rhythm of the words how to move. A long

²²⁵ A ‘part’ is a series of *vadivu* between two resting points. A resting point is a moment in which the body does not move, and stays for a fraction of a second in a certain *vadivu*. This moment is used to relax the body, and to observe the opponent (source: KKA gurukkal).

²²⁶ Shiva stands for the five elements (*pancamahabhuta*) out of which the universe is created: ether (*akasha*), wind (*vayu*), fire (*teja*), water (*jala*), and earth (*prithavi*). I will come back to these elements in section 4.1.1, because this is an essential part of the philosophy of KKA Kalarippayat. These elements represent matter, and as such they are seen by the KKA gurukkal as ‘heavy’, in the sense of ‘difficult to move’. This opposes Shakti, which is pure energy (*prana*), light, and ‘always moving’, represented by the seven steps (*shaktis*) of the *puttara* (see chapter 2.3). The Shiva and Shakti forms do represent the opposition of matter and energy, because the Shakti forms are made up of many jumps, and the Shiva forms are built up of low positions and a few jumps (see section 1.3.7).

tone, for example, means that the student has to stretch out completely, and on stressing a word the student should collect his strength in order to put his whole energy into one movement (like a stamp on the floor). Another example is that the student knows from a stop in the poem that he should relax his entire body when there is a small break between the different movements. There are schools in which the teacher sings the *vayttari*, and some of them even make use of a drum as well. Singing and playing a drum are not done in the KKA *kalari*.

When I was practicing in the KKA *kalari*, a senior student was reciting the *vayttari* for me. There was no language problem because even as a beginner one can hear from the tone and the sound how to do the exercise. Moreover, based on my experience, the exercises are so ardent that one cannot understand words anyway, but can only hear sounds.

3.3.2a Kadathanad Kalaripayat (II)

When the Kadathanad style is practiced (see paragraph 3.2a), the *vanakkams* are followed first by a set of six hand *mudras*, a set of six leg *mudras*, then by *mei-adavu*, and then by *meippayat*. The six hand *mudra* exercises teach how to keep the hand in the correct position, in such a way, that the impact of an attack is optimized. These *mudras* are treated in more detail in chapter 4. The leg *mudras* are meant to increase the muscular power of the legs. Practicing these *mudras* increases the height of the jumps of a practitioner, his condition, and the impact of the kick.

After the hand and leg *mudras* the 18 *adavu* exercises are practiced: they range from push-ups to several kinds of jumps. Most of the *adavu* are also used in the Shakti forms of the Arappukai style. The Kadathanad *adavu* are meant to improve flexibility, dexterity, condition, and agility. The number of 18 exercises is a multiple of the number specific to the Kadathanad style, the number six. This number occurs once more during practice of the *adavu*; each of the *mei-adavu* should be repeated either three, six, nine or twelve times.

The six *meippayat* of the Kadathanad School are similar in structure to the Pillatangi Shiva forms, only with more turns altering the body direction. They clearly belong to the group of Shiva forms, which stresses the practice of *ashva* and *gaja vadivu*.

3.4 Koltari (wooden weapons)

Weapons, wooden and iron alike, are treated with the utmost respect. The weapon, like the *gurukkal* and the *guruttara*, is synonymous with the art itself. This applies to the sword and the shield in particular, since a combination of a pair of crossed swords behind round *kalari* shield is the generally accepted symbol of Kalaripayat. Each time a weapon is taken up, the weapon is touched with the right hand, then the forehead, and after that the heart, similar to the greeting of the *kalari* floor, the three altars, the *gurukkal*, and the fellow students. The same is done when a weapon falls from the hand during practice by accident. The latter is considered to be an apology and a paying of respect to the weapon.

The second part of the actual training is the use of wooden weapons (*koltari*), which immediately follows the practice of Shiva and Shakti forms. The next sections give a description of the wooden weapons.

3.4.1 Kettukari (long stick)

After having mastered most of the *meippayat* forms, a student of KKA Kalarippayat is allowed to take his or her first weapon: the long stick according to the Northern Style²²⁷. The long stick should be a bit taller than the body length. As the stick is a pole weapon, it should be wielded with wide movements. In order to be able to perform multiple attacks, the rolling of the stick is done in circles. In most of the long stick forms and exercises both the attacker and defender do the same movements.

The manner of handling the stick demonstrates its nature. Each weapon has its own nature, and can only be used once this nature is understood. Because the long stick is wielded in large circular movements, the direction of attack is always perpendicular to its longitudinal axis.

Apart from long stick fighting, there are also forms to learn stick rolling (*vadi vessal*), which are performed solo. Stick rolling is very important, because it teaches how to control the stick, and to get a feeling for a long stick and how to use it.

3.4.2 Ceruvadi (short stick)

Short stick is used to teach the student how to act in a fight with fast-moving weapons. The stick is only about 40 centimeters long (three hand spans), and its strikes and maneuvers are performed at high speed and at very close range from the opponent. This forces the student to overcome the natural human fear of being in the vicinity of potential danger. Because of the speed of the attacks, the agility of the practitioner has to increase dramatically.

The tip of the short stick is used to strike. Therefore the weapon can be wielded in two ways: as a whip, or as an extension of the arm with circular movements performed in the same fashion as the long stick.

3.4.3 The otta (curved stick)

The *otta* is peculiar to some of the northern traditions of Kalarippayat. The KKA gurukkal borrowed the *otta* exercises from the Pillatangi tradition. The weapon is a short wooden stick shaped into a curve. When *otta* is practiced, one man holds the *otta*, pointed downward, and the other a short stick, pointed upward. The *otta* indicates the downward flowing energy, which is used for attacks performed from down to up. The short stick refers to the upward flowing energy, or attacks performed from up to down.

The *otta* is especially designed to be able to penetrate most of the *marmas* or vital points of the human body (see also chapter 4). Because of its shape, the weapon jabs the *marma* in the right (i.e. most damaging) direction. The stick can reach many vital spots located on the back even by an attack from the front or

²²⁷ The long stick forms belonged originally to the Arappukai tradition (source: KKA gurukkal, Oral Transmissio Period III)

the side. According to the KKA gurukkal, one *otta* attack on such vital spot will disable the body; a combination attack on several points is usually fatal.

The *otta* can be also used in combination with a lock. Because of the curve, the lock will cause pressure into several *marmas* at the same time.

3.5 *Ankamtari* (iron weapons)

According to the KKA teacher, the training with wooden weapons is an introduction to the use of iron weapons (*ankamtari*), and forms the third part of the training. The practice with the iron weapons is added for more advanced students, who are supposed to be able to control their weapon in order to prevent accidents. The following gives a summary of the different kinds of iron weapons as they are taught in the KKA *kalari*.

3.5.1 *Katara* (dagger)

A *katara* is a dagger with a double-edged pointed blade. The dagger is made in such a way that the hilt is perpendicular to the longitudinal axis of the blade. This construction makes it possible to cut through armor, because the full body strength can be put behind a thrust.

3.5.2 *Urumi* (flexible sword)

The *urumi* is a hilt with a flexible blade of at least one and a half meters. The weapon is wielded in circular movements around the body. The effect is that it creates a kind of shield, which makes it difficult for an opponent to approach.

A student starts the training of the *urumi* with a piece of cloth, because the weapon itself is very dangerous, even for the practitioner himself. As said, the *urumi* is wielded in circular movements around the body. Stopping the wielding of the *urumi* should be done in a special way to avoid cuts. Changing the direction of rotation is yet another skill. The weapon is used as a whip, when attacking. This gives the *urumi* a special characteristic in the fight. When an *urumi* attack is defended by warding off the body by a shield, the flexible blade of the *urumi* will just flip over the edge of the shield, leaving a cut on the body of the opponent.

3.5.3 *Kuntham* (spear) versus *curika* (sword) and *paricca* (shield)

The use of the spear in the KKA *kalari* is taught in combination with the use of sword and shield. The spear bearer learns to anticipate an attack from somebody who wields a sword and shield. The spear is the opposite of the sword and shield combination. This opposition is twofold. The spear is used mainly by stabbing with the spear head, and slamming with the spear tail. The attack of sword and shield combination consists of fast cutting movements and light stabs. This difference is apparent from the shape of each of the weapons: the spear is long and heavy and difficult to wield, while with the light sword attacks can be made fast and easy.

The KKA gurukkal told me that the spear exercises as they are taught in the KKA *kalari*, are the very same that the *cavers* used to attack the Zamorin (see section 1.3.4.1). The bodyguards of the Zamorin were using spears, while the

cavers were using sword and shield. The sword attacks of the *cavers* are fast, and can be expected from any corner.

The long stick training is often considered as a preparation for spear fighting. The nature of the spear is similar to that of the long stick, though with some important differences. The most striking distinction is that apart from throwing blows, one is also able to jab. Thus certain spear techniques cannot be done with a long stick.

3.5.4 Venmezhu (axe)

The axe is used for chopping. The weapon is very useful to chop through armor. It breaks bones easily as well. The axe can be used in combination with a shield, for example.

3.5.5 Gedda (Indian Club)

The Indian club or mace is a weapon with an aristocratic allure. It is therefore forbidden and considered very rude to throw blows below the waist²²⁸. The effect of the use of the mace is devastating. The mace can be considered as the tank among the weapons. A possible disadvantage is that the Indian club is heavy and big. This makes it impossible to use it for fast and speedy attacks.

3.5.6 Vāl-vali (sword and shield)

The use of two kinds of swords is taught in the KKA *kalari*. The *vāl* has a curved blade, and the *curika*, used in the spear exercises (see paragraph 3.5.3), has a straight blade. The former is very useful for chopping, while the latter can be used for stabbing as well. The *vāl* is used in combination with a shield in a series of exercises in which the sword is circled very closely around the body. These exercises are done to teach a technique in which a cut is delivered at the moment of drawing the sword. The forms also show how to throw sand at the opponent using a shield. This technique became famous because it is considered one of the secret fighting techniques of the hero Otenan.

3.6 Applications

The fourth part of the actual training is focused on the attack on the weak spots on the human body (*marmas*). The student learns where they are, and several practical forms to be able to hit those spots properly. Not only is the destructive

²²⁸ This rule can be found in the Mahabharata as well. The Mahabharata is about the rivalry between two groups of brothers, the Kauravas and the Pandavas, who both claimed the throne. This rivalry caused a war, which ended in a duel between Bhima, one of the Pandava brothers, and the Kaurava Duryodhana. They were fighting each other with Indian clubs. Bhima wins the fight by crushing the thigh bone of Duryodhana, which was against the code of a fight with a *gedda*. The Mahabharata tells us that: "Sanjaya said, 'Beholding thy son struck at the thighs, the mighty Rama (i.e. Balarama), that foremost of smiters, became exceedingly angry. Raising his arms aloft the hero having the plough for his weapon, in a voice of deep sorrow, said in the midst of those kings, "Oh, fie on Bhima, fie on Bhima! Oh, fie, that in such a fair fight a blow hath been struck below the navel! Never before hath such an act as Vrikodara hath done been witnessed in an encounter with the mace! No limb below the navel should be struck. This is the precept laid down in treatises! This Bhima, however, is an ignorant wretch, unacquainted with the truths of treatises! He, therefore, acteth as he likes!" (Shalya Parva, chapter 60; *The Mahabharata of Krishna-Dwaipayana Vyasa*, Translation by Kisari Mohan Ganguli, downloadable from www.sacred-texts.com (maha09.txt)).

form of the art taught, but also how to counteract a hit *marma*, and to treat the consequences of a *marma* attack. According to the KKA gurukkal, the fourth part is often called *verumkai prayogam* within most of the northern traditions²²⁹. The KKA gurukkal teaches several of *marma* training methods, and groups these under the English term ‘applications’.

3.6.1 *Verumkai prayogam* (empty-hand application)

Verumkai prayogam teaches the student how, where and when to hit a *marma* with the bare hands, and how to block a (*marma*) attack (*tadavukal*). The student also learns to apply this knowledge within the Shiva and Shakti forms. The *verumkai prayogam* exercises are done with a partner in order to indicate the location of the *marmas*.

3.6.2 *Katiyum talaym*

When walking the streets of places such as Cannanore, Calicut, and Tellicherry, you see many Kerali men wearing a white towel over the right shoulder as part of their everyday outfit. *Katiyum talaym* is self defense with a towel against somebody who launches (for example) a knife attack. The attack is neutralized by special ‘knotting’ techniques that ‘knot’ the hands of the attacker to his or her body.

3.6.3 *Kettum pidutavum* (locks and holds)

Many of the locks and holds of Kalaripayat are similar to those in wrestling. The most striking difference is, that Kalaripayat makes use of the knowledge of *marmas* to give those holds and locks more effect.

3.6.4 *Pitinettu prayogam*

The 18 *pitinettu prayogam* exercises are similar to the Kadathanad hand *mudras*. They teach the student how to attack using different hand and arm positions.

3.7 Southern Style and Central Style

Often an extra block is added during practice in the KKA *kalari* between the *mei-abhyasam* and the *koltari*. This block consists of Southern Style Kalaripayat. The solo forms (*cuvadukal*) form the backbone of the Southern Styles, and are vital to correct understanding and application of the art. They teach the student *marmas* and their specific attack, and one learns to move according to the principles of the Southern Style. The Southern Style consists of the following parts:

- Solo empty hand training (*cuvadukal*)
- Southern Style short stick, added to the practice during *koltari* training. The southern short stick (*kuruvadi*) is different from the northern one (*ceruvadi*): it is lighter and it is pointed in order to penetrate the *marmas*.

²²⁹ Also CVN *kalari* calls this fourth part *verumkai prayogam*, see www.kalaripayat.com

- Southern Style long stick, added to the second part of the training, *koltari*
- Footwork training (*kuta cuvadu*), without weapons, with knives and with stick weapons are practiced during the *ankamtari* part. These exercises are done along a square footwork pattern.
- Training in the use of the knife during the *ankamtari* part
- partner forms for empty-hand training, practiced during the fourth part of the training (applications)

The KKA gurukkal usually taught the Central Style during the fourth part of the training, the Applications (see paragraph 3.6), because it involves complicated footwork training and *marma* attack practice with a partner.

3.8 Ending a training session

Before the end of a training session a student must obey several rules, as well. First he or she should get permission from the gurukkal, or, in his absence, the most senior student. To cool down the body, the student has to perform seven kicks.

According to the teachings of the KKA teacher, the body is made up of seven layers, called *dhatu*s, that range from tissue layers (such as bones and flesh) to mental layers (such as the mind itself). Each layer becomes less material and more mental. Each kick symbolically cools down a *dhatu*, or, in other words, a part of the body. Notice that the number seven is connected to *shakti* and the *puttara* (see section 1.3).

After the seven kicks the student has to once more do the *puttara vandanam*; this time the sequence should not be repeated seven times, as is the case at the start of the practice, but three times. According the KKA teacher, this number refers to the temporal division of the cosmos into three parts: creation, maintenance, and destruction. The use of this symbolism indicates that the training started is now finished, and that the body should be switched back from a 'sporting-state' to a normal state. The state the body has taken on during the practice of Kalarippayat is now 'destroyed' and the body is brought back to its original state, in which 'creation' (i.e. the start of another training session) can again take place. Though the KKA gurukkal indicated this explanation was the Hindu point of view, he himself has no problem with accepting this, because, as he told me, it does not go against his Muslim belief. Moreover, according to the KKA gurukkal, this view is inextricably connected with the basic ideas of Kalarippayat, and as such it cannot be removed from the teachings of Kalarippayat²³⁰.

Paying respect to the *puttara*, the *ganapatittara*, and the *guruttara*, in the same way as when starting the practice, follows the *puttara vandanam*. The Muslim practitioners pay respect to Mecca, instead of to the three altars. After the salutations to the supernatural and the system itself, the student approaches first the gurukkal, and then his seniors for the *kalari* handshake. The *kalari* is exited

²³⁰ Private conversation with KKA gurukkal during third week of Oral Transmission Period II

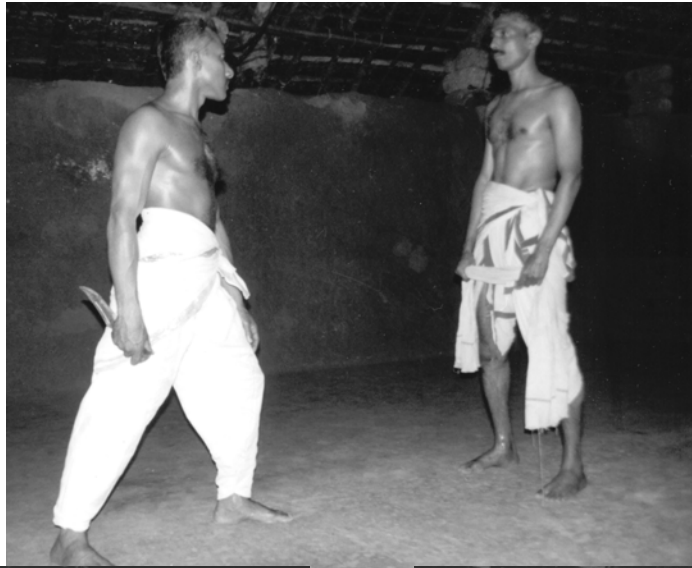
the same way as it was entered: the right foot is kept in the *kalari* last, then the ground, forehead, and heart are touched with the right hand.

Theoretically the gurukkal should be the last to leave the *kalari*, as he should be the first one to enter. With a hand broom he symbolically wipes away all the footprints from the practitioners. This finishing rite is, however, seldom observed in the KKA *kalari*.

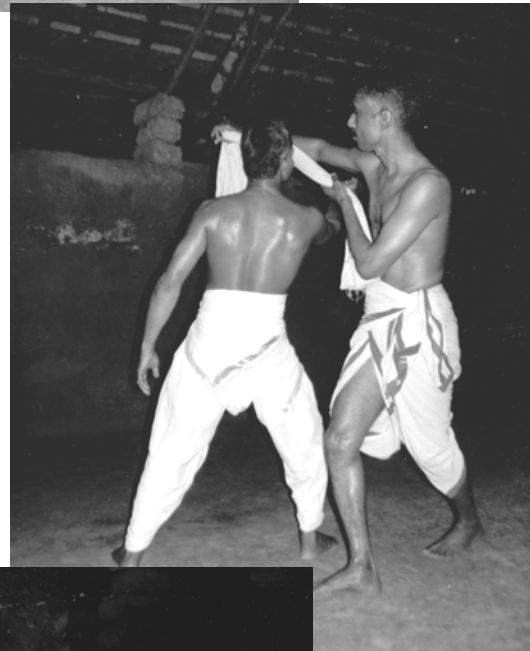
Above I have described the complete set of exercises in the daily practice of a Kalarippayat practitioner. I noticed that a novice does only some of the exercises: a beginner is not allowed to use iron weapons, because this is considered irresponsible. When somebody starts to learn the art, the emphasis will be on the empty-hand forms, such as the Shiva and Shakti forms. Each time the gurukkal thinks the student is good enough, he will let him or her enter the next stage, as in taking up short or long stick fighting. The very first day, I have noticed, is even a bit disappointing to many novices, because the first lesson consists only of several kicks (*kal etup*); these kicks will take no more than five minutes. Then the novice is asked to get dressed and go back home, after having paid respect to the *puttara*, *ganipattittara*, the *guruttara*, and the gurukkal²³¹.

²³¹ A training session is *always* ended in this way (block III as it is described in paragraph 3)

Example of
Keralan
pidutavum).
the towel
and throws
around the
opponent. By
towel and
attacker, the
breaks the
opponent.



fighting with a
towel (*kettum*
The man with
steps aside,
the towel
head of his
pulling the
blinding the
defender
neck of his



4. Kalaripayat as a medical system

Kalaripayat teachers in Kerala are known for their profound knowledge of the human body.²³² Northern and Central Style teachers claim to base their knowledge on Ayurvedic medicine, while Southern Style teachers claim to base their knowledge on Siddha medicine.²³³ The KKA gurukkal maintained that it is likely that the Indian martial arts were the major foundation of Ayurveda, because the science of healing started on the battlefield where medical practitioners were trying to save the warriors. Those physicians constructed a theory which explained that the body consisted not only of flesh and blood, but also of a life energy, which they called *prana*. *Prana* runs through vessels (*nadis*) throughout the body. Some parts of the *nadis* are situated only a small distance under the skin; where this is the case they are called *marmas*. For a physician it was important to avoid damage to those *marmas*, especially when they had to cut arrows and spear points from the body of a wounded warrior.

Unlike the medical practitioner, the martial artist seeks to damage the *marmas* in order to end a fight as soon as possible. But *marmas* cannot be damaged easily: they must be attacked at the right angle in the right way. In her forms and exercises Kalaripayat provides the knowledge of how to attack the *marmas* of the human body in the most efficient way.²³⁴

Because Kalaripayat is considered to be a way to attain liberation and union with the divine, much attention is paid to the promotion of health as well. The martial art provides massages to stimulate the flow of *prana* (life energy) in a positive way, contributing to the wellbeing of a person.²³⁵ This shows a different face of the gurukkal: his role as a healer.

This chapter falls into four sections. The first section treats the Ayurvedic philosophy and ideas on humors and *prana* as it is taught in the KKA *kalari*. The second section pays attention to the question of how to apply the previous theory in combat. The third section is a short introduction to *kalari* massage. I will also devote attention to the different kinds of *kalari* massages given in the KKA *kalari*.

I noticed that some teachers own clinics, providing their main source of income. The last section is about several examples of teachers who are working as traditional physicians.

I obtained the information of this chapter from the KKA gurukkal during Oral Transmission Period II and III, unless otherwise stated.

²³² Zarrilli, 1995, p.67

²³³ The KKA gurukkal asserts that Kalaripayat is a healing system not based on, but next to the Ayurvedic and Siddha medical systems; Zarrilli (e.g. 1992a, p.38) does not consider Kalaripayat as an independent healing system.

²³⁴ KKA gurukkal; Cf. Zarrilli, 1992a, p.38

²³⁵ KKA gurukkal; Cf. Zarrilli, 1995, p.67

1. The human body

1.1 Energy and Matter

The philosophy behind the Indian Martial Arts is closely connected to the culture in which it came into being. This culture developed a medical system called Ayurveda, or 'the science of life'. The Ayurvedic system of today, as it is practiced in Malabar, which is very popular among locals, claims to be rooted in and to be similar to the original system. There are several ancient standard works on medical treatments, such as the Sushruta Samhita and the Charaka Samhita, which date from at least several centuries BC²³⁶. Each of these works discusses a particular area of the Indian medical science. The martial arts of India cannot be separated from their medical counterpart. In order to maximize the wound inflicted on an opponent, a good understanding of the human body is necessary. Attacks follow patterns presented by Ayurvedic medicine.

As we have said, both Ayurveda and the Indian martial arts are a product of Indian civilization. This is the reason why both branches of arts are influenced by cultural and religious beliefs. In order to understand the basic ideas behind Kalarippayat and particularly that interpretation of Ayurveda on which the martial art bases its knowledge, it is important, according to the KKA teacher, to know the philosophy of the creation of the universe, as conceived in the interpretation of the KKA *kalari*²³⁷. This philosophy states that in the beginning there was only a seed. This seed contained in potency everything present in the universe. When the potencies inside the seed manifested themselves, the birth of the universe became a fact. According to 'ancient Indian sources', this seed was pure energy.²³⁸

The universe, as pointed out to me by the KKA gurukkal, is made out of space and matter. The 'tradition' says that this implies the existence of the opposition energy versus matter and space.²³⁹ This opposition is thought to be symbolized by the two sexes, man and woman. Man is the seed, the energy, while woman symbolizes matter, and the driving force of creation. The male energy is called Shiva, after one of the main gods of the Indian pantheon, while the female is referred to as Shakti, or power, being the wife of Shiva. A short list of several oppositions important to Kalarippayat includes:²⁴⁰

Shiva

Male
Positive
Energy
Motionless
Source
Cold

Shakti

Female
Negative
Space and matter
Dynamic
Manifestation
Hot

²³⁶ Cf. Zarrilli, 1992a, p.53; Zarrilli, 1995, p.67

²³⁷ That interpretation of Ayurveda as practiced by those who are connected to Kalarippayat, the KKA in particular

²³⁸ The KKA teachings have never specified to me which sources

²³⁹ According to the 'tradition' of the KKA *kalari*

²⁴⁰ The Kalarippayat of the KKA gurukkal

Applied to the human body the energy is called *prana*, while ether (*akasha*) represents space, which is necessary for the existence of matter. *Prana* is energy, male, and positive, while matter, female, and negative. Both matter and energy are necessary to uphold creation. Ether evolved into four other elements, wind (*vayu*), fire (*teja*), water (*jala*), and earth (*prithavi*). To illustrate the following, the KKA *kalari* provides drawings taken from the book of F. Ros, *The Lost Secrets of Ayurvedic Acupuncture*. Because these drawings were presented to me by the KKA gurukkal as essential to the ideas behind Kalarippayat, I am providing similar drawings. Chapter IV of that book was also used as an instruction text for the teachings of the functioning of and the theory behind *marmas*, though the KKA teacher made certain corrections to the text of the book. The following gives an account of the theory as it was presented orally to me by the KKA gurukkal. I included the essential illustrations mentioned, as well.

Creation started with the lightest element. Heavier elements are thought of as a more condensed state of the lighter elements. Pure energy was condensed to ether, ether condensed to wind, wind to fire, fire to water, water to earth (see figure 4.0). One can compare this to the different states of water: water is vapor in the gas state, water in the liquid state, and ice in the solid state.

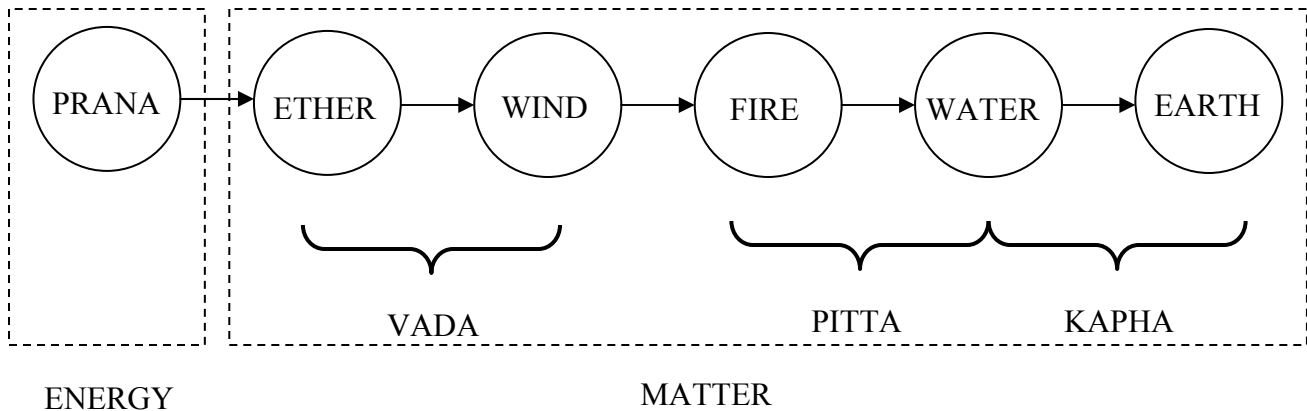


Figure 4.1: The creation of matter from light elements to heavy elements (after F. Ros)

The five elements are coupled into three pairs.²⁴¹ Ether and wind form the lightest couple. They represent space and movement inside space. This pair is called *vada*, or wind humor. The next couple is fire and water, or *pitta*, the fire humor. Water is, however, ambiguous. It occurs as vapor in the air, but also as liquid or even as a solid on the ground. So *pitta* contains the lighter version of water, while the more heavy state is coupled with earth. The latter is called the earth or mud humor, or *kapha*.

Everybody is made up of the three humors, and each person has its own specific quantity of *vada*, *pitta*, and *kapha*. For example, some people have more

²⁴¹ The five elements are the *pancamahabhuta*, see chapter 3.3.3.2

kapha then *vada* and *pitta*, while others have the three humors almost perfectly balanced. Each combination causes weaknesses and strengths in the body and the mind. I will treat the three most common types of people here in brief: people who possess an excessive quantity of *vada*, of *pitta*, and of *kapha*.

1.2 *Vada*

Vada contains the two lightest elements, ether and space, and is therefore very close in state to pure energy. *Vada* represents movement and is connected to catabolism. Therefore typical psychological characteristics related to *vada* can be: tendency to nervousness, difficulties with concentration, anxiety; but also flexibility of mind and understanding. Bodily characteristics are: tendency to be slim, with thin muscles that are difficult to develop, a flexible body, and tallness. The lower part of the body, the legs, are usually the weak point of somebody who has *vada* tendencies (figure 4.3). From a martial arts point of view, attacks should be done mainly to the legs, since they constitute the weak part of the opponent.

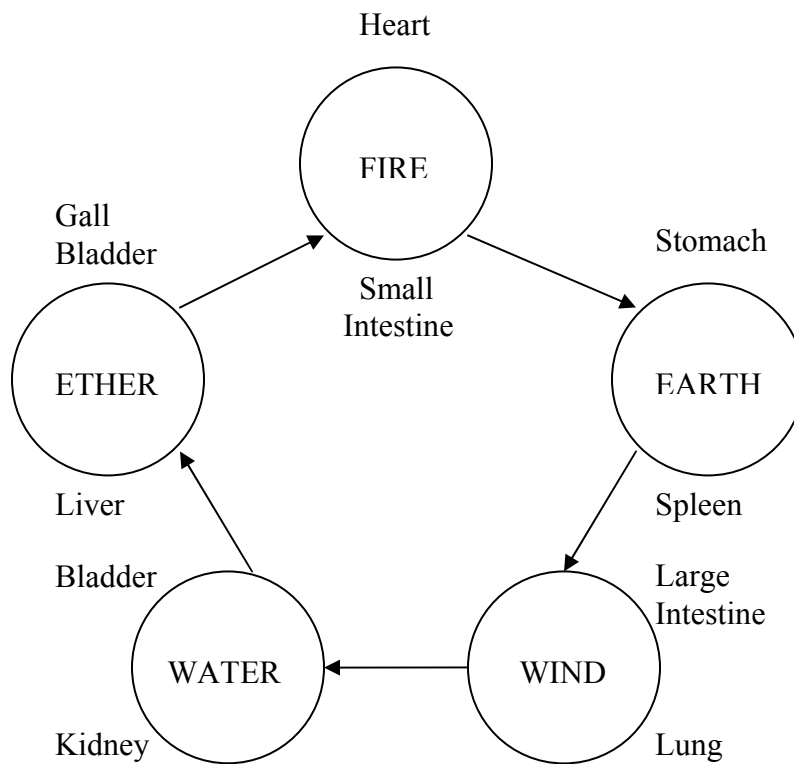


Figure 4.2: The wheel of support (*alamba chakra*) (after F. Ros)

1.3 *Pitta*

Pitta is the metabolic humor related to the hormonal system. People who are easily agitated possess a lot of *pitta*. *Pitta* however, also provides the energy to start something, and to undertake action. Since the combusive processes in the body, such as digestion, are caused by *pitta*, the torso up to the diaphragm is

vulnerable in people who are predominantly *pitta* (figure 4.3). *Pitta* people will also be more sensitive to diseases related to that part of the body.

1.4 *Kapha*

Kapha refers to rigidity. The *kapha* humor represents what is fully grown. People who are naturally endowed with heavy muscles or a lot of fat possess a strong *kapha* influence. Mentally *kapha* people are often not too flexible; they have the tendency to be focused on and attached to only one thing. They can be very steadfast in many ways. In terms of the body type, they usually have a very strong stance. Their weak point is the part of the torso above the diaphragm (figure 4.3).

It is very difficult to judge which tendency a person has, however, according to the KKA gurukkal. The estimation of the body type requires a lot of experience, and even then mistakes are easy to make. Therefore a martial artist should consider his or her judgment only as a general impression.

The tendency to a certain body type plays an important role in the practice of Kalarippayat. When a student begins his or her practice under a gurukkal, the teacher observes his new student during the first few lessons. Based on these observations the teacher estimates the body type of the student. Depending on the body type, he will decide to emphasize the practice of either Shiva or Shakti forms. Because of the fact that Shiva forms must be performed strongly and steadily, teachers advise students who do not naturally have strong legs to practice mainly the Shiva forms. Within the theory of the KKA *kalari* it means that when the *vada* or wind humor of the body of the student is much higher than its *kapha* humor, the *kapha* humor should be increased. Practicing the Shiva forms increases the stamina and strength of the lower body.

A similar story can be told for the Shakti forms. Some students naturally possess a body movement which is a bit stiff, without fluidity. Such people often have very strong legs. This is considered to be caused by the fact that their bodies possess more *kapha* than *vada*. Those people are advised to pay more attention to the fluent and soft movements of the Shakti forms, stimulating *vada*, in order to compensate their high *kapha*.

The KKA gurukkal told me that in this way a Kalarippayat teacher must ensure that there is a personal 'learning plan' for each student, because each student is different, with different capacities, weaknesses and strengths. The purpose is to build the same base for all students, even though each of them will specialize in certain branches of the art. The idea is that, whatever the interest and capacities of the student are, advanced training can be achieved only when the basics of the art are learned well.

1.5 *Nadis* and organs

The body transports life energy (*prana*) along channels called *nadis*. Peculiarly, a *nadi* runs through each internal organ to one of the limbs. According to Ayurveda, each of the organs is related to one of the five elements. Therefore

each organ can be labeled as *pitta*, *vada*, or *kapha*, as can its corresponding *nadi* (see figure 4.3).

In modern-day alternative medical methods, *nadis* are usually compared to meridians. These meridians too are associated with and named after their particular organs.

Table 4.1: The internal organs and their corresponding element and humor (Ros)

| Organ | Element | Humor |
|-----------------|---------|-------|
| Large Intestine | Wind | Vada |
| Lung | Wind | Vada |
| Kidney | Water | Vada |
| Bladder | Water | Vada |
| Liver | Ether | Pitta |
| Gallbladder | Ether | Pitta |
| Heart | Fire | Pitta |
| Small Intestine | Fire | Pitta |
| Stomach | Earth | Kapha |
| Spleen | Earth | Kapha |

The organs listed in table 4.1 are divided into two groups, the main organs and the minor organs. The organs of each group support each other directly by handing over their *pranic* energy. The main group is as follows:

- The heart supports the spleen (fire supports earth)
- The spleen supports the lung (earth supports wind)
- The lung supports the kidney (wind supports water)
- The kidney supports the liver (water supports ether)
- The liver supports the heart (ether supports fire)

From the last point, we see that the liver supports the heart because of their corresponding elements: ether supports fire. But fire supports earth, or applied to the intestines, the heart supports the spleen. We thus arrive again at the first point of the list of interrelationships. This means that when we take all the interrelationships together, they form a circle, called the wheel of support (*alamba chakra*). In the same way, the five minor intestines form a circle as well, because each of the main organs corresponds to one of the minor organs, since they refer to the same element. The resulting wheel of support for both major and minor organs is displayed in figure 4.1.

How can we apply this knowledge to the martial arts? In the first place we can attack the *nadis*. The *nadis* are like blood vessels, but instead of blood, life energy runs through them. And like blood vessels, *nadis* run along certain areas of the body, which makes them vulnerable and easy to reach. These vulnerable spots are called *marmas*. By poking a finger or a weapon into a *marma* in a specific way, it is said that damage can be inflicted on the body, because the *pranic* energy stream will be blocked. I will come back to this shortly.

The naming of these vulnerable spots is controversial. I noticed that each Kalaripayat teacher uses his own names for the specific spots, as taught to him by his own teacher²⁴². There is also disagreement among teachers about the exact location of the *marmas*. If one uses the information on the location of a specific *marma* given by several different teachers, one can usually only point out the area in which a specific spot can be found. The KKA teacher has collected information on the *marmas* from several teachers²⁴³. Where possible, he also 'tested' the *marmas*. He thus created his own *marma* system. Most points of this system I have indicated in figures 4.4 to 4.5.

The *marmas* are used not only according to their destructive aspect: many Ayurvedic treatments and treatments within the Kalaripayat system are based on manipulation of *prana* by pressing *marmas* and using massage along the *nadis*. If we can use these *marmas* to manipulate the *pranic* energy, we can also use them in combat to increase the damage to the body of the opponent. I will come back to this point in the next paragraph.

Apart from manipulating the *marmas*, there is another way to impose damage on an opponent. This can be done by a direct attack on the organs. In order to understand how, let's return once more to the Ayurvedic philosophy of the KKA *kalari*. Ayurveda also uses the outline of the creation of the elements to explain how an ailment comes into being. Before we recognize an actual disease, the problem starts with minor, hardly noticeable, dysfunctions inside the body. As time passes by, these dysfunctions become more and more apparent. Expressed in terms of the elements, they start like ether, and end like earth:

- Ether destroys wind
- Wind destroys fire
- Fire destroys water
- Water destroys earth
- Earth destroys ether

As the internal organs are related to the elements, we can cut off the *pranic* energy in one organ and damage another as well. An attack on two organs in the right order will cause irreparable damage to the body. Such attacks can be done according to the map of figure 4.3, which displays the wheel of destruction (*vinasha chakra*) used within the system of Kalaripayat.

2. Theory applied

2.1 The 'secret *mudras*' of Kalaripayat²⁴⁴

'*Mudra*' means, according to the KKA interpretation, 'seal'.²⁴⁵ In relation to Kalaripayat the word refers to the position of a hand and/or a foot when attacking an opponent. According to the KKA philosophy, in order to attack a

²⁴² The KKA gurukkal provided me with copies of drawings from several gurukkals (among others: Sadasivan Asan, Moolachal Asan, Chandran Gurukkal), in which they pointed out the position of 'their' *marmas*. Zarrilli (1992a and 1992b) uses the same teachers as a sources for his account on *marmas*. The KKA gurukkal and Zarrilli are well acquainted with each other, and Zarrilli often (1998, 1992a, 1992b, 1989) refers to the KKA gurukkal as one of his sources.

²⁴³ Ibid.

²⁴⁴ This text of this paragraph is based on Luijendijk D.H., *Mudradalam Kalaripayat*, appeared in: Seni Beladiri, May 1998, Kuala Lumpur, pp.39-40

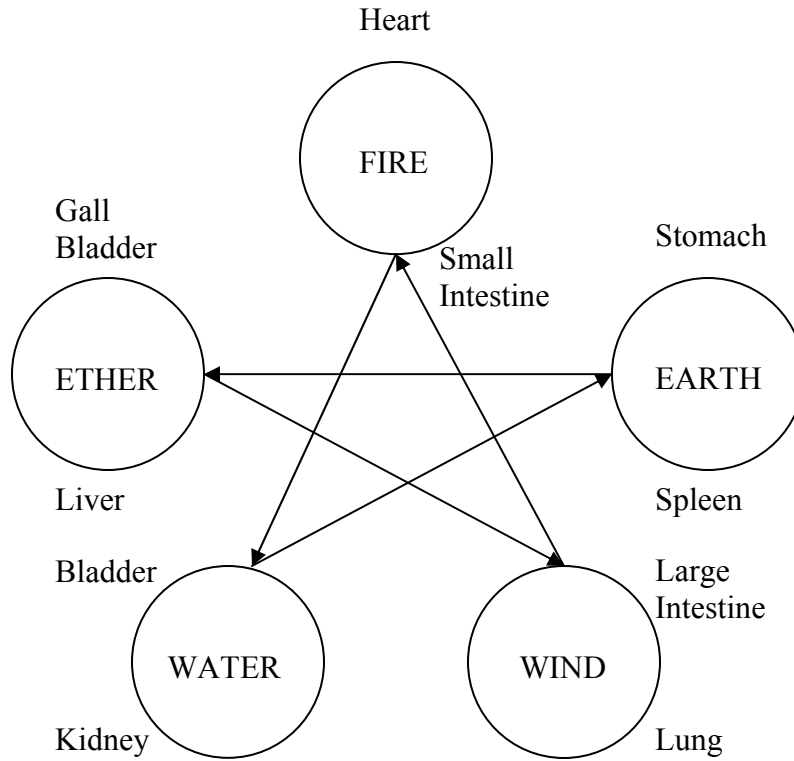


Figure 4.3: The wheel of destruction (*vinasha chakra*) (F. Ros)

marma effectively, two things should be taken into consideration: the location of the *marma* on the body of the opponent and the direction of penetration, which is specific to each *marma*. In practice this means that one needs a weapon of a certain shape, which fits the location of the *marma* on the body of the opponent, and which can be positioned at a specific angle for the required direction of penetration. If a person is fighting without weapons, he or she has to use a part of his or her body for the attack, such as the shoulder or hand. In many cases this part of the body will be (a part of) a limb. In order to make a hand or a foot suitable for an attack on a specific *marma* (to make it 'fit' the *marma*, as it were), the fighter has to keep his or her hand or foot of attack in a particular shape. This shape is called *mudra*. In short, an attack on a specific *marma* requires the use of a corresponding *mudra*. Most Kalaripayat *sampradayams* teach the use of *mudras*. I will treat just one of them.

According to the Kadathanad system there are six basic hand *mudras*, twelve secondary *mudras*, and six leg *mudras*. The effect of a *marma* attack is more lethal when a *mudra* technique is used than when a non-*mudra* technique is

²⁴⁵ Cf. Monier-Williams, *Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, Kessinger Publishing, Whitefish (USA), 2004 (on internet available via the <http://webapps.uni-koeln.de/tamil>)

- | | | | |
|-----------|---------------------|-----------------|--------------------------------|
| 1- Heart | 5- Kidney | 9- Kidney Nadi | A- Region where a <i>kapha</i> |
| 2- Lung | 6- Lung Nadi | 10- Liver Nadi | person is most vulnerable |
| 3- Liver | 7- Pericardium Nadi | 11- Spleen Nadi | B- Region where a <i>pitta</i> |
| 4- Spleen | 8- Heart Nadi | 12- Diaphragm | person is most vulnerable |
| | | | C- Region where a <i>vata</i> |
| | | | person is most vulnerable |

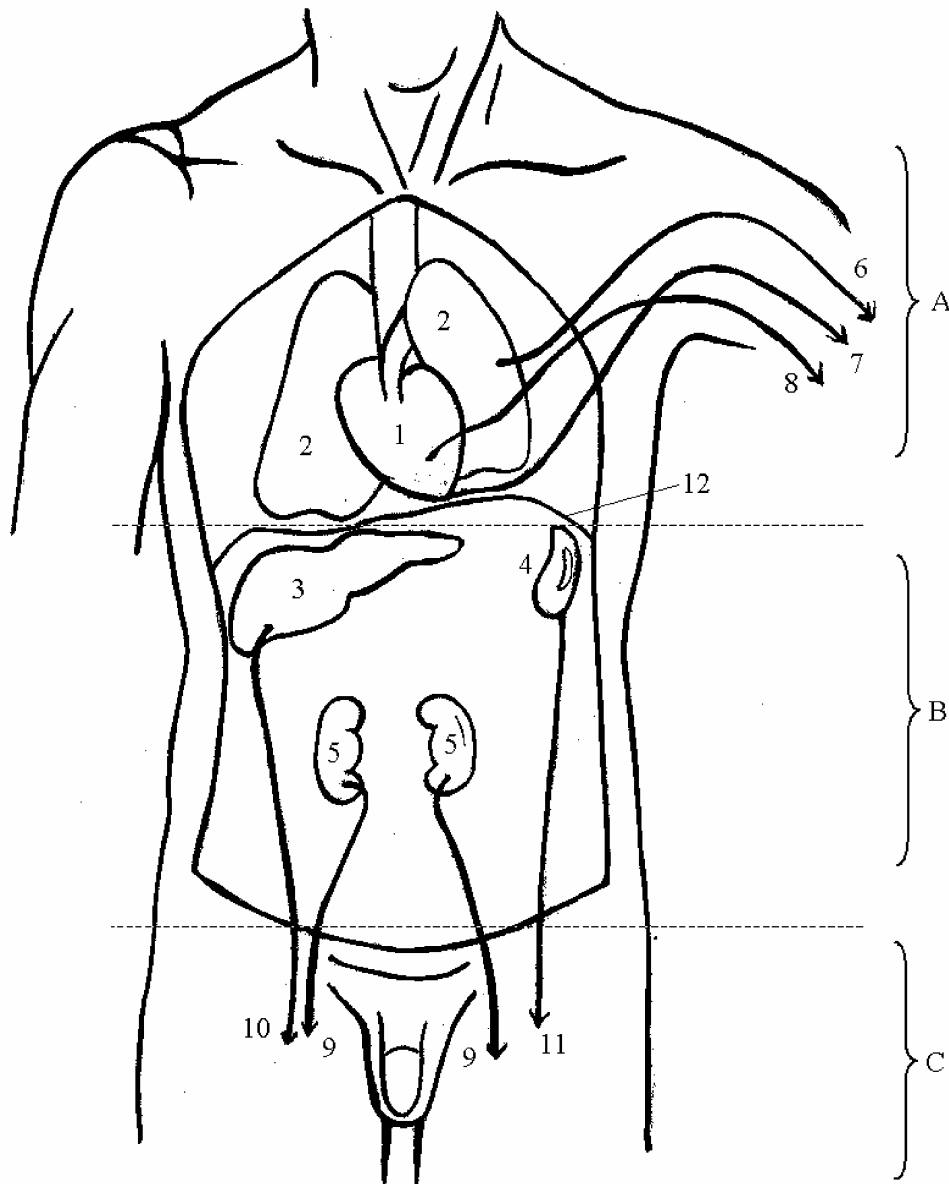


Figure 4.4: The position of the main organs and their corresponding *nadis* (after F. Ros)

used. The use of a *mudra* causes a block of the *pranic* or life force that flows through the energy channels (*nadis*) of the body. The technique 'seals' the *prana*

off as it were, referring to the meaning of the word *mudra*. The *mudra* is the most effective way to do this, because of its precise and specifically targeted impact.

Each *mudra* can penetrate one *marma* or a group of *marmas*, depending on the specific *marma*, angle, and direction of attack. *Cuvadu* (footwork) gives the direction, and *vadivu* (pose, position) gives the angle. The six basic hand *mudras*, however, naturally incorporate the correct angle and direction. In their case, footwork and pose are not necessary for the effect.

The six hand *mudras* of Kadathanad Kalarippayat are:

1. *Tembukai mudra* (scooping hand)
2. *Kutu mushti mudra* (folded hands)
3. *Panchakai mudra* (fist)
4. *Adikai mudra* (open palm)
5. *Vettukai mudra* (cutting hand)
6. *Tettakai mudra* (elbow)

The 'science' of *mudras* is closely related to Ayurveda. The idea behind Ayurveda is that the body consists of several vital juices; each is made up of the five elements (ether, wind, fire, water, earth), and as such each is related to a humor. Blood, for example, is one of them. However, often *prana* is also considered as one of these vital juices. In the body of a healthy person, the vital juices are in equilibrium. Disturbance of this equilibrium leads to health problems.

As mentioned, the purpose of using a *mudra* is to block the *pranic* stream in the body. This can be compared to blocking the bloodstream. Each blood vein and each *nadi* is connected to certain parts of the body. Therefore blocking of either vein or *nadi* will directly affect muscles and internal organs.

2.2 Location of some *marmas* according to the system of the KKA *kalari*

In the past, the knowledge of *marmas* gave a warrior a very strong advantage in battle. Many teachers took care not to teach the students all they knew, because they were afraid that one of the students would surpass them. Only on his deathbed did the teacher call his most trusted students. To them he told the 'secrets of the art'. Usually those 'secrets' were the location of a set of *marmas* which would result in death after being struck. Not all *marmas* cause death, however. Some bring dysfunction to certain organs, others just horrible pain.

According to Ayurveda the human body has two parts.²⁴⁶ The first part is the external physical body, called *sthula sarira* or gross body. This is made up of the bodily fluids on the one hand, and muscles and bones on the other. In other words, the gross body is composed of liquids that are supported by a solid system.

Inside the *sthula sarira* resides the subtle body of a human being, the *sukshma sarira*. The latter incorporates thinking power, automatic movements, experience, etc. In western terms we can say that the subtle body deals with brain functions.

²⁴⁶ According to the interpretation of Ayurveda according to the KKA *kalari*. Ross, chapter IV; Zarrilli, 1989, pp. 1291 et seq.; Zarrilli, 1992a, p.45

In total, man is made of three bodies, two kinds of gross body and the subtle body. The practice of Kalarippayat focuses on each of them. The art even teaches that there are three kinds of *marmas* related to each body. Certain *marmas* affect the liquid or humor part of the *sthula sarira*, other *marmas* affect the solid part, and there are *marmas* to affect the *sukshma sarira*. The following subdivision of *marmas* into groups is used in the KKA *kalari*²⁴⁷.

Group 1: humor-related *marmas*

Many *marmas* on the body are located on the *nadis*. In the first section of this chapter I explained that *nadis* are connected to organs, and that organs are predominantly built up of one element. Therefore the organs are attached to a humor. That is why those *marmas* that are located on the *nadis* are dominated by a humor. There are *pitta*, *vata*, and *kapha marmas*. Pressing such *marmas* will affect the humor system of the body. The result is a disturbance in the natural balance between the humors, because the energy stream in the body (*prana*) is blocked. This often creates problems for one of the internal organs.

Group 2: Tissue-related *marmas*

The *marmas* in this group are not necessarily covered by the *marmas* of group 1. The *marmas* that affect the solid part of the gross body are of four kinds:

- *Padu marmas*, spots on the bones
- *Todu marmas*, points on the nervous system
- *Ullu marmas*, points on the most sensitive areas of the muscles, and points connected to the respiratory system
- *Tattu marmas*, points on the circulatory system

These points are very useful when one wants to block the blood stream, upset the nervous system, or find the place to break a certain bone in the best way. The points are in such a way located, that in general, they obey the rules of physics. For example, the best place to break a bone depends on the location of the impact of a strike, while pressing a point in the center of a muscle causes great pain. These points are in principle different from the *nadi*-related *marmas* that are always draining energy in the body or a part of the body. Warriors who are using weapons often use the vital points in this group. When a knife is used, one must know where to cut to maximize the damage, or which points on the skeleton to hit when wielding a club in order to splinter the bones.

Group 3: *Marmas* affecting the *sukshma sarira*:

The word *marma* refers to 'vital' or 'weak' point. In Keralan culture there is absolutely no difference between physical *marmas*, with an exact location on the body, and psychological or brain-related *marmas*. The definition of 'psychological warfare' within the interpretation of Kalarippayat would be 'to attack the *marmas* of a person's psyche'. The *marmas* of this group are twofold: the weak spots of a person's psyche and the brain's electronic circuitry. The latter can be influenced by certain techniques meant to upset the brain for a moment by creating a small

²⁴⁷ Another division can be obtained from Fedorova (1990: 274). She has divided the *marmas* into five categories: *mamsa* (muscles), *sira* (vessel), *snayu* (tendon), *asthi* (bones), and *sandhi* (joint) *marmas*.

shock inside the brain's electronic circuitry. Though the effect of such shock is marginal, precious time, even though it might be a very little bit, can be bought by applying such techniques.

Apart from the three groups just mentioned, in general, *marmas* are also divided into two other groups, *eka marmas* and *duanda marmas*. *Duanda marmas* are vital spots that occur symmetrically on the body. For example, when there is a *marma* on the left side of the ribcage on the body, the same *marma* will be on the same spot on the right side of the ribcage. An *eka marma* is a vital spot that is unique on the body. An example is the *adipati marma*, the fontanel.

In the figures 4.4, 4.5, 4.6, and 4.7, I pointed out some *marmas* on the human body as they were told to me by the KKA gurukkal²⁴⁸. The drawings do not show the complete set of *marmas* as transmitted to me in the teachings of the KKA gurukkal. I have chosen those points, that were pointed out to me most frequently in relation to the forms. The drawings should be used in combination with those forms, such as Shiva and Shakti and the weapon forms, since each form within the KKA Kalarippayat system shows a set of combination attacks directed to several *marmas* at the same time²⁴⁹.

3. *Kalari* massage

The master of Kalarippayat played an important role in Keralan society as a physician. Even nowadays a lot of people go to the local gurukkal with their problems²⁵⁰. The martial arts expert has a lot of knowledge about combat-related injuries; and many gurukkals treat fractures, dislocations, bruises, and swellings. But he is also often successful in healing or softening numbness, paralysis, general fatigue, and other nerve-related problems.²⁵¹

Usually both internal and external treatments are given at the same time. Just like an Ayurvedic physician, the gurukkal prescribes the standard Ayurvedic medicines for internal use. However, what distinguishes the gurukkal from the normal Ayurvedic doctor is his expertise on *marmas* and *nadis*²⁵². He uses this expertise to give a special kind of massage, the *kalari* massage or *uliccil*. Most gurukkals know several different *kalari* massage systems²⁵³. Each of these massage systems has its own purpose. They are believed to be very effective and to have better results than the treatments of modern physiotherapists.

Medicated oils are always used during the *kalari* massage. These oils are usually homemade according to recipes handed down from teacher to student or from father to son. The making of such oils is a time-consuming process. The pure oil is extracted from the fruit of plants such as coconuts or almonds. This oil is boiled for a long time with several kinds of medicinal herbs in a certain

²⁴⁸ Last month Oral Transmission Period I

²⁴⁹ Zarrilli gives an account of the different *marma* spots as well (Zarrilli, 1992a: 67-78)

²⁵⁰ Cf. Zarrilli, 1995, p.67

²⁵¹ Physical problems which are nerve-related according to the KKA system

²⁵² Though the KKA gurukkal mentions Ayurvedic medicine here, one of his most commonly used massages comes from the Southern Style. This massage is based on Siddha medicine.

²⁵³ Cf. Zarrilli, 1995, pp.67 et seq. ; Zarrilli, 1989, pp.1289 et seq.

proportion. The boiling itself can take several days. Because of this, good quality oils can become very expensive.

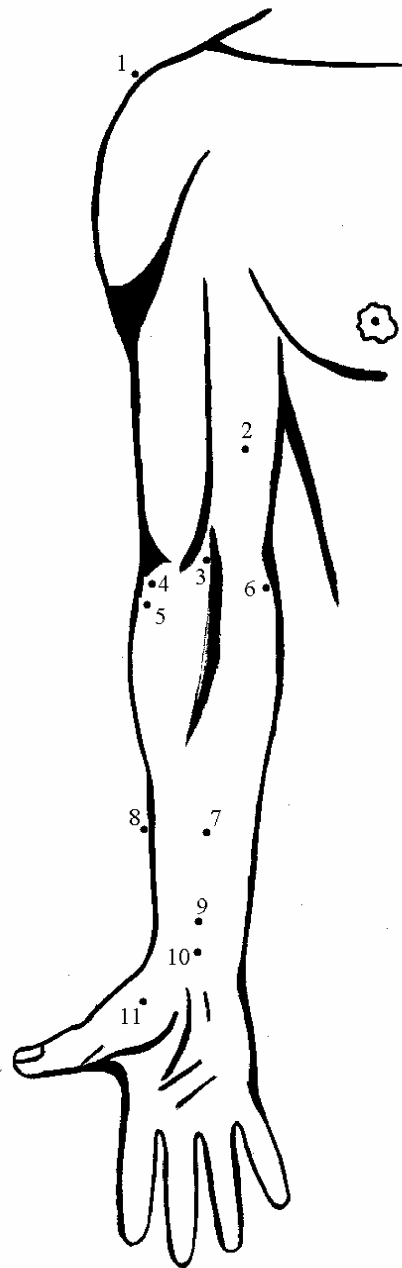


Figure 4.5: The *marmas* on the arm (inside view)

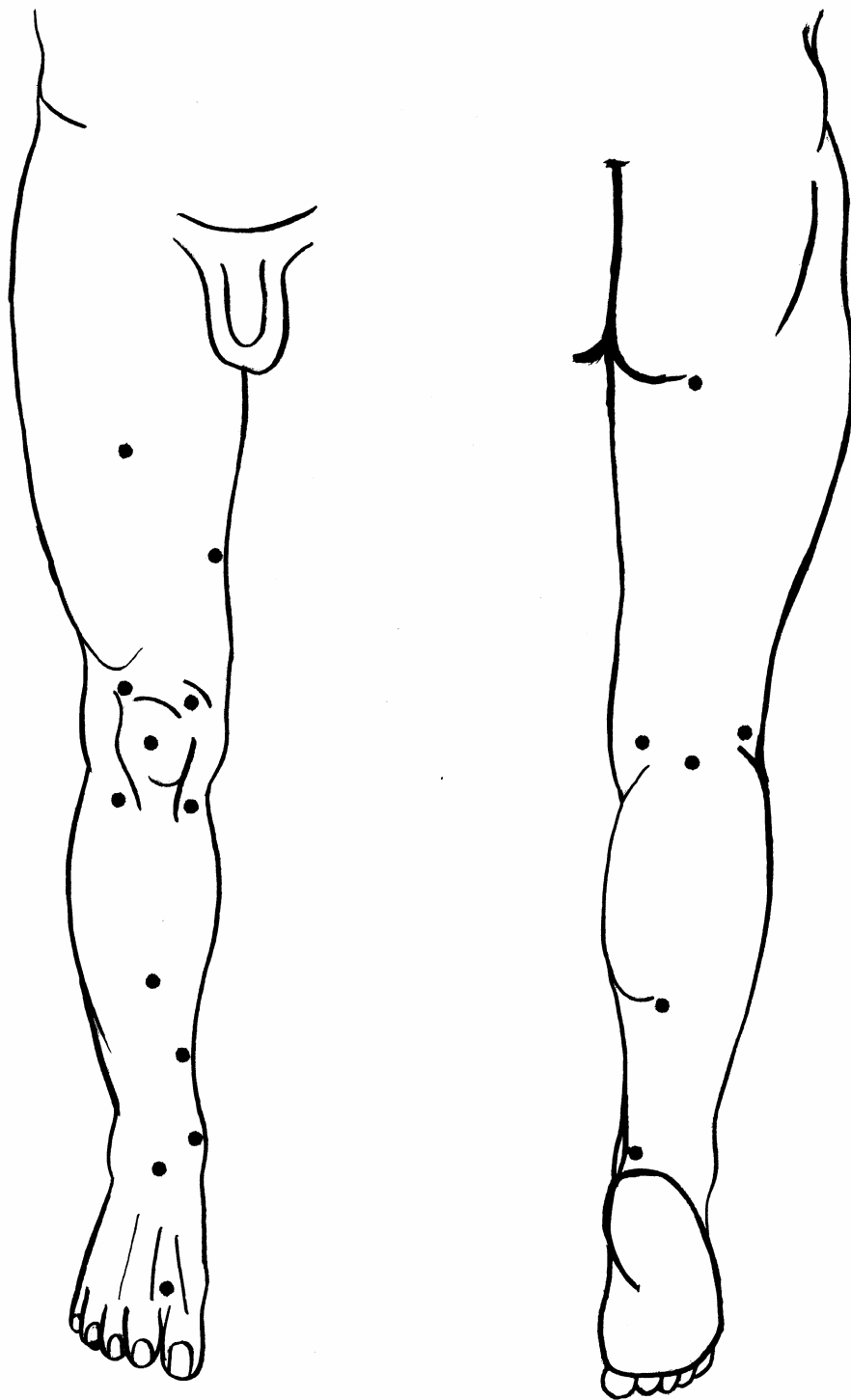


Figure 4.6: Some leg *marmas*

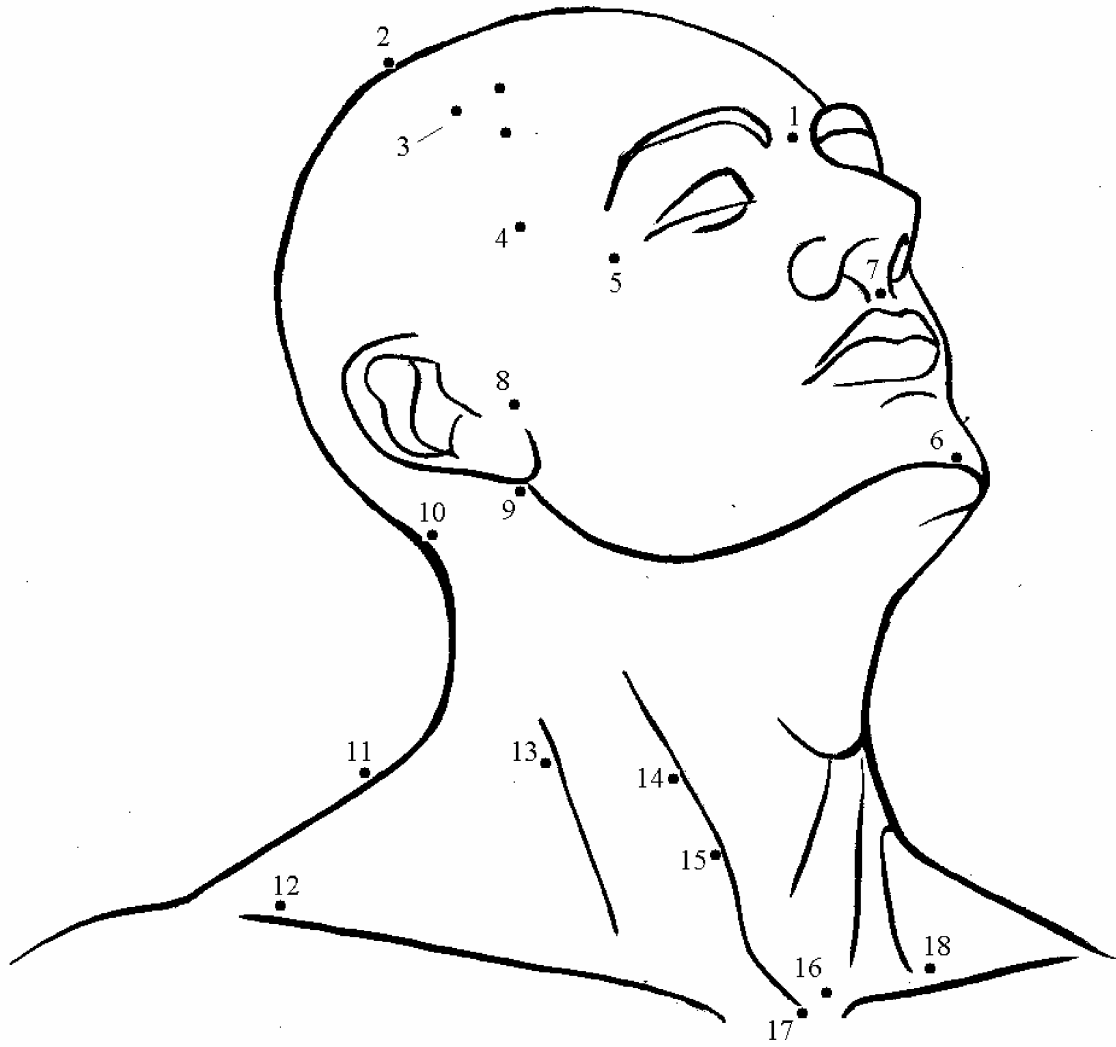


Figure 4.7: The face and neck *marmas*

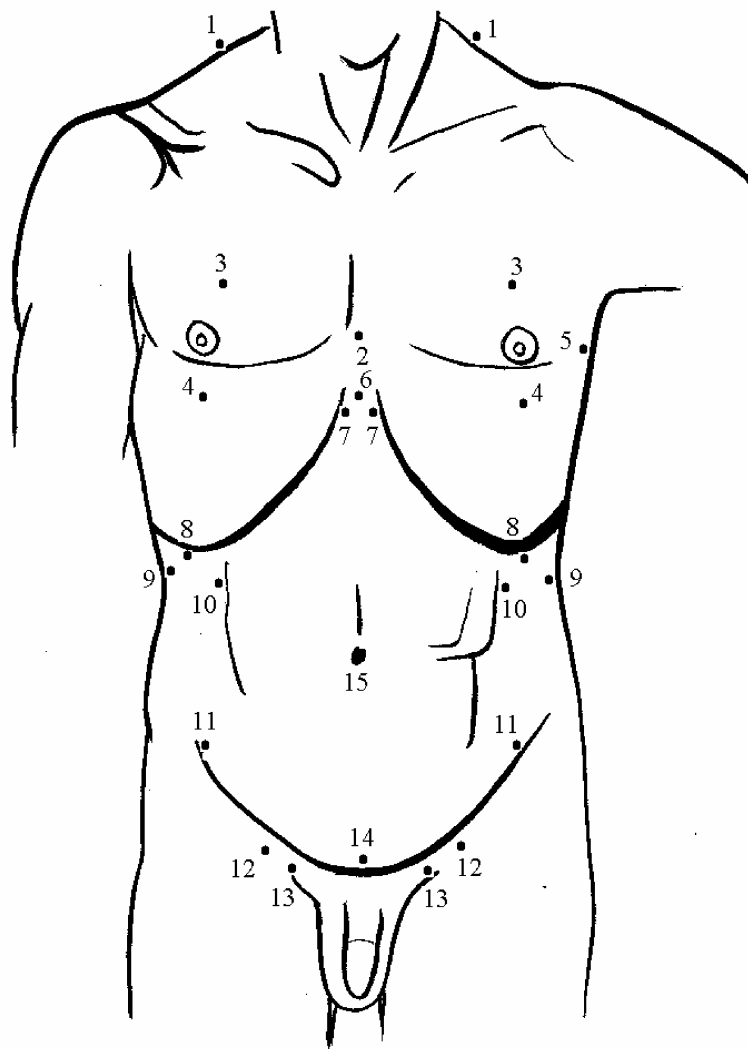


Figure 4.8: The torso

The idea behind the use of such oils is to impregnate the medicines into the blood or energy streams of the body through the pores of the skin. In order to maximize this absorption, the pores are opened up by adding heat. Heat can be added in several ways.

One way is that the gurukkal opens the pores by applying heat produced by the flow of his *prana*. Because the gurukkal has practiced Kalarippayat for a long time, he is believed to be able to control the energy flow (*prana*), which circulates within his body. When he concentrates on this energy stream, he is able to heat his body up. This specific heat is called *tapas*. During a hand massage, he increases the intensity of the energy flow into his hands. As a result his hands will become warm. The *prana* of the gurukkal will stream into the sore part of the

body of the patient in the form of body heat. The advantage of this kind of heat is that it affects the complete energy system of the patient as well. In other words, the *tapas* of the gurukkal stimulates the *pranic* flow of his patient, which will add to his or her recovery.

Another way to heat up the skin and open its pores is to use a source of heat in the form of boiling hot oil. During a *kili* treatment cloths are soaked in medicated oil of a certain temperature, and used to massage the inflicted part of the patient's body. The massage is carried out several times in a row, but with the oil at different temperatures. Little by little the gurukkal increases the heat of the oil, until it finally reaches up to 150 degrees Celsius. The temperatures of the oil are specific for each time the massage is carried out.

Besides the use of medicated oil, patients are also treated by manipulation of their body energy. As an expert on *marmas* and *nadis*, a master is not only able to harm a person through vital point attacks, but he can also use his knowledge to help his patients. Therefore many of the *kalari* treatments are based on balancing the life energy via the *pranic* system. This can be done in different ways:

1. Massage along the *nadis* or energy channels of the body. In this way any blocks inside the *nadis* are removed.
2. Massaging and pressing the *marmas*. Since *marmas* can be understood as 'taps', or as openings to the *nadi* channels and the entire *pranic* system, they can be used to add energy, to stimulate the energy stream, and to lift blocks inside the *nadis*.
3. Adding life energy to the body of the patient using the internal heat (*tapas*) of the gurukkal himself.
4. Sometimes the gurukkal gives some specific exercises to a patient. These exercises correct the alignment of muscles and bones, and free the blood vessels and energy channels. Moreover, such exercises are believed to stimulate the 'inner heat' of the patient.

Each *marma* pressed has its own effect on the body. Therefore different *marmas* must be stimulated for each particular problem. When a certain massage is applied the gurukkal knows where and when to press. Pressure on the *marmas* cannot be given without taking into account the age and body type of his patient. In general, old or unhealthy people must undergo a lighter pressure than the young and healthy. It is important for the master to estimate the body type as well (see paragraphs 1.2-1.4): in general, the *marmas* of *vata* persons should be pressed less than those of *kapha* persons. But not always, as the fact that somebody is *vata*, *pitta*, or *kapha* indicates which parts of the body should be attended to more.

The gurukkal also has to decide which particular massage should be given to the patient. He can choose from at least five different kinds of massages²⁵⁴:

²⁵⁴ This is a division made by the KKA gurukkal. Zarrilli (1995: 67) uses a slightly different division:

1. health-giving and health-maintaining full-body massages
2. muscle- and body-strengthening applications

1. Full-body massages
2. Massages that increase muscular flexibility
3. Physiotherapeutic massages
4. Sport injury massages
5. Massages to counteract the effects of *marma*-related injuries

3.1 Full-body massage

A full-body massage starts with putting oil on the whole body of the patient. Some full-body massages are based on strokes that work mainly on the nervous system; other full-body massages are based on the stimulation of the *pranic* flow of the energy system²⁵⁵. Both types have a relaxing effect. These massages are intended improve the health in general, and are a good antidote against stress. Full-body massages are very important within the basic theory of the Ayurvedic system. Ayurvedic medicine teaches that good health can only be attained when the *entire* body works as it should work. It believes that a problem only arises when the three humors, *kapha*, *vata*, and *pitta*, are out of balance. This balance is different for every person. A patient can only heal if the optimal amount of each of the three humors for his or her body is restored. Because those three humors are involved in the functioning of the body as a whole, Ayurveda prescribes medicines to solve a problem holistically. According to the KKA teacher, this is in contrast with modern medicine, which applies treatments based on solving a problem locally. For example, aspirin is prescribed for a headache, even though the headache originated due to a totally different problem. The weakness of Ayurvedic medications and prescriptions lies in the fact that because of its aim of starting a recovery process for the body as a whole, they work very slowly, especially compared to western medicine.

As a full-body massage is meant to restore the balance of the humors, it therefore contributes to a healing process of the entire body.

3.2 Massages, that increase the muscular flexibility

Massages that improve muscular flexibility and strength are used especially for Kalarippayat practitioners. Each student that has been accepted undergoes a full-body massage, in which all bones are aligned correctly, and the muscles are stretched. The *nadis* are cleared of any blocks present, as well. This type of massage (*cavuti tirummu*) takes fifteen days. The master uses his feet to make the strokes along the limbs of the student. To keep his balance he hangs from a rope with his hands. Because he is using his feet the *gurukkal* is able to apply more pressure to the strokes than with his hands. During the fifteen days that the

3. treatments for specific injuries or pathological conditions including bruises, dislocations, bone breaks, general weakness of the muscles and limbs, or complex crippling injuries

4. emergency counter-applications for potentially deadly shocks or blows to the body's vital spots.

²⁵⁵ According to Zarrilli (1995: 71) “The body type (*kapha*, *vata*, and *pitta* body types; author) and condition determine the number of strokes and the pressure used, with healthier clients receiving more strokes and pressure, and with martial arts and dance students receiving the maximum pressure possible in order to build strength and gain flexibility”. According to the information I obtained from the KKA *gurukkal*, the body type determines the pressure used, as Zarrilli states, but the number of strokes is independent of the body type. In the KKA *kalari* the basic number of strokes is seven.

massage is given, and the fifteen days after, the student is not allowed to do any heavy physical work or to do any heavy practice. The massage sessions each take about one and a half hours and are concluded with some light practice, usually kicks. Each day that the massage progresses, the strokes are applied with more pressure. On the seventh day the intensity of the massage is at its peak. The eighth day is a resting day on which the body is purged with a special laxative. From the ninth day onward the pressure of the strokes decreases. This type of massage is very painful, but when the massage period is finished, the student feels more energetic and his flexibility has increased dramatically, as I can tell from my own experience.

3.3 Physiotherapeutic massages

Sometimes certain massages are given along with the full-body massage, or even separately. These massages have a purely medical purpose. They can be compared to treatments from a physiotherapist. This type of massage is meant for all kinds of problems related to the nervous and the *pranic* systems and the bones and muscles. Examples of typical ailments are numbness and broken bones. The master tries to solve his patient's problem by manipulating the energy system via his or her *marmas*. In order to do this effectively, the patient mostly lies down. The massage is given manually so that the master can locate the exact spot of the specific *marmas* he wants to manipulate. The strokes are given with variable intensity of pressure, depending on the *marma*, the body constitution, and the age of the patient.

3.4 Sports injury massages

Some massages were meant to solve problems such as bruises and dislocations from combat fast and effectively. The purpose is to send warriors back into the battlefield after a short treatment. These types of massages are now being used when small accidents happen in the *kalari*, when a Kalaripayat practitioner has a muscle problem, and for bruised joints. Usually the patient is in a standing position when this massage is given. In general, these massages are excellent for medical attention for sport injuries.

3.5 Massages to counteract the effects of *marma*-related injuries

When a *marma* is hit in a fight or just accidentally penetrated, the master will give a treatment to cure or reduce the results of the *marma* injury. Each *marma* on the body should be attacked in a specific way. Similarly, each ailment due to a *marma* injury is treated according to a counter-application, especially related to that *marma*. Typical for this kind of treatment is the manipulation of that *marma* which is the exact opposite of the injured *marma*. For example, an injured *marma* on the chest will be treated via its opposite on the back.

4. The *kalari* and treatment

Kalari massage is compulsory for advanced Kalaripayat practitioners. Those who want to learn the different massages must have had a solid basic training of Kalaripayat. This is due to the fact that being in good condition is an absolute

must for most massages, as well as a profound knowledge of the body and its *marma* and *nadi* system.

The *kalari* itself is sometimes used to give treatments, though many teachers have a separate room for this purpose. Some gurukkals use a small *kalari* (*ceru kalari*) for this purpose, while others have a *kalari* clinic.

One of the senior students of the KKA *kalari*, who had become a gurukkal himself, has a clinic next to his house. He makes oils and medicines according to the Ayurvedic and *kalari* tradition. His patients get different (*kalari*) massages for different ailments. He not only treats muscular and bone problems (the specialty of a gurukkal), but he also tries to cure almost any disease with traditional medicine. Though the effect of these treatments may be questionable in the eyes of modern medicine, I have witnessed some good results. The man is also much cheaper than regular hospitals, and certainly his clinic is much cleaner. Therefore such clinics are still very popular among the local population.

The senior student used to come each morning to the KKA *kalari* on a very old motorcycle with a bag which to me was almost a magic bag. When somebody was bruised or wounded, he would take an endless variety of oils, potions and ointments out of his bag to help the victim. He also had a deep knowledge of local herbs and their effects.

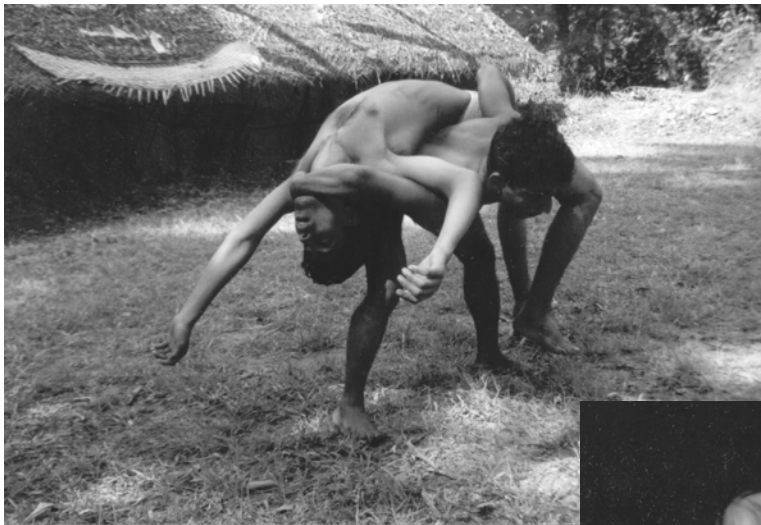
There are also gurukkals who do not have their clinics next to their house. Some of them work in hospitals, such as Chandrashekar Gurukkal, and others in treatment centers. Sri Jayan Gurukkal gives massages in Cannanore, 20 kilometers from his house near Tellicherry, in the local Kalari Cikitsa Kendra (Kalari Treatment Center).

Also Sherif Gurukkal, the KKA teacher, who earns his living as a shop owner, recently opened a *ceru kalari* and a place where traditional oils and medicines are made. Though Sherif Gurukkal does not need to make his living from his treatments, for many gurukkals it is how they earn money for their families.

The standing foot massage (*cavuti tirummu*)...



... and the resulting flexibility which is useful during a bout.



Flexibility of the joints is tested when the teacher shows a lock.



5. Four stages of Kalaripayat

In section 2.3 I explained the symbolism of the *puttara*. The *puttara* is the embodiment of the *kalari* goddess. Its seven steps represent the seven stages of development of a practitioner. The highest step, the top of the *puttara*, signifies the ultimate goal of Kalaripayat: union with the divine. The martial system herself is a way to reach that goal; in other words, through the practice of Kalaripayat the practitioner tries to elevate himself to a spiritually higher level.

In section 2.3 I also pointed out that, in practice, only four stages of self-development are identified in the KKA *kalari*, though the *puttara* represents seven stages. During the first stage the student learns the forms and rituals; during the second stage the student learns how to apply these forms in a fight. The understanding of the art deepens during the third stage, and the student becomes one with the art. The fourth through seventh stages are purely meditative and contemplative, and do not involve physical exercises anymore. These last four stages are seen as one in the KKA *kalari*, because they are hardly mentioned, and are called the stage of meditation.

When analyzing the art of Kalaripayat as it is taught in the KKA *kalari*, I noticed that the division into four parts occurred more often. In this chapter I want to examine if the six kinds of rituals – those that I have identified in the Introduction (section 2.5) – can be divided into four parts in the way I explained above. These six rituals are:

1. Rituals for starting the (daily) practice
2. The practice itself
3. Rituals for stopping the (daily) practice
4. Rituals for accepting a new student to the *kalari*
5. Periodic rituals, connected to the seasons
6. Periodic rituals, connected the progress of a student

First I want to examine if the division into four can be made. Then, assuming we are able to subdivide a particular kind of ritual into several smaller rituals, I want to show how we can link this subdivision to the four stages of development mentioned.

1. Starting the practice

After having applied oil to one's body, a student advances toward the *puttara* to pay respect to the *kalari* system itself. In the KKA *kalari*, this is done by greeting the four representations of the art:

1. *Puttara* (the *kalari* goddess)
2. *Ganapatittara* (the tutelary deity of Kalaripayat)
3. *Guruttara* (the lineage of the art)
4. Gurukkal (the personification of the art and her lineage)

The *puttara* is the embodiment of the divine origin of the art, the *guruttara* is the altar representing the past gurukkals through whom the art was handed down (the 'lineage'), while the gurukkal is the last link in this lineage. Before each undertaking, the obstacles to success must be removed. to the KKA, the

elephant-headed god Ganesha is the one who removes or erects obstacles. Paying respect to him will increase the chances for success. The *puttara* and the *ganapatittara* are the divine, while the *guruttara* and the gurukkal are human. The senior students of the KKA gurukkal, who are Hindu, give Ganesha yet another role: he is the tutelary deity, the ultimate teacher of the art.

The divine knowledge is transmitted to humanity through Ganesha: by erecting or removing obstacles, he decides whether this divine knowledge will arrive. Ganesha, as the tutelary deity of Kalarippayat, may assume the same role as Shiva here: it was Shiva who taught Parasurama (see section 1.3.3). The reason that Ganesha assumes the role of the tutelary deity instead of Shiva in the KKA *kalari* and many other *kalaris* may be that Ganesha is the remover of obstacles and must be worshipped before one starts to learn Kalarippayat, in order to be able to learn the lessons²⁵⁶.

Divine knowledge originates in the *kalari* goddess²⁵⁷. She, however, is just the source of knowledge; she does not play any active role. The knowledge is transmitted to humanity through the tutelary deity of Kalarippayat, Ganesha. Ganesha will not teach the Kalarippayat student directly, because he is more concerned with providing the ideal circumstances for learning. The gurukkals will do this job. These gurukkals are the gurukkals of the martial lineage; the youngest of this lineage is the gurukkal himself. The older the gurukkal, the more he will only observe, and leave the actual teaching to his senior students. He will only correct the student indirectly, via the senior student appointed by him (see section 2.1). The more we 'climb' the chain of gurukkals, coming closer to the source of knowledge (the *kalari* goddess), the more inactive the teacher becomes. The source herself is dormant and inactive.

In my interpretation, the four representatives of the art that are greeted at the start of the practice can be seen as stages of activity: the *puttara* is passive, while the living gurukkal is the most active.

The information of this chapter I obtained through observations in the KKA *kalari* during Oral Transmissions Periods I, II, and III. The explanation of the observations expresses the view of the KKA gurukkal, unless otherwise stated.

2. The practice

After paying respect to the four representatives of the art, the *vandanams*²⁵⁸ are performed (introductory Kalarippayat forms, see section 3.3.2.2). These express the idea behind the forms and exercises. I don't think the division into four works in these *vandanams*²⁵⁹, because if any numbers are used, they will refer to the number associated with the *sampradayam*, as the number six is associated with Kadathanad *sampradayam* (see section 3.3.2a), rather than with the stages of development.

²⁵⁶ Cf. Zarrilli, 1998, p.72 ; I also encountered this idea in the *kalaris* of Soman Gurukkal and Sri Jayan Gurukkal

²⁵⁷ See section 2.3

²⁵⁸ or *vanakkams* (see section 3.2)

²⁵⁹ Ibid.

After these introductory exercises, the lessons on body conditioning, empty-hand and armed fighting take place. This part of the training session is divided into four parts as well (see section 3.3):

1. Kicks and the empty-hand training in the form of Shiva and Shakti forms (*meyttari* or *mey-abhyasam*)
2. training with wooden weapons (*koltari*)
3. training with iron weapons (*ankamtari*)
4. (empty-hand) applications ((*verumkai*) *prayogam*) focusing on the vital spots of the body (*marmas*)

This schedule is followed exactly when learning the art as a whole. The student must first learn the basics, starting with the Shiva and Shakti forms. These basics sculpt the body, condition the body, and improve the body's flexibility and fluidity of movement. When the student has mastered several of these forms, the gurukkal gives him permission to take up wooden weapons, starting with long stick and followed by short-stick practice. These two stages take a long time and require many repetitions. At a certain moment the student enters the next stage: he gets permission to take up iron weapons, starting with the spear (the equivalent of the long stick) and followed by the sword and shield (more or less the equivalent of the short stick). The last stage is the teaching of *marmas* through *verumkai*, and the *otta*. Though the *otta* is a wooden weapon, it is considered the 'master's weapon', because it requires a lot of understanding of *marmas* and the human body to be able to wield it. Some schools start the *otta* together with the other wooden weapons, and explain its actual use later.

Based on my experience, the most physically intense of these four types of exercises is the first, the *mey-abhyasam*, followed by the *koltari*, and then the *ankamtari*. The least intense is the last, covering the applications: compared to the other three parts, there is much less physical activity. The emphasis of a training session is usually on the first part of the four; the forms in this part are the ones that are repeated most during a training session.

The number four appears in yet another aspect of the training. According to the KKA teacher, 'traditionally' it takes twelve years for a student to learn the art properly, that means three years for each part.

3. Finishing the practice

The rituals for finishing the practice are the same as for starting the practice. See section 1 for an explanation.

4. Acceptance rituals

The acceptance rituals follow a similar pattern as those for starting the practice. See section 1 for an explanation.

5. Rituals connected to the seasons

The year is divided into four parts, indicated by the monsoon or rainy season, the cold season, the warm season, and the hot season²⁶⁰. In the KKA

²⁶⁰ The KKA kalari does not use any particular names for the seasons, and instead refers to the Malayalam months. The rainy season: Karkidakom (July/August), Chingam (August/September), Kanni

philosophy, the body's condition changes during each part of the year because of the differences in weather conditions. Therefore each season stresses certain body exercises. For example, during the warm season, especially its second half, students must refrain from ardent exercises. The weather can become so hot, that even in the early morning, when the training takes place, the body cannot stand the intense demands required to perform several Shiva and Shakti forms. The emphasis is on weapon training and Southern and Central Style exercises. During the cold season the opposite is true: more attention is paid to the Shiva and Shakti forms. However, during the rainy season the number of weapon forms are reduced. The reason is that because of the continuous and heavy rain the ground becomes saturated with water. Because the *kalari* is a rectangular pit in the ground, the mud floor becomes very wet. Often students slip and fall on the floor, which can be dangerous when using weapons.

The choice of oil used to cover the body during training also changes with the season. It is believed that oil covers the body as if wrapping it in a bag. During the cold season the oil used keeps the body warm, while during the warm season the body must be cooled down. Though the oil is usually made of a base of coconut oil, the herbs in the oil give the required effect. Some herbs are characterized by their cooling effect, while others are known for their warming effect. The season is not the only decisive factor for the use of specific oils: the body structure of the practitioner is also taken into account. The season is always the basis for using a specific oil, though (see section 4.1.2-4.1.4).

In the next paragraph I want to discuss some of the important peculiarities of each season for Kalaripayat.

5.1 The rainy season

The hot season, when the *kalari* is closed, usually ends somewhere in the second or third week of June. Almost instantaneously heavy clouds start to appear in the Malabar sky. The bright daylight, which is common almost throughout the Keralan year, is dimmed by the blackness of those clouds. A few thick drops come down, gradually swelling into an almost solid curtain of rain. During the rainy season it rains almost continuously day and night. Only a few *kalaris* start practice in this period. One reason is that the *kalari* floor becomes muddy and slippery, as I have indicated before. A second reason is that a morning training session usually starts at sunrise. However, during the rainy season there is hardly enough light to see properly in the *kalari*. Even those *kalaris* that have introduced an afternoon training session face a similar problem, because afternoon training sessions end at sunset. During the periods I was in Malabar, hardly any *kalaris* had electrical light.

Though the weather is cold enough to perform ardent practice, the slickness and the darkness of the *kalari* make it often too dangerous to practice weaponry. In this period the emphasis is still on the *mey-abhyasam*.

(September/October). The cold season: Thulam (October/November), Vrischikom (November/December), Dhanu (December/January). The warm season: Makarom (January/February), Kumbham (February/March), Meenom (March/April). The hot season: Medom (April/May), Idavom (May/June), Mithunom (June/July).

One of the most important events for Kalarippayat is Navaratri, a festival marking the end of the rainy season and the start of the cold season.

5.2 Navaratri, the celebration of the victory of Durga: the start of the cold season

The academic year in Kerala and the start of the cold season begin with a nine-day festival, Navaratri²⁶¹, held in September-October. According to several Hindu teachers I know, the festival celebrates the victory of the goddess Durga over the buffalo demon Mahisha. The main themes of this story are as follows:

The demon Mahisha practiced austerities, and because of that the god Brahma granted him a blessing that he could only be killed by a woman. From that moment on, Mahisha started to threaten the universe. He drove away the gods and took over the throne of the king of gods, Indra. In order to stop the demon, the gods combined their powers (*shaktis*²⁶²) to create a goddess named Durga²⁶³. The goddess was riding a lion.

Durga rushed to Mahisha, killing a few of his men and drinking their blood. The demon fell in love with her. He tried to seduce her with a marriage proposal. Durga replied that she would only marry the man who could defeat her. Thereupon they commenced to fight. Though Mahisha used his shape-shifting abilities and changed into an elephant and a warrior, he could not get a hold on Durga. At last she jumped on his back, and thrusting her trident in his neck she killed him. Durga thus liberated the universe from evil.²⁶⁴

5.2.1 Navaratri in Kerala

During Navaratri the Hindus in Kerala celebrate the start of a new year, in particular the academic year. Each school in Kerala begins a new school year after the festival. Three days are dedicated to Durga²⁶⁵, three to Lakshmi²⁶⁶ (goddess of wealth), and three to Sarasvati²⁶⁷ (goddess of learning). Navaratri is a festival for requesting new opportunities, wealth, well being, and, last but not least, knowledge. The festival marks the end of the rainy season and takes place

²⁶¹ Meaning 'nine nights'

²⁶² that is, their female counterparts

²⁶³ According to the KKA gurukkal, Durga is no other than the mother goddess Parvati, wife of Shiva. She also represents *shakti*, that aspect of the divine expressed in the Shakti forms (see section 1.3.7).

²⁶⁴ I retold the story as briefly as possible, with only those elements that might be relevant to Kalarippayat. The story itself appears in several classic Indian texts, e.g. the second and third chapter of the *Devi Mahatmyan* ('the glorification of the goddess'), part of the Markandeya Purana. Several translations of this text have been published, e.g. Swami Jagadiswarananda, *Devi Mahatmyam, 700 Mantras on Sri Durga*, Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1999, and Th. B. Coburn, *Encountering the Goddess: A Translation of the Devi-Mahatmya and a Study of Its Interpretation*, New York, State University of New York Press, 1991

²⁶⁵ According to Kinsley (p.95) Durga is associated with Shiva, as his wife. Shiva symbolizes the destructive power of the tri-partition of time (creation, maintenance, and destruction, see section 3.1.8).

²⁶⁶ Fertility goddess, wife of Vishnu. Vishnu symbolizes the maintaining power of the tri-partition of time (creation, maintenance, and destruction, see section 3.1.8).

²⁶⁷ River and fertility goddess, wife of Brahma. Vishnu symbolizes the creative power of the tri-partition of time (creation, maintenance, and destruction, see section 3.1.8).

around the harvest time. According to my Hindu fellow students, for the Keralis Navaratri indicates the start of a new season, with new opportunities (indicated by the goddess Sarasvati), full of new promises of prosperity (symbolized by the goddess Lakshmi), introduced because of the efforts of Durga. One of the Hindu teachers I know told me that the three goddesses (Sarasvati, Lakshmi, and Durga) are in reality three appearances of the mother goddess of India, Parvati. The *kalari* goddess, who resides in the *puttara*, is also a manifestation of Durga.

The last three days are the most important of the festival. In Kerala these days are marked by performances of Keralan arts, such as classical dance (e.g. Bharatanatyam and Kathakali) and classical Keralan music. For these days each school is cleaned and decorated.

As far as I can tell, Navaratri is not celebrated among Muslims. As a Muslim, the KKA gurukkal doesn't celebrate the festival either. Since all of his Indian (senior) students are Hindu, and since he believes Navaratri is connected to Kalarippayat (I will come to this in the next section), the KKA gurukkal allows Navaratri rituals in his *kalari*.

5.2.2 Navaratri in the *kalari*

Each day of the festival a puja is held in front of the *puttara* in the *kalari*. The last three days, special pujas are performed. Zarrilli, who was in the CVN *kalari* during Navaratri, describes these special pujas²⁶⁸. He says that the gurukkal Govindakutty Nair had an altar made in front of the *puttara*, with statues of Durga, Lakshmi, and Saraswati. These pujas are only performed if the gurukkal is a Hindu²⁶⁹.

On one of the last days the KKA *kalari* is cleaned and the *puttara* is covered with weapons. In the middle there is a shield with two crossed swords at its back. Small candles are placed on each step of the *puttara*. On one occasion a small ceremony was conducted by one of the gurukkals of the KKA teacher, who is a Hindu. The KKA teacher himself stood way at the back, as if he was not participating. This is his usual behavior when Hindu ceremonies are performed in his presence, as far as I have seen: on the one hand he admires everything that is a tradition of Kerala, even when it is not connected to Kalarippayat. I noticed frequently from his enthusiasm that this feeling increases dramatically when such a tradition has any connection with Kalarippayat. On the other hand he, as a Muslim, is taught to keep himself far from 'pagan religions'. The Muslims of Malabar are usually very strict in their interpretation of Islam. Though most of them accept and even respect Hindus, they are very much afraid of doing anything that is not in accordance with Islam. I will illustrate this point with an example. One of my closest friends in Kerala, a Muslim, was very curious about Hindu religion, and in particular the worship of one god, Mutappan. The god Mutappan is one of the indigenous gods Malabar. He is the god of the hunt and the forest. I convinced my friend to come with me to Mutappan's main shrine in the village of Parasinikadavu during puja hour. A steep staircase leads down from the road to the shrine, which is at the riverbank. Each step that brought us

²⁶⁸ Zarrilli, 1998, p.80 et seq.

²⁶⁹ Ibid.

closer to the shrine became harder for my friend. Especially near the shrine, in the market where pilgrims can buy religious items, toys, and plastic flowers, he didn't dare look around. Inside the temple compound he swiftly passed by the hall where the puja was being held and headed to the river. I took him and practically carried him inside, where he disappeared in the darkest corner of the hall. When we were home he told me that it was one of the most exciting days of his life. He enjoyed seeing the puja, and experienced it as a self conquest. This story may reflect some of the inner struggle of the KKA gurukkal.

On the day after Navaratri it is common for *kalaris* to accept new students²⁷⁰. The KKA *kalari* is not strict in this matter; if a student-to-be applies in February, for example, he or she does not have to wait until Navaratri to participate.

In contrast to some other *kalaris*, Navaratri is not always the start of the academic year in the KKA *kalari*. The lessons start as soon as the rains have come and the weather has cooled down.

The figure of Durga seems to me to be the connection between the local *kalari* goddess and the epics of India. Before Rama set out to fight the demon Ravana on Sri Lanka, he performed a puja for the goddess²⁷¹. Arjuna in the Mahabharata did the same when he was on his way to fight the Kauravas²⁷². These two examples taken from Indian mythology express that before undertaking a fight, it is better to make an offering to Durga or the goddess of war, probably to get her blessing.

Navaratri is the start of a new school year in the *kalari*. In the *kalari* people practice the art of warfare. Therefore I suggest a parallel between the ritual performed by Rama and Arjuna in the myth, and the worship of Durga in the *kalari* during Navaratri: in both cases the blessing of the goddess is requested for a martial undertaking. For Rama and Arjuna this martial undertaking was going into battle, while for the Kalarippayat practitioner it is preparation for battle: the *kalari* practice for the coming year. The Kalarippayat practitioners bring offerings for Durga, just like Arjuna and Rama, before undertaking their own 'fight', which is the practice of a fighting art and mastery over one's emotions²⁷³.

For Kalarippayat (and in particular for the KKA *kalari*) Navaratri is a festival marking a new beginning, in which disorder and ignorance are replaced by order and knowledge by virtue of the mother goddess, who is represented by the *puttara*. Because this tradition is an intrinsic part of the *kalari*, the KKA teacher accepts these ideas, as long as he himself does not have to participate in the rituals. For him this time is just the beginning of a new school year.

²⁷⁰ As I have observed in Hindu *kalaris* of Sri Jayan Gurukkal and Soman Gurukkal.

²⁷¹ According to Kinsley, "The association of Durga with Rama's success in battle over Ravana in the Ramayana tradition, although not part of Valmiki's Ramayana, has become a well known part of the Rama story throughout India" (1987: 108-109). The connection between Rama and the war goddess can be found in a number of other works, like the Kalika Purana, the Devibhagavata Purana, Brhaddharma Purana, and the Mahabhagavata Purana.

²⁷² Mahabharata, Bhishma Parva 23. (Roy, Pratap Chandra, *The Mahabharata of Krishna Dwaipayana Vyasa*, 12 vol., Calcutta, Oriental Publishing Corporation, 1960-1963)

²⁷³ Zarrilli adds another meaning as well. Navaratri "marks the ritual representation of kingship, especially the relationship between human king and royal deity" (1998: 48).

As I have indicated above, just after Navaratri Kalarippayat teachers accept new students and begin new teachings with their present students²⁷⁴. I would like to connect Navaratri to the interpretation of the acceptance ritual in section 2.6. By performing the acceptance ritual, the gurukkal lifts his pupils from the ignorant state to a state of knowledge, whereby Kalarippayat is ultimately a means to attain union with the divine, and therefore knowledge of the divine order.

The Navaratri acceptance rites are followed by a gift (*dakshina*) from each student to the teacher, in return for the blessing of the gurukkal²⁷⁵. By accepting the *dakshina* the teacher assumes the role of the beggar-saint, a sign of his proximity to the divine. He gives his students the opportunity to give and to relinquish earthly goods, enabling those students to reach a higher spiritual state (see section 2.6).

In the KKA *kalari* the traditional *dakshina* is not given to the gurukkal. This is probably due to the fact that the KKA gurukkal himself does not want to perform Hindu rituals.

5.2.3 Practice during the cold season

The cold season is divided into two parts. In the first part there is a lot of emphasis on the Shiva and Shakti forms. In the second part the weather gradually becomes hotter, and the emphasis is more on *koltari* (wooden weapons) and, to a lesser extent, on *ankamtari*.

5.3 Teyyam and the warm season

The third season is the warm season. The start of the warm season coincides with the end of what I will call the *teyyam* month²⁷⁶. This month falls in January and February, and most of the Keralan temples organize a festival period in which every day a *teyyam* is performed. In general, during a *teyyam* a specially appointed person (also called the *teyyam*), who belongs to a certain caste²⁷⁷, dresses up as a deity or an ancestor, goes into trance, performs ritual dances and predicts the future to believers. The at times huge masks used for the *teyyam*, up to five or six meters tall, are quite remarkable. Many *teyyams* are performed in honor of a form of the mother goddess, usually her violent manifestation, but there are also *kalari-teyyams* at the shrine of a Kalarippayat hero. The *teyyam* is then dressed up as a warrior, complete with arms and armor²⁷⁸. When it is not the *teyyam* month, many shrines have a *teyyam* each week connected with a puja.

²⁷⁴ As I have observed in Hindu *kalaris* of Sri Jayan Gurukkal and Soman Gurukkal.

²⁷⁵ In the Hindu *kalaris* of Sri Jayan Gurukkal and Soman Gurukkal. Cf. Zarrilli, 1998, p.81

²⁷⁶ The period that I am calling 'the *teyyam* month' are two months, in Malayalam the months of Makaran and Kunbham

²⁷⁷ The person who goes into trance belongs to one of the lower castes. For example, the *teyyam* of the forest god Mutappan, whose weapons are a bow and arrow and a shield, belongs to the Tiyya caste, as I mentioned in section 1.3.4.

²⁷⁸ In section 1.3.4 I mentioned that the Tiyya caste had the right to bear arms. The same Tiyya case provides the *teyyam* for several Kalarippayat warriors who died in the past. Near Cannanore there is a shrine for the hero Kathivannur Veeran, who was cut into 64 pieces by his enemies. A *kalari-teyyam* takes place frequently in front of the shrine, which is taken care of by the Tiyya community.

At the end of the festival period until the start of the hot season, the temperature gradually rises to nearly unbearable levels. These temperatures are a strange experience, as I can tell from my own experience.

In order to build up good stamina, each *kalari* practitioner trained in the KKA philosophy has to undergo a program aimed at preparing the student to perform all the Shakti forms learned, non-stop, in sequence. At the peak of this program a student will be busy with jumps, steps, and leaps for an exhausting (and seemingly incredibly long) 45 minutes. It happened that my 'trial' fell just before the start of the hot season, somewhere in the first week of May 1997. The temperature had risen to around 43°C, though it was not yet even ten o'clock in the morning. I had only one Shakti form to go to finish the complete sequence. At a certain moment my body felt as if it were frozen; it was as if my body was displayed on a photograph taken mid-action. After that it was impossible for me to practice at all: I had to stand still. The heat had drained all my energy, leaving my body without power, forcing me to stop practice. A few days after this experience, the *kalari* was closed for the period of the hot season.

5.4 The hot season

The hot season starts usually somewhere in the second half of May, when it becomes impossible to practice because of the heat. The atmosphere in the *kalari* becomes very musty, and breathing inside the building becomes difficult. There is no specific starting date of the hot season: the lessons in the KKA *kalari* stop when people are unable to practice anymore. During the hot season the *gurukkal* will have the roof of the *kalari*, which is made of coconut leaves, replaced or repaired. This work must be finished before the first rains arrive. These rains are the heavy rains of the southwest monsoon. Due to the high temperatures of the warm and hot seasons, the roof will have dried out and become cracked. The walls of the *kalari* are made of mud, and if the roof cannot stand the fierce rains, they will crumble and be washed away.

Not only does the KKA *kalari* close, there are school holidays for a few weeks during the hot season, as well.

When I arrived in Kerala – at the start of my second stay – I found that the weather was still uncomfortably hot²⁷⁹. I heard from several of my acquaintances that the rains stayed away longer than usual, and so lessons in the KKA *kalari* still hadn't started. In the evening of one of those first days I decided to go to one of my favorite temples in the area, the Railway Mutappan Temple in Cannanore. When I arrived there I learned that the temple was closed due to the god's holiday. It seems that this season is too hot for everybody to work properly: even God is on holiday. No wonder all the *kalaris* are closed...

5.5 Final remarks on the seasons

To complete the above explanations for the division into four seasons, I would like to make an additional remark. As I explained above, a student's curriculum consists of four parts. The first part will be taught first (just after the start of the

²⁷⁹ Oral Transmission Period II

start of the training season, Navaratri), and the last part at the end of the training season. Kalaripayat, as it is taught in the KKA *kalari*, offers for the body ardent and very intense exercises. When it is warm you can hardly do these exercises, so the physically lighter forms are done in the warm months, while the heaviest exercises wait until the colder months. The cold months gradually change into the warmer months, so the character of the practice of the art changes with the temperature.

6. The progress of the student

Ideally, the ultimate goal of a KKA *kalari* student is to become a gurukkal. In order to achieve this, the student has to undergo several stages of development, as I have indicated in section 2.3.

According to the KKA gurukkal, the youngest age for a child to start to learn Kalaripayat is seven. He told me that 'traditionally' the period required to learn most of the system and her applications in a real fight is twelve years. 'In olden days' warrior families sent their children to a gurukkal at the age of seven; a fighter was ready at the age of nineteen. But this doesn't imply that somebody could be a gurukkal at this age: in order to become a teacher, the practitioner's mind and his understanding of the art must mature. Typically, this 'maturation process' consists of the following stages (indicated by A, B, C, and D; the numbers refer to important actions within that particular period):

A. During the first period the student just learns how forms and practices are done. He is not taught the meaning of those forms and exercises. This stage starts with the acceptance ritual. The forms taught in this period are:

1. *Vanakkam*, 6 primary *kal etup*; student starts with Shiva and Shakti forms
2. Six advanced *kal etup* and Shiva and Shakti forms
3. *Koltari* (each weapon starts with the acceptance ceremony)
4. *Ankamtari* (each weapon starts with the acceptance ceremony)

B. Meaning of the forms and *marmas*:

5. *Verumkai*: the connection between *marmas* and forms; there is no acceptance ritual at this stage

C. A small ceremony similar to the acceptance rite is conducted when a student is granted permission to teach. The ceremony is done without anybody else present in the *kalari* other than the gurukkal and the particular student. The student is allowed to start his or her own *kalari* under the supervision of the gurukkal.

D. From the age of 42 the student can be given the title of gurukkal and start his own *kalari*, for which he is completely responsible.

The acceptance ritual marks each stage of progress in the art. The acceptance ritual is similar to the ritual of paying respect to the *kalari* system each morning

when the practice starts, except that the acceptance ritual contains the rite of offering the coin and receiving the blessing from the gurukkal.

Stages A, B, and C correspond to the process of learning. There are three levels of understanding the art (see section 2.3):

1. First level: in which a student just learns how forms and practices are done
2. Second level: in which a student understands the martial meaning of the forms; in other words, he learns to apply the concepts of the *sampradayam* (see section 1.1)
3. Third level: in which a student becomes one with the art, and starts to grasp the art in its full meaning, physically and metaphysically

The KKA gurukkal adds a fourth stage: the stage in which physical training disappears and is fully replaced by meditation. This stage, however, is not practiced in the *kalari* herself.

The stages are also very connected with the natural maturation of the body and soul, as does the last stage (indicated by D). I recognized the stages of maturation of the mind in the KKA teacher himself, over the years I have known him. When I first set foot in the KKA *kalari*, the KKA teacher had just reached the age to become a gurukkal. He was mostly focused on the actual fight and on making his students the best living fighters. At that point he had been gurukkal for just a few years. Gradually his interest shifted to the medical and healing aspect of Kalarippayat. This aspect has a lot to do with knowledge of the body and its *marmas*. Recently – he is now around 50 – he shifted his focus again to the more metaphysical aspect of the art, such as meditation and metaphysical interpretations of the art. He also became personally much more religious than before. An example of this is that he used to think it was not useful to fast during Ramadan. Now he has changed his opinion, and tries very hard to live according to what he believes to be Islamic rules.

This pattern of change in the KKA teacher's interpretation of the art parallels the traditional life stages (*ashrama*) of an Indian (Hindu) man. According to Zimmer the life of a Hindu is divided into four stages²⁸⁰:

1. *Antevasin* or *Brahmavacin* (pupil): the learning stage. During this stage a person is introduced to philosophies of how to live according to the *dharma* (the order of the universe), and how this *dharma* works. The person should practice *shraddha* (blind faith in the teacher).
2. *Grhastha* (householder): during this stage a person gets married and has children; the main concern is to run a household properly (i.e. according to the *dharma*).
3. *Vanaprastha*: when the household duties are fulfilled, a person should depart for the forest, to live (with a partner) in solitude, in order to start the quest for realization of the inner Self. He or she should 'put off cares, joys and interests that linked him to the world'²⁸¹.

²⁸⁰ Zimmer, 1990, pp. 155-159

²⁸¹ Ibid., p.157

4. The last stage of life is that of a 'wandering holy beggar (*bhiksu*) taking no thought of the future and looking with indifference upon the present'²⁸². This is to complete the quest for the Self begun in the third stage (*vanaprastha*).

According to the philosophy of the KKA *kalari* as mentioned in section 2.2, the steps of the *puttara* stand for the seven stages of self-development, seeking union with the art, and thus with the divine. The art is a way to accomplish this. The first three stages of learning correspond to just the first three steps of the *puttara*. The remaining steps are mere stages of mental development, starting with the third stage of becoming one with the art. From that point the art tends to become meditative and contemplative. The change of interest of the KKA teacher reflects this theory; now that he is more mature, he tends to give more importance to contemplation. In order to reach the divine his behavior and perspective become more religious. Since his religion is Islam, the Islamic and Keralan tradition have clearly merged in the tradition of the KKA *kalari*.

7. The number four: an 'hypothesis'

The number four appears in the Kalarippayat system in connection with most of her rituals. We see it in the four stages of progress in the art. These stages are also the four parts of a (full) training session:

1. *Meyttari* (body conditioning)
2. *Koltari* (wooden weapons)
3. *Ankamtari* (iron weapons)
4. *Verumkai* (*marma* applications)

Moreover, each training session starts with paying respect to the four representations of the art herself:

1. *Puttara* (the *kalari* goddess)
2. *Ganapatittara* (the tutelary deity of Kalarippayat)
3. *Guruttara* (the lineage of the art)
4. Gurukkal (the personification of the art and her lineage)

The *kalari* year consists of four seasons, each with their own Kalarippayat-related specifics. The practitioner uses a different body oil for each season. The following diagram shows how the seasons, their main events and the training are connected:

| Season | Main event | Training |
|--------------|--|--|
| Rainy season | Start of lessons | Emphasis on Shiva and Shakti forms |
| Cold season | Navaratri: the start of the cold season | Part one: emphasis on Shiva and Shakti forms Part two: emphasis on weapon forms |
| Warm season | End of <i>teyyam</i> month: the start of the warm season | Emphasis on weapon forms and <i>verumkai</i> |
| Hot season | Repair of the <i>kalari</i> 's roof | No practice |

²⁸² Ibid., p.158

We also recognize four stages in the mental and spiritual development of a gurukkal:

1. Learning the forms on a physical level
2. Learning the meaning and use of the forms in a fight
3. Becoming a gurukkal and one with the art
4. Contemplation and meditation

If we look at the stages we can say that the higher the stage, the more important spiritual practice is, and the less important physical action is. During the first stage a student learns only body movements, and physical conditioning takes a hundred percent of a student's time in the *kalari*. The more one progresses, the more one starts to understand the principles behind the art; these stages are expressed by stages two and three. The fourth stage is almost devoid of any physical action; contemplation and meditation consume most of the practitioner's time. How does this relate to the other divisions into four?

The first stage, the *meyttari* stage, focuses mainly on body conditioning and fluidity of movement. The *vadivu* of the *meyttari* are first applied with wooden weapons, and later, if a student has become advanced in the art and has more understanding of what he or she is doing, the wooden weapons are exchanged for iron weapons. The first and second stage, the *meyttari* and the *koltari* stages are physically more intense than the *ankamtari* or third stage. The last stage, in which the *marmas* are connected with the forms, requires the least physical activity and the most understanding. Here we recognize the same trend as in the path of becoming a gurukkal.

Even the four greetings (to the *puttara*, *ganapatittara*, the *guruttara*, and the gurukkal) correspond to this trend. The gurukkal is the most physical and touchable manifestation of the art, and paying respect to him makes the most physical connection between the student and the art. The second greeting is to the representation of the art in the form of the *guruttara*, the altar for the lineage of the gurukkal. The teacher of the teacher, who in many cases is alive, is still visible for the student, though he may not be present during every training session. In my experience, he acts at the background, and doesn't usually relate directly to the students inside the *kalari*. The lineage itself is also more 'touchable' than the other two representations of the art, the *ganapatittara* and the *puttara*, because the lineage consists of humans, while the other two are deities. Therefore the greeting to the *guruttara* is more physical than the greeting to the two deities, but less physical than greeting the teacher himself.

The next greeting is to the representation of the tutelary deity of the art, Ganesha. The tutelary deity symbolizes understanding the art, while the *kalari* goddess is the ultimate divine source of the art; she *is* the art itself²⁸³. The first is considered to be a less advanced stage than the latter, because the art itself is on a higher level than just having an understanding of it.

When we compare this to the four stages of development of a gurukkal, discussed above, we can consider the maturation of a gurukkal as a process of proceeding 'backwards', towards the divine, and ultimately becoming one with

²⁸³ Cf. section 2.3

that divine. First you become a *gurukkal* (i.e. paying homage to the *gurukkal*), then you acknowledge the lineage (i.e. paying homage to the *guruttara*), then you gain understanding of the art via the tutelary deity (i.e. paying homage to the *ganapatittara*), and finally, at the highest level, you become one with the divine source (i.e. paying homage to the *puttara*). This process is an inner experience characterized by silence, physical inaction, and spiritual growth.

Finally we recognize the shift from physical action to physical inaction in the seasons as well: the *kalari* year starts with ardent training; the hotter the weather becomes, the more attention is paid to understanding the art and less to physical training. The *kalari* year ends in the hot season, in which there is no training: a time of inaction and silence (in the *kalari*).

All divisions of a ritual or a ritual period start with physical action, still leaving out the spiritual and mental aspects. The more you advance in the art, the more attention is paid to mental and spiritual aspects, and the less importance given to the physical exercises. This culminates in a stage in which the practitioner spends most of his or her time on understanding of the art and on spiritual self-development.

6. The KKA as an organization

In Kerala several *kalaris* have grown into organizations. These *kalaris* have become more than training centers for martial arts. The *kalari* organizations are established according to official rules; they have statutes, a chairman, a secretary and a treasurer. Only a few of them gained the status of an accredited school as well: they can grant diplomas that are recognized by the Indian government. The Kerala Kalarippayat Academy (KKA) is one of the nationally accredited *kalari* organizations recognized by the government of India, with the status of an official school.²⁸⁴

The second assumption of Bell's practice theory states that rituals are interpreted in terms of how they "construct and inscribe power relationships"²⁸⁵. In order to define the relationships in the KKA *kalari*, I have distinguished between internal and external relationships. Internal relationships are the different relations within the KKA *kalari* as a community, while external relationships deal with the relationships between the KKA *kalari* as an organization and the people who are connected to it (see figure 0.1). Based on this figure, I distinguished the following relations:

Internal:

- The gurukkal and his *sampradayam*
- The gurukkal and his students
- The students among each other
- The gurukkal and those who are directly involved in the KKA organization

External:

- The KKA and the local community
- The KKA and other *kalaris*
- The KKA and other (non-*kalari*) institutions
- The KKA and other Keralan arts

In this chapter I will briefly discuss all of these relationships. In chapters I and II I covered the first internal relationship fully (the gurukkal and his *sampradayam*), and the second internal relationship partially (the gurukkal and his students), so I will only summarize what was discussed in the previous chapters.

The first two types of internal relationships fit Bell's theory as examples of 'power relationships', as I have shown in chapters I and II. The question is whether the other relationships can also be called 'power relationships'. I also want to show that the four external relationships say something about the place of the KKA in the society, local, and international.

²⁸⁴ Accredited by the Indian Council for Cultural Relations

²⁸⁵ Cf. Introduction, paragraph 4

1. The gurukkal and his *sampradayam*

In the KKA *kalari* the gurukkal is identified with his *sampradayam* (lineage), and with the *kalari*, the gym²⁸⁶. The gurukkal is the last of the chain of gurukkals through which divine knowledge, Kalarippayat, is handed down to the student. The origin of the martial system itself is embodied by the *puttara*. The gurukkal is the bridge between the student and the divine, via his *sampradayam*. One of the requirements for a Kalarippayat practitioner to become gurukkal is that he has to become 'one' with the art of Kalarippayat: Kalarippayat has to become the practitioner's 'second nature'. For this reason the gurukkal is seen by his students as the embodiment of the art.

2. The gurukkal and his students

The basis of the *kalari* is the strong bond between her members. This bond is twofold: the relationship between gurukkal and student discussed in chapter 2, and students among each other. This basis is so powerful that it creates a kind of brotherhood between the members of the KKA *kalari*. Though the gurukkal is primarily seen as a *primus inter pares*, he is the impetus and point of focus for the members of the *kalari*. Because he is considered close to the divine, he is able to act as a spiritual guide. Moreover, the KKA gurukkal tries to act like a father to his students, not only in terms of Kalarippayat, but also their daily life.

I have found that the KKA gurukkal has helped his students many times. I would like to give three examples of his help: an example of psychological help, of financial aid, and of his role as counselor.

I witnessed an example of his psychological help during Oral Transmission Period III. One day a student of one of the senior students of the KKA gurukkal arrived at the KKA *kalari*. The student was a drug addict and looked very bad, with unwashed clothes and filthy hair. The KKA gurukkal accepted him as a student because he was the student of one of his senior students. Near the *kalari* was a small house, which belonged to the *kalari*. The KKA gurukkal allowed the student to live in one of the rooms of that house for a while. Three months of training passed, and at the end of that period the gurukkal had managed to change the boy. He no longer took drugs, he had cut his hair, and he was dressed properly. In my opinion this change was possible because the boy had trained in the *kalari* itself. This, based on my experience, brings the practitioner into a certain feeling of connection with and respect for the sacred nature of Kalarippayat, because of the rituals performed in the *kalari*. In fact, what I myself, and probably the boy as well, noticed, may be well expressed by Bell's second main point: "...the body movements of ritually knowledgeable agents actually define the special qualities of the environment, yet agents understand themselves as reacting or responding to this environment..."²⁸⁷. The gurukkal and other students were 'defining the special qualities of the *kalari*', and that particular student and I were responding to this.

²⁸⁶ The information of this paragraph is based on sections 2 and 3 of chapter 2

²⁸⁷ Cf. Introduction, paragraph 4

This feeling probably added to that student's trust in the KKA gurukkal. The student developed an open attitude towards the KKA gurukkal, and was open to receiving his advice. This open attitude was probably strengthened by the results of the Kalarippayat practice: based on my experience, two months of ardent training is enough to produce noticeable changes in the body's condition and strength.

The KKA teacher not only seeks to give psychological support; he also tries to give practical solutions. As a teacher he tries to get to know each student and his or her way of life. He tries to help where needed to solve problems either structurally or financially. In Oral Transmission Period I, I encountered both cases. As a shop owner he was able to give work to two of his students who came from very poor and deprived families. This is very important, because often in India the lives of several related families depend solely on one or two small incomes.

The second case is an example of financial aid. One of his senior students wanted to open a *kalari* clinic. The gurukkal helped him with resources, knowledge about how to run a business, and contacts with other traditional general practitioners who were willing to share knowledge, and customers. The KKA *kalari* itself became a good and loyal customer by buying all different kinds of oil from that senior student.

The teacher plays an important role in the lives of his students. He is truly a kind of counselor. If a student has a problem, he will usually go to his or her teacher for advice. As an example I saw the KKA teacher help one of his students get married²⁸⁸. In Malabar most marriages are prearranged. Due to certain circumstances, such as poverty, it is not always easy to find a good partner. One of the boys of a certain family that had difficulty finding a partner for one of its members, went to his teacher, the KKA gurukkal, for help. The KKA teacher used his connections and did find a suitable partner for one of the members of that family.

In general, the gurukkal is always the guest of honor when one of his students or the family members of one of his students get married. In times of loss, as well, the teacher is there for his students. When the child of one of the senior students died, the KKA gurukkal was not only the main source of psychological support for that student; he also helped to organize the funeral²⁸⁹.

In my experience with the KKA *kalari*, when a student wants to help his fellow student, this should always be done via the KKA teacher. As the central figure, the KKA teacher wants to know what's going on in his group. This also implies that he can reject such a request for help.

3. The students among each other

Each Kalarippayat practitioner has equal status in the KKA *kalari*. This is expressed in several ways: the *kalari* handshake, the dress code, and the sayings of the KKA gurukkal. The *kalari* handshake is a ritual expressing mutual

²⁸⁸ Observation of Oral Transmission Period I

²⁸⁹ Observation of middle of Oral Transmission Period I

respect²⁹⁰. The two people giving the handshake bow towards each other. Because the KKA gurukkal is a Muslim, he omitted the act of touching the feet of the gurukkal for his students, which is found in Hindu *kalaris* as a way of paying respect²⁹¹. This adds a lot to the feeling of equality in the KKA *kalari*, in my experience.

The KKA teacher often maintained that everybody is equal, because each person is just on a journey towards union with the system. He, as a teacher, has just learned a bit more than the other students. Frequently the KKA gurukkal told me that he still sees himself as a student. In this light the KKA teacher sees himself as a *primus inter pares*.

Another sign of equality is the dress code of the KKA students and teacher: everybody wears a *langutti*, even the teacher. Nobody shows any sign of a hierarchy. However, on the other hand, one should keep in mind that the hierarchy between teacher and student is always implicitly present.

In my experience during the three Oral Transmission Periods, I never saw senior students behaving towards the junior students as if they were in a higher position. This should not be confused with the fact that the senior students are considered to be more knowledgeable of and more advanced in the art of Kalarippayat, and as far as I know the KKA gurukkal, he would not agree with any display of this advancement through certain behavior. The KKA gurukkal always treated senior and junior students alike, and I observed junior and senior students treating each other alike, as equals.

The difference in position between junior and senior students became apparent during the starting and finishing rituals, in which the student has to pay respect to the *puttara*, *ganapatittara*, the *guruttara*, and the gurukkal. After having paid respect to these four representatives of the art, the junior student must approach the senior student to greet him (or her); never would a senior student approach a junior student.

Though there are only a few ways in which the hierarchy between junior and senior students are expressed clearly, each student knows his or her exact place in the hierarchy.

4. The gurukkal and those who are directly involved in the KKA organization

In order to say something about those who were directly involved in the KKA as an organization, I want to first discuss the organization itself, its *raison d'être*, and its history.

4.1 The KKA as an organization

The Kerala Kalarippayat Academy (KKA) was founded in 1976 by a group of Kalarippayat teachers, each with their own family *sampradayam*, led by Chirakkal T. Balakrishnan Nair, the son of the raja of Chirakkal, as an answer to the success of the CVN *kalari*, the *kalari* founded by C.V. Narayanan²⁹². According to

²⁹⁰ Cf. chapter 2.6.3

²⁹¹ Cf. chapter 2.6.4

²⁹² Cf. Chapter 1.3.5

the KKA teacher, this group believed that the teachings of C.V. Narayan were too much limited because of the prescribed lines of his curriculum. Narayanan's students tried to perform the exercises exactly as described in that curriculum, without considering their martial application. This resulted in a change from Kalaripayat as a martial art into Kalaripayat as a performance art. Kalaripayat thereby lost its martial meaning, and gained a more dramatic effect. The teachings of the CVN *kalari* stress high leaps – which are seen by the KKA gurukkal as a disadvantage in a real fight, because when a fighter is in the air, he cannot control his mobility. However, a display of such flexibility is very useful for displaying the art on stage as a dance. It is interesting in this respect that the researcher Zarrilli, who trained for several years at the CVN *kalari* in Trivandrum, is a professor of dance and drama in Exeter²⁹³. From my contact with Zarrilli I know that as a part of his job he is an advisor to actors. In his advice he stresses a technique for influencing the psychophysical process of acting using a combination of yoga and Kalaripayat²⁹⁴.

Chirakkal T. Balakrishnan Nair's group advocated a more martially-oriented interpretation of Kalaripayat, and, in addition, the institution of an organization whose purpose is not only to teach the art, but also to collect and maintain other forms of the same martial art which they considered an integral part of the cultural heritage of Kerala itself. This resulted in the foundation of the Institute of Malabar Physical Culture, which was later renamed the Kerala Kalaripayat Academy.

The governing board of the KKA consists of three people: the secretary, the technical director and the president. The secretary does the organizational work for events such as meetings and the participation of the school in games. He also maintains contacts with other teachers and *kalaris*. The technical director is the KKA gurukkal. He is mainly concerned with teaching and collecting further knowledge about the art. The president has a more official role. The man who is in charge now works as a lecturer at the university of Calicut. He uses his position as a means of contact with other institutions of Keralan art, and to keep the officially recognized position of the KKA as a cultural institute.

The KKA is officially recognized in several ways. Firstly, the KKA is part of the Kerala Kalaripayat Association, the institution founded by C.V. Narayanan in 1958 (see chapter 1.3.5). This Kerala Kalaripayat Association is recognized by the Kerala Sports Council, a department of the Keralan government. Secondly, the KKA is recognized by the Ministry of External Affairs of the government of India in New Delhi. Thirdly, the school is registered with Nehru Yuva Kendra Sangathan (NYKS). The NYKS is an organization directly under the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports of the government of India. This organization promotes the practice of sports among the youth of India, among other things.

Membership in the above-mentioned institutions has led to recognition of the KKA as an educational institution. Foreign students, for example, can easily get a student visa based on the school's invitation.

²⁹³ University of Exeter, UK (2004)

²⁹⁴ Cf. the website of Professor Zarrilli: www.ex.ac.uk/drama/staff/kalari/zarrilli.html

According to the KKA statutes, the school was founded with the following mission²⁹⁵:

1. To promote Kalarippayat as a martial art on an international level
2. To organize, sponsor, manage, and arrange training in a variety of styles and techniques with master teachers of traditional techniques, by providing
 - Long-term training for local students
 - Short-term intensive courses of training for students from the region, throughout India, and from other countries (i.e. all students)
 - Seminars for practitioners and scholars
3. To establish an ongoing treatment center where traditional hands-on therapies are provided to the local community on a regular basis, and to include these traditional therapies as part of the training of advanced students²⁹⁶
4. To establish and maintain a research center and library to collect, accept, and keep in an appropriate environment palm-leaf manuscripts, hand-written copies of the same, and other forms of documentation of traditional techniques such as slides, photographs, and videotapes; and to ensure that these resources are available to all masters, students, and researchers of the martial art
5. To encourage and establish a research program in cooperation with local, regional, national, and international scholars to further document the variety of styles of the Indian and regional martial and related arts and all of their specific techniques
6. To establish scholarships for local students to enable them to undergo a full-time four-year course of intensive study culminating in certification to teach Kalarippayat as a traditional martial and healing art
7. To advocate on behalf of the development of a pension program for master teachers; and, if possible, to administer such a program, in case funds are available

In order to satisfy the first point, the promotion of Kalarippayat on an international level, in the past the KKA accepted three foreign students who were educated up to the master level of the art. The KKA has also given demonstrations on martial arts galas in Italy (Pasqua Del Budo 1987 and 1988), Germany (Budo Gala 1992), and Korea (World Martial Arts Festival 2003), and played a major role in two documentaries, one of the German channel Pro Sieben in 1996 (Warriors of the Goddess of War) and one for the National Geographic channel in 2003 (7 Deadly Arts). Furthermore the KKA has appeared in articles in several martial arts magazines, such as the 'Asian Martial Arts Journal' (USA), 'Karate' (Japan), and 'Sport's Life' (Germany).

²⁹⁵ See Indian Council for Cultural Relations (New Delhi), Reg. Nr. F/AVR/94; Kerala Sports Council (Trivandrum), Reg. Nr. N/245/95

²⁹⁶ Hands-on therapies are different kinds of massages, bone setting, etc.; in short, those treatments that are given by the therapist with the use of his hands and feet

The second statute has two parts. One part concerns the teacher, and one the student. In the case of the former the KKA frequently invites other teachers to its *kalari* to teach its students. In that way the KKA wants to integrate new techniques and styles into its existing system. Moreover, it wants to stimulate cooperation between different gurukkals. The idea behind this is to protect Kalarippayat as part of the cultural heritage of Kerala, to prevent loss of knowledge, and to collect knowledge on Kalarippayat.

In the case of the student, the KKA wants to be a school where the student can learn Kalarippayat 'academically'. This idea is expressed in its name, the Kerala Kalarippayat Academy. The word 'academically' is to be understood in the sense that the training sessions or 'lessons' are taught according to a curriculum and syllabus. The intention of providing 'academic study' is also why the KKA has gained the status of an official school. During my Oral Transmission Periods, I was educated in the 'traditional' way, as I described in chapter 2.1. During Oral Transmission Periods II and III, however, I noticed that new students were being educated in a more structured way, according to a curriculum, with a set period to learn each exercise. This was in contrast to the 'traditional' way, in which the teacher observes the student and decides at a certain moment, at the teacher's discretion, that the student is good enough to go on to another exercise.

The words 'long-term training for local students' mean that the KKA intends to be able to provide a four-year study program. This has not been achieved yet, at least not as of 2005. The short-term courses are to be understood as 'tuition packages', which are made up of subjects taken from the four-year study. Having done all the available packages, the student will have gained the same amount of knowledge as in the four-year study.

The 'seminars for practitioners and scholars' should provide the participant with knowledge on a specific subject. Currently I have seen the KKA organizing seminars for gurukkals on the subject of traditional healing.

The KKA also thought of accommodations for its students. The KKA *kalari* itself is a pit-*kalari* located in a garden full of coconut trees in a village which was the residence of the raja of Chirakkal. Near the *kalari* is a house with a kitchen, which is used to make medical preparations and to house the 'library' of the school. The KKA also helps students who don't live nearby to find accommodations. If needed, a cook is hired to make food. Since the training is very intense, the students need special food, which is not available in the local restaurants.

The fourth point refers to the *kalari* as a treatment center. The house with the kitchen near the *kalari* is also used for treatment, mainly for the KKA students, but anybody can make an appointment.

The fifth point expresses the wish of the KKA to become the leading research center on Kalarippayat in Kerala. The house with the kitchen near the *kalari* contains a poorly preserved collection of martial arts magazines from the past twenty years, mainly from the USA. Furthermore, it houses several shelves of books on martial arts in general, in the same poor condition as the magazines. Several palm-leaf manuscripts and a collection of slides, photographs, and videotapes on *kalari* techniques are kept in the KKA gurukkal's house. Each year during the monsoon, however, several documents and footage are lost to mold.

There doesn't seem to be much focus on this purpose of the KKA, but the KKA gurukkal shoots as many films as possible, especially of very old gurukkals. He has seemed to me to be very keen on storing such information. The filmtapes however, hardly make it through the rainy season. The KKA has no means or knowledge of how to preserve these tapes.

The KKA uses the contacts and influence of its chairman, who is a teacher of traditional dance, drama, and folklore at the University of Calicut. This relationship gives the KKA teacher access to palm leaves on Kalarippayat which are in museums or other official institutions. The gurukkal often studies copies of such manuscripts.

Though the intention of the KKA is to be part of international research on the Indian martial arts with funds from organizations such as the EU or the Indian government, up to now this attempt has been in vain. In 2003 the chance to organize such research with the help of the EU failed, because suddenly more and more people remembered that they were closely connected to the KKA, and demanded their share of the fund.

The idea of getting a four-year scholarship from the Indian government for local students to learn Kalarippayat, as formulated in point six, has not been successful so far. The pension program for old Kalarippayat teachers (point seven) is running, however. The income for the program is generated from treatments, donations, and student fees. Moreover, the KKA makes it possible for those teachers to earn some extra money during seminars.

4.2 The people of the KKA as an organization

There are three people who are currently the core of the KKA: the KKA gurukkal, its chairman and its secretary. The chairman and the secretary are enthusiastic volunteers, who seem to give almost every minute of their free time to Kalarippayat and the KKA. They do not practice the art, though, but for them Kalarippayat is part of the heritage of their country. Together with the KKA gurukkal they try to find ways to popularize the art, not only among Keralis, but also internationally.

Each of these three people has his own task. The KKA gurukkal takes care of the actual teaching and maintains the quality of the teachings. The secretary helps with the organization of big events, such as the pan-Keralan and pan-Malabaran Kalarippayat games. While the secretary is mostly involved with the actual organization of events, the chairman tries to keep the official status of the KKA as an accredited school and to make and maintain contacts with other schools and organizations in Kerala and internationally. The chairman, in his position as a university teacher, also uses his connections to provide the KKA with access to manuscripts in Indian university libraries, as I mentioned in section 4.1. The KKA gurukkal, the secretary and the chairman try to complement each other. In this respect I consider their relationship as equal. Moreover, I have seen that each of these three men treat each other as equals. For example, they do not use the polite forms of their names when addressing each other, as is common among Keralis; they just call each other by their given names, and use

the singular form of the Malayalam word for 'you' when talking to each other²⁹⁷. However, one must be aware that the chairman and the secretary are willing to spend so much of their free time only because of the respect they have for the gurukkal, his qualities and (*kalari*) abilities, and his *sampradayam*. As it is the case with the hierarchy in the *kalari*, the differences in status between the three men may be implicitly present, and may have escaped my observation.

5. The KKA and the local community

In this section I will show how certain parts of Malabaran society are connected with the martial art Kalarippayat. I will cover the connection of Kalarippayat

1. with the youth of Malabar, because the (local) future of the art is in their hands
2. with the attitude of the Keralan government towards Kalarippayat, because the government plays an important role in how the art is promoted
3. with the different religions of Kerala and Kalarippayat, because the imbedding of Kalarippayat in the local culture is partly supported by the different religions of Kerala
4. with (medical) patients, because one of the major assets of Kalarippayat is her medical treatment

5.1 The youth and Kalarippayat

Many boys join a *kalari* between the ages of six and twelve, regardless of their religious background, at least in the area where I lived. Among the many males I used to know in Malabar, only a few never enrolled as a student. Apparently Kalarippayat is almost compulsory for children of many families in Malabar as a part of a proper education.

Though the number of girls in a *kalari* is usually considerably less than the number of boys, based on what I observed there is still a substantial group of girls practicing Kalarippayat, especially if you take into account the strict attitude of the Keralis towards girls (see section 2.9). It should be mentioned that I have never seen Muslim girls in a *kalari*; all the female children were either Hindu or Christian.

There is yet another connection between Kalarippayat and the youth of Kerala. Kalarippayat is mentioned as part of the cultural heritage of Kerala during the history lessons in the schools²⁹⁸. Stories about warrior heroes and heroines of Kerala's past, mostly taken from the Northern Ballads, are taught as historical accounts.

Many of the children (and adults) have yet another relationship with the martial art. They themselves are more or less directly related to Kalarippayat because many of them belong to a caste such as the *nayers*, which was involved in war

²⁹⁷ In Malayalam the singular form of the Malayalam word for 'you' is used among friends, while the plural form is used when Keralis are polite.

²⁹⁸ Based on what I have seen in the books used in several English Medium Schools in and around Cannanore, and talks with the children of friends and acquaintances. It should be noted that these children also went to English Medium Schools.

and fighting in the past. When children are born in a family of this caste, it is possible that sooner or later their relationship with Kalarippayat will become evident for them.

Comic books with stories dealing with the Kalarippayat warriors of the past are very popular among the youth of Kerala as well. They can be bought everywhere, in any kiosk or bookshop.

Through religion and the *kalari* clinics, Kalarippayat is a part of the daily life of the Kerali (at least from Malabar). This is supported by the fact that Kalarippayat is deeply rooted in the historical awareness of the Keralis inherited through education and even the comic books. This is the reason why one can consider Kalarippayat today to be part of the cultural identity of the Keralis.

5.2 Keralan Government and Kalarippayat

The government of Kerala considers Kalarippayat as one of its arts. In one of its handbooks, the martial art is mentioned in the chapter on “Art and Culture” among other arts, such as traditional dances, *teyyam*, and poetry²⁹⁹. The ‘District Handbook of Kannur’ says about Kalarippayat:

“*Kalari* meaning school and *Payattu* meaning combat, *Kalaripayattu* is one of the advanced combat sciences of the world and has reproduced many a hero whose exploits are celebrated in legends and folk songs. In the past, each *desom* or locality had its *kalari* or gymnasium, presided over by the guardian deity called *Kalari Paradevatha* or Bhagavati. Most of the heroes of medieval Kerala were products of the *Kalari* system. Both boys and girls received training in the *kalari*. It is the training and practice in *kalari* that are known by the term *Kalaripayattu* and this is valued very much from the point of view of physical culture. The whole philosophy underlying *Kalaripayattu* is that the system is to be used only for noble causes and never for self aggrandizement. The glorious days of *Kalaripayattu* had set with the dawn of the 17th century, with increasing use of guns and cannons.”³⁰⁰

But the government of Kerala does not see Kalarippayat only as a cultural phenomenon of Kerala, it is also presented as one of her main sports. When writing about the sport merits of the Keralan people, the handbook says:

“(…) The famous Fort Maidan and Police Maidan provide ample facilities for youths to excel in this field (i.e. sport). The CDRE Football team and Hockey team excelled in those days. At the same time, the traditional martial art ‘Kalaripayat’ has also been here, majestically, all along.”³⁰¹

²⁹⁹ The Government of Kerala has issued a series of ‘District Handbooks’, which deal with the industry, culture, agriculture and specialties of a particular district. For this research I have taken only the ‘District Handbooks of Kerala: Kannur’ (Department of Information and Public Relations, Government of Kerala; downloadable at www.kerala.gov.in/district_handbook), because I lived in the area of Kannur (Cannanore).

³⁰⁰ District Handbooks of Kerala: Kannur. pp.45-46

³⁰¹ Ibid., pp.56-57

Moreover, under the heading of “Outstanding sport personalities of Kannur (Cannanore)” the handbook mentions two Kalarippayat teachers:³⁰²

“T. Sreedharan Nair and C.V. Narayanan - Well known artists of ancient warfare and Kalarippayat”³⁰³.

The district handbook gives a short account of the history of Kerala, and the Cannanore district in particular. It considers Kalarippayat a part of the historical past of the area:

“In the early days, the Ezhuthupallies under the Ezhuthachan or village school master, provided facilities to pupils to acquire elementary education. After undergoing the preliminary course of study in these institutions, the children were sent to the *kalaris* for acquiring training in gymnastics and in the use of arms and then they were sent to study Sanskrit in Vedic schools under well trained teachers. This district had in the past, its share of such *Kalarippayattu*, is particularly associated with this district (i.e. Cannanore District).”³⁰⁴

The above gives the following picture of Kalarippayat. According to the Government of Kerala, Kalarippayat is part of Kerala’s past. They currently see the martial art as one of indigenous arts of Kerala, and promoting it as being good for the health of body and soul. This image is promoted by three (Keralan) government agencies: the Keralan Sports Council, the Department of Cultural Affairs, and the Department of Tourism.

Many *kalaris* are member of the Keralan Sports Council, the official organ of the Keralan Government, which deals with sports in general. I saw this department actively promoting Kalarippayat in schools. They also financially supported and organized Kalarippayat competitions and games.

During the last decade many massage centers were opened in Kerala for *kalari* massage. Some *kalaris* even provide demonstrations on request³⁰⁵. This is good for Kerala’s tourist sector, and thus the martial art is also promoted by the Department of Tourism of the Government of Kerala. They also support the publication of books, such as the book of Kurup and Varier, which I have used frequently as a reference in this research.

The Department of Cultural Affairs pays attention to Kalarippayat through publications as well. For example, in February of the year 2000 they published a booklet in Malayalam, *Kalaripayattu-Keralathinte Sankthiyum Soundkariyavum* by K. Vijayakumar. I do not know if they organize or support any other particular Kalarippayat-related events.

³⁰² Ibid., p.60

³⁰³ Ibid., p.61

³⁰⁴ Ibid., p.20

³⁰⁵ An example is the ENS *kalari*, situated near one of the most touristy cities in Kerala, Ernakulum (see their website www.enskalari.org.in)

5.3 Religion and Kalarippayat

In Malabar I encountered three major religions, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity. The Hindus connect Kalarippayat directly to the popular local belief system through *teyyam*. There are many shrines erected for the worship of a warrior hero of the past³⁰⁶. In this type of shrine a man appointed from a special caste or family dresses up like the warrior, complete with sword and shield, and goes into trance. In this state, being possessed by the spirit of the deceased hero, the man performs some kicks and does some parts of certain *kalari* forms. The way of worship through *teyyam* is very popular among the people from Malabar. Each tiny village has at least one shrine where *teyyam* is performed. I visited many *teyyams*, they were always crowded. The crowd can possibly be explained by the fact that through divination most *teyyams* give the visitors a glimpse into the future or an insight in (or even solution to) their problems. All this for a very reasonable amount of money, which even the poor can afford.

The Muslims connect Kalarippayat to their religion via Sufism, the mystical branch of Islam. Though not every Muslim in Malabar is connected to a Sufi group, Sufism is immensely popular and respected by many. In a village like Vellapattanam, 15 kilometer north of Cannanore, most inhabitants are Muslim³⁰⁷. As a result there are many (ancient) mosques in the village. Most mosques are related to a Sufi group. Vellapattanam is also the home of a number of Sufi *kalari* gurukkals. One of them is a teacher of the KKA gurukkal, Abdul Kader Kutty. He is the *sheikh* of a Sufi group and also an active Kalarippayat teacher³⁰⁸. I visited one of the gatherings of his group. Abdul Kader Kutty's group uses rhythmic breathing (*zikr*) to go into a trance. Initially they read some texts from the Koran, and at a sudden moment the members of the group are only breathing loudly and in a certain rhythm. During this part of the session the individual attains a state (*hal*), whereby the Self of the individual is replaced by the Self of God³⁰⁹. This process is called *faena*'. The fact that the Sufis go into a trance is not exclusive for Abdul Kader's group: the members of many Sufi groups in Malabar go into trance during their gatherings³¹⁰.

I have noticed that people such as Abdul Kader Kutty are highly respected in the society of Malabar. One reason may be that people believe that somebody who performs the *zikr* frequently is close to God. In chapter 2.4.1 I mentioned that many Central Style teachers are Sufis. If Sufis are close to God, and many Kalarippayat gurukkals are Sufis, then, from the point of view of many Malabaran Muslims, those gurukkals probably connect the martial art with Islamic sainthood and God. This may create the respect I have noticed in the Malabaran society for people such as Abdul Kader Kutty.

I did not find a specific Christian *kalari* (i.e. a *kalari* whose gurukkal is a Christian) in the area where I lived. There are several Christian *kalaris* in Central

³⁰⁶ An example can be found in the direct vicinity of the town Cannanore, just of the Cannanore-Calicut road.

³⁰⁷ I visited this village many times during the Oral Transmission Periods

³⁰⁸ At least during the first half of Oral Transmission Period I. By that time the man was very old, and I understood when I was in Kerala during Oral Transmission Period III that he was not teaching anymore.

³⁰⁹ Private conversation with Abdul Kader Kutty, last month of Oral Transmission Period I.

³¹⁰ Ibid.

Kerala, such as in the Cochin district, where the number of Christians is much higher than in the area where I lived, Malabar.

5.4 Kalarippayat and medical aid

Most gurukkals I know provide medical treatment. For almost every *kalari* in Malabar there is a *kalari* treatment center where people can get cheap treatment. The philosophy behind the art is closely related to the Ayurvedic health system (see chapter 4). The Keralis I have met trusted the efficacy of this system. In this way Kalarippayat, which from a (traditional) medical point of view can be considered a branch of Ayurveda, offers medical care that is acknowledged and trusted by many Malayali. I found it was not uncommon to consult a gurukkal instead of a medical practitioner.

In the KKA *kalari* the medical treatment was given (at least up to Transmission Period III) by one of her senior students. Many people who live near the KKA *kalari* know the KKA gurukkal. Many go to him or his senior student to get treatment or medical advice.

6. The KKA *kalari* and other *kalaris*

The KKA gurukkal is a collector of *sampradayams*. Because of the younger generation's lack of interest in Kalarippayat, many *sampradayams* are about to die out. The KKA teacher tries to visit old gurukkals and convince them to teach him their *sampradayams*. Although normally a gurukkal is reluctant to teach other gurukkals (see chapter 2.1), often the KKA teacher gets what he wants, because there is in many cases no one else who wants to learn. The KKA teacher has collected a lot of knowledge this way, and has learned to look at the interpretation of the movements of Kalarippayat from different angles. On the other hand, several times the KKA gurukkal displayed to me almost a kind of contempt towards some gurukkals who are, in his eyes, incompetent. According to the KKA teacher, they don't understand the meaning of the Kalarippayat exercises.

The KKA does, however, organize seminars for the other gurukkals in the region. A guest speaker is invited, and a specific topic of Kalarippayat is covered. As he explained to me, he wants to contribute to the knowledge of the gurukkals of the region, and to create cooperation between them.

7. The KKA and other (non-*kalari*) institutions

The KKA has made several contacts with non-Kalarippayat institutions. These contacts were primarily made through people who are directly connected to the KKA *kalari*: her students, the chairman, and the secretary. These people work somewhere or they go to school, they have family, and so on. This creates a network of people, which, like the fingers of a hand, reaches relatively far into the society. Each of those people is ready to help the KKA because of the social status of the KKA teacher (not to mention the KKA *kalari* itself).

Another type of KKA connection is through its cultural sister organizations. The KKA believes that other traditions of Kerala, such as dance, drama, and indigenous medicine, are her cultural sisters. The organization endeavors to seek

contact with other cultural institutes of other Keralan arts in order to exchange knowledge on cultural subjects. This is how the KKA gurukkal learned some massages used by a Kathakali dance teacher. Kathakali is one of the traditional dances of Kerala. This dance requires a lot of flexibility. The massages the KKA gurukkal learned from the Kathakali teacher are designed to increase the dancers' flexibility.

Other examples of such relations are with a big Bharatanatya dance institute in Bangalore, with the most important dance institute in Cannanore, and with an Ayurvedic institute.

The KKA does not only use her relations to promote the art, but also to secure the wellbeing of her students. These relations play a major role when the KKA gurukkal wants to help a student, for example with finding a partner to marry, as I discussed in section 2.

8. The KKA and other Keralan arts

Kalarippayat can be connected to the local arts of Kerala. The first art I want to mention in relationship with Kalarippayat is yoga. I obtained the information on yoga from Soman Gurukkal, one of the senior students of the KKA gurukkal, who is a yoga teacher as well. Yoga, as it is practiced by Soman Gurukkal, and KKA Kalarippayat share some *vadivu* (postures). An example is the horse pose, which is the main pose in the Shiva forms. The parallel of the horse pose in Soman's yoga system is called *virabhadrasana*, the 'warrior pose'. There are even many similarities between one of the greeting sequences of yoga, called *surya namaskar*, and Kadathanad Kalarippayat's *ishvara vanakkam*.

Both arts make use of breath control. Yoga practices breath control directly, Kalarippayat does it in the practice of certain combinations of her forms. Also the idea that there is a countermovement for each movement occurs in both Kalarippayat and *hatha yoga*³¹¹.

There are many similarities between the two arts, but, in my opinion, one must be careful about comparing them: one is a fighting art, which can only be performed with a kind of inner fire, based on my experience, while yoga aims to calm the mind, as far as I have understood it. This difference is not always clear to some people, because some western sport schools have advertised Kalarippayat as 'dynamic yoga'³¹². On the other hand, the term gains some meaning when it refers to mind control, the aim of both the yoga and the Kalarippayat system.

Kathakali is a Keralan art form which is a combination of drama, dance, music, and ritual. Kathakali dancers perform with painted faces and elaborate costumes expressing characters from the Indian epics, mostly from the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. As in western operas, in which the play is often sung by the actors, in Kathakali a theater version of an epic is danced. The dance not only consists of body movements, but also of almost bombastic facial expressions, expressing the feeling and intention of the character. Many Kathakali teachers

³¹¹ E.g., if a practitioner brings his nose to his knees, he or she should also do a back-bend.

³¹² See e.g. Tatami nr. 4, 1994, p.7; Tatami nr. 4, 1995, p. 15

send their pupils to a *kalari* to build their stamina and flexibility to prepare for the demanding movements of the dance. Some basic knowledge of swordplay can sometimes be useful as well for players who play the role of a character with a sword.

Similar to Kalarippayat, Kathakali uses a full body massage to enhance flexibility. The flexibility massage used in Kalarippayat is done with the feet instead of the hands, but the Kathakali massage I have seen is done with the hands. Sometimes the Kathakali massage uses the feet as well³¹³. The KKA *kalari* has connections with at least one Kathakali teacher. The main purpose of this relationship is to exchange ideas and experiences on the field of massage.

Another very popular art form in Kerala is Bharatanatyam, a south Indian dance form. One characteristic of this dance is its abundant stamping on the floor with the flat part of the feet. Originally it was a court and temple dance performed by women. I visited a training session of this dance in the School for Classic Indian Dance in Cannanore several times³¹⁴. The start of the practice was similar to the start of the practice of a Kalarippayat training. The teacher sits in front of the class on a chair with a wooden block and a thick, short wooden stick (*tatkali*). During practice the teacher beats with the stick on the wood to indicate the rhythm of the dance. At the start of the training the student approaches the wood, meditates for a moment, and then touches the wood, the forehead and heart, just like a Kalarippayat practitioner would do when he or she starts the practice by paying respect to the *puttara*³¹⁵. A similar rite is performed to greet the dance teacher; as in the *kalari* the student would pay respect to the teacher, after paying homage to the *puttara*, the *ganapatittara*, and the *guruttara*. Then in the *kalari* the *vanakkam* follows, an exercise related to the *puttara*. The *puttara* and *kalari vanakkam* were replaced here by a special preliminary dance, related to the *tatkali*. After having performed this dance, and having paid respect to the elephant-headed Ganesha, the student can start the actual training. We see that the Keralan form of Bharatanatyam and Kalarippayat share similar ways of paying respect to the system.

Another parallel between Bharatanatyam and Kalarippayat is the division of the exercises (the forms) into Shiva and Shakti. Bharatanatyam has *tandava* dance, representing the cosmic dance of Shiva as Nataraja, with which he destroys the universe. The Shakti forms of Kalarippayat find their counterpart in Bharatanatyam's *lasya* dance forms, the dance of Shiva's wife Parvati.

There is yet another aspect to the rite of paying respect in the form of touching the floor (or the base of the altar), touching the forehead, and then the heart. In chapter 3.2 I stated that this way of paying respect is interpreted by the KKA gurukkal as a sign of humbleness. It also represents that the knowledge obtained in the *kalari* first enters the head, then the heart, referring to the first three stages of self-development of the practitioner. The KKA gurukkal told me yet another interpretation, from a more Hinduistic point of view: it is an apology to the *kalari* goddess that the practitioner is about to practice in her precincts. This

³¹³ Cf. http://kathakali.nyima.org/kathakali_project.html

³¹⁴ On the outskirts of Cannanore on the Cannanore-Vellapattanam road

³¹⁵ See paragraphs 3.3.2 and 3.3.3

interpretation is also given by Zarrilli³¹⁶. During my stays in Kerala I noticed that the same gesture was used as a form of politeness among the Keralan people: when they want to apologize to somebody, they do not say “excuse me”, or “I am sorry”, as it is the custom in English, but they touch the person, then their own forehead and heart, without saying a word. Apparently this Keralan custom has become part of the rituals of the (KKA) *kalari*.

8.1 *Darsana* in Kerala

J. Richardson Freeman has shown that the *tantric* rituals performed by Keralan *brahmins* parallels the rituals performed during *teyyam*.³¹⁷ In his work he uses the term ‘formalized possession’, which he defines as

formally stipulated and ritually prepared ‘bodies’, whether of animate or inanimate matter, can routinely become receptacles for the consciousness and person of deities. It is through these bodies that deities are subsequently perceived to interact, communicate with, and tangibly benefit worshippers, and this indeed constitutes the *raison d’être* of worship.³¹⁸

Above I have argued that the *gurukkal* is the living embodiment of *Kalarippayat*, which is perceived as the manifestation of the *shakti* of the *kalari* goddess. In this paragraph I want to show that the role of the *gurukkal* can be explained as ‘formalized possession’ as defined by Freeman, and that structurally this role parallels the (Keralan) *brahmin* and the *teyyam*.

According to Freeman, the *teyyam* is typically performed in front of a shrine of a deity or dead ancestor. A man, dressed up like the deity of the shrine, gets possessed by ‘drawing’ the deity from the statue in the shrine into his own body; the deity taking over the man’s body and mind. In fact, the person who does the *teyyam*, serves as a temporary vehicle, equal to the enshrined statue, of the deity. Freeman argues that the *brahmanical* parallel of *teyyam* can be found in the installation ritual of a statue. The *brahmin* invokes the deity first in his own body, similar to the possessed state of the *teyyam*; hence Freeman’s use of the expression ‘formalized possession’ for this *brahmanic* ritual.³¹⁹ Then the *brahmin* transfers the deity from his body into the statue. This process is described in a textbook of the All-Kerala Tantrics’ Association:

Taking the aromatics, flowers, and grain mixture along with water from the conch in the two joined hands, bring them into the proximity of your *muladharam* [chakra at the tip of the coccyx], and in order to dislodge that *caitanyam* [conscious power] situated in the *muladharam*, intone one *pranavam* [the syllable *Om*]. With another *pranavam*, raise that *caitanyam* upward through the *susumna*, and bringing the hands reverently to the heart, praise [the deity] with the *upacaram* [the mantra of honoring the god

³¹⁶ Zarrilli, 1998, p.77

³¹⁷ Freeman uses Teun Goudriaan’s characterization of tantrism, who states that “what is most often called by this term is a systematic quest for salvation or for spiritual excellence by realizing and fostering the bipolar, bisexual divinity within one’s own body” (1981: 1). This realization is achieved in tantrism through elucidating a characteristic set of techniques such as *mantra*, *yantra*, *chakra*, *mudra*, and *nyasa* (<http://web.uni-marburg.de/religionswissenschaft/journal/diskus/freeman.html>)

³¹⁸ <http://web.uni-marburg.de/religionswissenschaft/journal/diskus/freeman.html>

³¹⁹ Ibid.

as guest]. Then uttering a *pranavam*, separate a fragment of the *caitanyam* from your heart, and with another *pranavam*, raise the hands up to the *dvadasanta*-lotus [above the head], and join that fragment of consciousness with the Supreme Self (*paramatmavu*) that is situated there. Intoning the 'root' [the basic mantra of the deity] three times, conceive the actual form of the root-mantra, and uttering, "Lord! Come, come!", with a *pranavam*, separate that fragment of consciousness from the Supreme Self and bringing it through the *susumna*-channel, conduct it into the *pingala*-channel [of the heart]. Then, with the utterance "I invoke [you]", conduct it in the form of breath through the right nostril that is the portal of the *pingala*, into the flower and grain mixture in the hands. Intoning the root-mantra, offer the flower and grain mixture to the heart of the image, and make that consciousness enter the image's left nostril, which is the portal of the *ida* [-channel], into the *susumna*. Through that course, visualize it as joined to the heart-lotus of the image, and then performing a flower-offering, show the *mudras* of invocation.³²⁰

Zarrilli has a similar account of his own teacher, Govindankutty Nayar, when he installed the *puttara*:

He faces the *puttara* and recites a specific mantra which 'brings the power (*shakti*) of the deity' into the *puttara*. While reciting the mantra he holds fresh flowers in his right hand. Simultaneously, he closes one nostril with the fingers of his left hand and breathes in. On exhalation through the opposite nostril he circles his head with his right hand, still holding the flowers. On this exhalation the *shakti* of the deity is breathed into the mound. The gurukkal's vital energy (*prana vayu*) is the vehicle for infusing the power of the deity into the mound.³²¹

The exhalation/inhalation of breath during the installation is a form of *pranayama* ('breath control'), meant to raise the Kundalini located in the *muladharam chakra*.³²² When gurukkal Govindankutty Nayar inhales through one nostril, he tries to increase his *apana vayu*, the downward flowing wind, and when breathing out the *udana vayu*, the upward flowing wind.³²³ Similar to the *brahmin*, the gurukkal uses *mantras* and breathing techniques to stimulate the *muladharam chakra*, in order to raise the Kundalini. Then he breathes, like the *brahmin*, through one nostril out (through the nostril which is the start of the *pingala* channel), infusing the breath containing *shakti* (the *brahmin* by means of flowers) into the idol.

The KKA gurukkal is a Muslim. When he wanted to make a *kalari*, he asked one of his teachers, Kumara Swamy, to give indications how and where to

³²⁰ Translated by Richardson Freeman from the textbook of the All-Kerala Tantrists' Association (Sankaran Nambutirippattu, M., 1972 *Tantradarppanam*, Part I. Tirunavaya, Kerala: Tantravidyapitham); op. cit. <http://web.uni-marburg.de/religionswissenschaft/journal/diskus/freeman.html>

³²¹ Zarrilli, 1998, p.65

³²² On Kundalini Shakti, see chapter 7.2.4.1 (Most Recent Changes).

³²³ On the *udana* and *apana vayus*, see chapter 7.2.4.1, 'Most recent changes'. The main channels through which these *vayus* flow are the *ida* and *pingala*, which are twisted around the *shushumna*, the central energy channel of the body on which the seven *chakras* are located. Increasing the flow of *vayu* through these channels may cause the Kundalini to rise and to open the *chakras*.

construct the building.³²⁴ Kumara Swamy determined the best location for the *kalari*, and installed the *puttara*. Unfortunately, the KKA gurukkal could not recall the ritual of installation of the *puttara* of his *kalari*.

According to Freeman,

(...) in Kerala the designation *tantri* can usually apply only to a Brahman of a relatively high rank whose practice of *tantra* is predicated on his exclusive access to Vedic verses, (...).³²⁵

Like the ability of a *brahmin* to practice *tantra* is predicated by his knowledge of the Vedas, the gurukkal bases his abilities on his knowledge of and unity with the system of Kalarippayat. The gurukkal equals Kalarippayat and by means of this equality he is supposed to be able to raise his Kundalini upward through his *shushumna*. According to the system of Kalarippayat, this ability follows automatically from regular stimulation of the *muladharam chakra* by the practice of *vadivus*.³²⁶ By his ability to raise his Kundalini, the gurukkal 'actualizes' the *kalari* goddess, which, through years of practice, has become part of his own being. When installing the *puttara* the gurukkal 'produces' or 'installs' the *kalari* deity first in his very own body and mind, as the *brahmin* does during the *tantric* ritual. Then he transfers this deity into the *puttara* with a ritual similar to the installation of the idols by the Keralan *brahmin*.

Before the *brahmin* is able to install the deity in his body, he prepares himself by praising the deity (*srota*), invocation (*avahana*), and meditation on the deity (*dhyana-sloka*).³²⁷ The equivalent during *teyyam* to these three forms of worship is the following. Before the *teyyam* takes place, the person who becomes the *teyyam* is prepared under a make-up shed. While the make-up is put, he sings songs about the actions and origin of the deity, which have a narrative character. These songs become invocations (*vara-vili*), and finally end with the speech of the deity through the mouth of the *teyyam* (*daiva-vakku*).³²⁸ Freeman recognizes a kind of 'formal acts of mental imaging' in these two 'installation processes', which he calls, on analogy, 'thought-acts'.³²⁹ These 'thought-acts'

imply an active agency which intentionally conceives of things in such a way as 'to make them appear', that is, in actuality, as effective entities in the real world.³³⁰

In fact the performer focuses his attention on the deity, and fills his mind with the characteristics of the deity. The consciousness of the deity (*caitanya*) is then perceived as replacing the human consciousness.

Within the system of KKA Kalarippayat we can recognize similar patterns of 'thought-acts'. When the student enters the *kalari* he or she will first pay respect to the *puttara*, to the *ganapatittara*, the *guruttara*, and the *gurukkal*, which are the four representatives of the martial system. This paying respect is not a form of worship, according to the KKA gurukkal, but more a form of meditation: the

³²⁴ See chapter 1.5.3

³²⁵ <http://web.uni-marburg.de/religionswissenschaft/journal/diskus/freeman.html>

³²⁶ See chapter 7.2.4.1 ('Most recent changes')

³²⁷ <http://web.uni-marburg.de/religionswissenschaft/journal/diskus/freeman.html>

³²⁸ Ibid. and personal observations in several shrines, like the Railway Mutappan Temple in Cannanore.

³²⁹ Freeman 1993, pp.121-23

³³⁰ <http://web.uni-marburg.de/religionswissenschaft/journal/diskus/freeman.html>

student should empty his or her mind and 'refill' it with thoughts of Kalarippayat. These thoughts are elaborated when starting the introductory exercises, the *puttara vandanam* and the *kalari vandanam*, which serve to unite the principles of *shiva* and *shakti*, necessary to raise the Kundalini serpent.³³¹ Then the actual practice commences, in which the exercises should be done with an empty mind. This way of practice leads ultimately to the ecstatic state of battle frenzy, which can be interpreted as a state in which the practitioner is 'possessed' by the *kalari* goddess.³³²

Freeman thinks that in Kerala the Sanskrit term *darsana* has a special connotation. In Kerala *darsana*,

the 'seeing' of the deity's external physical image, which in Kerala worship serves largely as a conceptual prop, merges with the internal 'vision' that is the real goal of worship; it is a 'vision' not in the sense of viewing deity as an object different from oneself, but in the sense of perceiving oneself as deity.³³³

This observation is applicable on the definition of 'gurukkal': somebody who, by ardent practice and through a gurukkal-*shisha* relationship, has become one with his martial system, and as a consequence has 'absorbed' the *kalari* goddess into his very own being.³³⁴ According to the teachings of the KKA gurukkal, an advanced student should learn to practice in the mind, while being at rest. A gurukkal is able to go in his mind through all the Kalarippayat exercises as if he is physically practicing. Zarrilli gives an account of a teacher, who affirmed that it is an advanced exercise to

(...) to mentally repeat the weapon forms allowing the 'sounds of the weapons to fill your ears'. In these stationary forms, what is most important is that 'the mental eye visualize the self in exercise' so that all sounds are 'shut out except the sound of the self in exercise'. Repetition of these exercises is understood to lead to *dharana*, a state this master interpreted as continuous with, but 'higher' than one-point concentration.³³⁵

Since the Kalarippayat exercises are a manifestation of the *kalari* goddess (or 'the divine' in case of Muslim and Christian practitioners), it is in agreement with Freeman's findings that when practicing the exercises in mind the Kalarippayat practitioner experiences at that moment a *darsana*. This interpretation is confirmed by Zarrilli, because the same teacher, who told him about mental exercises, thinks that this way of practice can lead to a *darsana*:

For this master, the highest level of practice is *dhyana* in which he fixes his mind on his personal deity: "I sit in a relaxed position with a relaxed mind, and think about god according to my own belief. Slowly, with the help of my breathing, I concentrate on the deity in my mind. Gradually, an image of the deity forms in my mind. When I get the image of the deity in

³³¹ See chapter 3.3.2.2

³³² See chapter 1.3.8

³³³ <http://web.uni-marburg.de/religionswissenschaft/journal/diskus/freeman.html>

³³⁴ Gurukkal is *kalari* is Kalarippayat; see chapter 2

³³⁵ Zarrilli, 1998, p.142

my mind, and am able to maintain it daily through practice, I gain mental courage and power.”³³⁶

The pattern of Kalarippayat training follows the Keralan *tantric brahmin* and *teyyam* rituals of invoking a *darsana*. This implicates that each Kalarippayat student is practicing to be able to invoke and to have a *darsana* of the system of Kalarippayat, which in fact equals the *kalari* goddess. Like the Keralan *brahmin* and the *teyyam* the gurukkal is thought to be able to invoke the divine in his own being. This ability of the *brahmin* is predicated by his study and knowledge of the Vedas; the gurukkal basis himself on the study and knowledge of the martial system. The process of this invocation looks very similar to the one of the *tantric brahmin*. The concept of *darsana*, as it is perceived in Kerala, is not only applicable to *teyyam* and during the installation of an idol by a *brahmin*, but also to the gurukkal and his students.

9. Conclusion

In this chapter I wanted to work out those relationships that play a role for the KKA as an organization. The relationships were differentiated according to figure 0.1. The first relationship is the one between the gurukkal and his students. The students see the gurukkal as a father figure. As such the teacher is very much respected. Students seek his advice when they have to make important decisions. The teacher helps his student not only spiritually, but if possible, also in a more materialistic way, such as providing a job. The teacher will also use his contacts to accomplish his goal. The KKA also tries to connect teachers of the KKA gurukkal to the KKA by the institution of a pension plan for those old people. The purpose is to create a kind of *kalari* family.

As an institution the KKA helps organize Kalarippayat tournaments in Kerala, as well as seminars for other gurukkals. The KKA tries to bring all gurukkals into line, in order to form a united front to promote Kalarippayat in the world as a respected and recognized martial art and as part of the cultural heritage of Kerala.

The KKA collects *sampradayams* from other teachers, in order to prevent extinction. A huge number of elements from these *sampradayams* have entered the curriculum of the KKA and were merged with the existing training. The result is more Shiva and/or Shaki forms, more weapon forms, etc. By doing so, the KKA has created a new tradition based on the ‘highlights’ of several *sampradayams*.

There are two other relationships important to the KKA as an institution. The first is the one between Kalarippayat and the Keralis, and the second is the relationship between Kalarippayat and other arts of Kerala.

Kalarippayat is definitely a part of the cultural heritage of Kerala, because children are brought up with it: they read comic books about Kalarippayat heroes of the past, they hear stories about the art during the history lessons in the school, and many people are descendent from families that have a connection to Kalarippayat in one way or another, such as families having a *sampradayam*.

³³⁶ Zarrilli, 1998, p.142

Kalarippayat is connected to other arts in Kerala in their shared patterns, such as in the teaching practices (Bharatanatyam), the use of oil and massage (Kathakali), and the use of similar ideas behind the art (yoga). Kalarippayat is also much connected with the every day belief system of most people of Kerala - at least of Malabar- as it is visible in the popular *teyyam* and the Sufi mystics. The purpose of comparing Kalarippayat with other arts is to show how much Kalarippayat, as performed today in its present form, is taught according to patterns used throughout the arts which are among the cultural heritage of Kerala.

The fact that children are brought up with Kalarippayat shows that the art is now deeply rooted in the population of Kerala, and the fact that the martial art is taught and performed using the same structures as other cultural expressions of Kerala indicates the importance of Kalarippayat for the cultural heritage of the Keralis. It also contributes to Bell's system of analysis of the art, in which a cultural phenomenon must be understood within the context of that culture, in order to distinguish ritual from non-ritual behavior. We will come back to this in the next chapters.

7. Analysis of KKA Kalaripayat

In this chapter I want to analyze the phenomenon of the KKA *kalari* using the theoretical framework of section 4 of the Introduction. The different backgrounds or scopes of Kalaripayat have been discussed in the previous six chapters. The purpose of this chapter is to say something about the hierarchical setup of the KKA *kalari*, and about the (re)interpretation of existing patterns within the Kalaripayat tradition. The latter is very much connected to the way Kalaripayat is taught to students and presented to the world by the KKA teacher. His activities, mostly due to new ideas of how to promote Kalaripayat on an international level, determine the 'face' the KKA gurukkal likes to show of KKA Kalaripayat. These new ideas influence his way of teaching as well.

Not only does the KKA teacher's desire to internationalize Kalaripayat create changes, so does his own maturation in the art. Though he is, in my view, a devout Muslim, he has managed to combine the basic ideas of KKA Kalaripayat, which has a local Indian, maybe South Indian, origin, with Islam.

1. Hierarchical structure

A *kalari* consists of a teacher and his students. There exist certain relationships between these people, because each of them fulfills a specific role. If there are relationships between people involved, it is possible that one person holds a higher rank than another person. Within a *kalari* the relation between the teacher and student is an example of such difference in position. We have seen, however, that the teacher is not the highest entity in the *kalari*, because the presence of the divine is represented by the *puttara*. The teacher uses the *puttara* to legitimate his knowledge. This process is well described by Bell's 'practice theory'. This theory is highly concerned with a description of hierarchical structures, in which people are related to each other by 'power relationships'. According to this theoretical model, the person (or persons) at the top of this hierarchical structure legitimates his (their) power, just like the *gurukkal* does, by referring to the authority of certain supernatural forces. In the case of Kalaripayat these supernatural forces are the *puttara* and the *sampradayam* (lineage) of the teacher. Bell calls the act of promotion of the authority of those forces 'ritualization': ritually knowledgeable agents, those on top of the hierarchical structure, actually define the special qualities of a given environment, e.g. body movements.³³⁷ These body movements function as elements of a comprehensive ritual, which, in turn, creates a hierarchy between people by means of 'power relationships'. The effective main purpose of 'power relationships' is to create a kind of community.³³⁸ The latter is definitely true for KKA Kalaripayat: each student feels that he or she is one of the 'children' of the gurukkal.³³⁹ This simultaneously is a warning not to reduce the meaning of the

³³⁷ Bell, 1997, p.82; also: Bell, 1995, pp.88-93

³³⁸ Bell, 1997, p.82

³³⁹ Cf. Chapter 2

relationships in the *kalari* to a mere hierarchical level. In the discussion of the relationship between teacher and student in chapter two, it may be clear that there is much more at stake than just maintaining a hierarchical structure in the *kalari*.

In this section I want to first identify the hierarchy within the KKA *kalari*. In the case of the KKA I recognize several hierarchical structures:

1. Hierarchy of transmission

I define the hierarchy of transmission as follows: that hierarchy which expresses how the knowledge of Kalarippayat has traveled from her divine source, via a lineage of teachers (*sampradayam*), to the student. This hierarchy is only used within the walls of the KKA *kalari* (that is by the KKA teacher and his students), and it includes all entities (symbolic entities as well as real-life persons) inside the KKA *kalari*.

Kalarippayat originates from a divine source, (re)presented by the *puttara*. The knowledge is transmitted by the exemplary teacher Ganesha ((re)presented by the *ganipattittara*), and the lineage of teachers that came before the present day gurukkal. Then, through the gurukkal and the senior students, the knowledge of Kalarippayat arrives at the common student. Thus, the hierarchy looks like this:

Kalari Goddess → Ganesha → Lineage of Teachers → Gurukkal → Senior Student → Junior Student

The first two entities in the chain, the *kalari* goddess and Ganesha, are not worshipped by the Muslim practitioners (and the KKA teacher), though their altars can be found in the KKA *kalari*. They are replaced by Allah, or God.

2. Actual hierarchy

The actual hierarchy expresses the hierarchy as it is presented to the students of the KKA teacher. I have heard the KKA gurukkal say frequently that everybody, including himself, is equal in the *kalari*. The reason is the following. For the KKA gurukkal, Kalarippayat is knowledge from the divine. This knowledge is expressed inside the building of the *kalari*. This makes the *kalari* a sacred place. Because everybody is equal in the eyes of 'God', everybody is equal in a place dedicated to 'God', in the same way that everybody is equal when praying in the mosque³⁴⁰. The KKA gurukkal told me that this idea is expressed by the fact that during practice everybody, including the teacher, is dressed in a *langutti*.

The 'seniority' of a student is determined by what I will refer to as the '*kalari* age', which is a combination of the time that a student is a member of the KKA *kalari* and the progress of that student. The longer a student is a member and the more that student has learned, the closer he is to reaching a state of unity with the art. According to the KKA gurukkal, the more a student advances towards this goal, the more humble he should become³⁴¹. When someone has become

³⁴⁰ KKA gurukkal, during Oral Transmission Periods I, II, and III

³⁴¹ Cf. chapter 2.6.4

humble, one will not feel the need to occupy a certain position in a hierarchical structure.

When I take the above reasoning into account, there is only a three-tiered hierarchy inside the KKA *kalari* with the divine at the top, followed by the lineage of teachers, and then, at the third tier, the students and the teacher.

One should, however, be aware of the relativity of the KKA gurukkal's statement. Because in practice, in my experience, the KKA gurukkal likes to be treated (inside the *kalari* at least) with the highest respect. Moreover, during the starting and finishing rituals, the younger students must approach the senior students to pay their respect, not the other way around³⁴².

I did not notice any hierarchy between the secretary, the chairman, and the KKA gurukkal (see chapter 6.4.2). Probably we could consider them as equal, though the hierarchy could be implicitly present. Moreover, I never have felt any trace of hierarchy between the students on one hand, and the chairman or the secretary on the other.

The above two hierarchical structures originate from the divine source of Kalarippayat. The reason for this is that Kalarippayat is seen by the KKA gurukkal as divine knowledge, given to mankind. This knowledge is handed down from teacher to student; when the student has become a teacher himself, he will in turn hand down the knowledge to his students. In this way a lineage of teachers (*sampradayam*) is involved in the transmission of the divine knowledge³⁴³. As I have explained in chapter 2, the gurukkal, or teacher, is the person who embodies the *kalari sampradayam*. It is he who is the ultimate and infallible expert on the exercises and forms. He is Kalarippayat, and he is the *kalari* itself. Because Kalarippayat is divine knowledge, knowledge of Kalarippayat is knowledge of the divine. Through the gurukkal, who possesses this knowledge, one is able to reach the divine source. The gurukkal is the bridge between practitioner and the divine³⁴⁴. Because the KKA *kalari* does not connect herself to any specific religion, the practitioner is able to give a definition of the 'divine' himself: the 'divine' is what the practitioner believes to be 'divine'³⁴⁵.

The authority of the KKA gurukkal, which is the highest 'ritually knowledgeable agent'³⁴⁶, is legitimated by several factors:

- He brings about the sacramental unity between the *puttara* and the *kalari* goddess by consecrating a gym as a temporary *kalari*. This means that the gurukkal is able to connect with the divine powers behind the knowledge of Kalarippayat³⁴⁷.

³⁴² Cf. chapter 3.3.2.1

³⁴³ Cf. chapter 1

³⁴⁴ Cf. chapter 2.2

³⁴⁵ See paragraph 1

³⁴⁶ Bell 1997, p.82

³⁴⁷ Cf. chapter 2.4

- The stories constructing the history of the ‘martial lineage’ of the gurukkal.
- The gurukkal’s knowledge of the forms and exercises.

The KKA gurukkal promotes the authority of the divine forces, which are seen by the KKA gurukkal as the source of Kalarippayat, by means of several rituals. These rituals are described in chapters 3 and 5:

1. Rituals for opening the (daily) practice
2. The practice itself
3. Rituals for stopping the (daily) practice
4. Rituals for accepting a new student to the *kalari*
5. Periodic rituals, connected to the seasons
6. Periodic rituals, connected the progress of a student

According to Bell, the function of rituals is to create a certain hierarchy between people³⁴⁸. I want to show that this is true for several of these rituals.

In my opinion, the rituals for starting and finishing the daily practice emphasize the first four, and sometimes five, links in the above mentioned chain of hierarchy of transmission, because first respect is paid to the *puttara* (the *kalari* goddess), the elephant-headed god Ganesha, the *sampradayam*, and the gurukkal³⁴⁹. If there are senior students present, then they should be greeted³⁵⁰. This order of paying respect is the same as the levels of the hierarchy of transmission, and it expresses the standing of an individual practitioner.

The practice itself is another ritual, in which we can observe a hierarchy. Somebody who teaches is, at least in the KKA *kalari*, on a higher level in the hierarchy than somebody who receives the teachings. In the KKA *kalari* the actual teachings are done by a senior student. When the KKA gurukkal wants to correct a junior student, he tells the correction to the senior, and he, in turn, will correct the junior³⁵¹. This way of teaching shows again a three-tiered hierarchy.

The acceptance ritual marks the progress of a student. This ritual is performed when a student is admitted to the *kalari*, and when he or she is allowed to practice with a new weapon³⁵². The process is quite similar to the starting and finishing rituals: respect is paid to the *kalari* goddess, Ganesha, the *sampradayam*, and the gurukkal. This implies that the hierarchy of transmission is represented in this ritual, in the same way it is during the starting and finishing rituals.

The basis of the hierarchical structure is the relationship between student and teacher. Ideally, the teacher tries to act as a second father to the student. The student, in turn, will give his unconditional trust to the teacher. By extension, the KKA gurukkal, seeing himself as the ‘martial father’ of his students, advocates that all his students are ‘brothers and sisters’ of each other³⁵³. In this way the

³⁴⁸ Bell, 1997, p.83

³⁴⁹ Cf. chapter 3.3.2.1

³⁵⁰ Ibid.

³⁵¹ Cf. chapter 2.7

³⁵² Cf. chapter 2.6.4

³⁵³ Cf. chapter 6.2

KKA gurukkal tries to make a kind of community. Frequently during training sessions I heard the KKA teacher emphasize the bond between his students³⁵⁴. In my view the KKA gurukkal has definitely created a community through his relationship with his students. This relationship is made and strengthened by the different rituals performed daily in the KKA *kalari*³⁵⁵.

2. Interpretation and reinterpretation of rituals

As I have argued in paragraph 4 of the Introduction, Kalarippayat should be studied against a cultural background, the scene of the act of practicing the martial art. The given scene is the present culture, fostered by the present circumstances. We should be aware that all field research says something about a phenomenon during a given period of time. It is possible, and even likely, that due to changed circumstances, different interpretations would be given to a cultural phenomenon, or that the shape of this phenomenon has changed, or even that the phenomenon is no longer present. Bell formulates this observation by assuming that ritual is a part of a historical process, in which past patterns are not only reproduced, but also reinterpreted or retransformed³⁵⁶.

This idea can be demonstrated for our subject as well. Kalarippayat is a living tradition, and highly dependent on the gurukkal³⁵⁷. If the thoughts of the gurukkal change, in any way, so does the art he teaches. As Norbert Elias puts it, an individual may justifiably be seen as a self-transforming person who, as it is sometimes put, goes through a process - a turn of phrase akin to 'the river flows' and 'the wind blows' (...)³⁵⁸

This implies that change is an intrinsic part of the nature of Kalarippayat, and those changes appear in each *kalari* in one way or another.

I observed the rituals and the people of the KKA *kalari* over three different periods, which I called 'Oral Transmission Periods' in the Introduction.³⁵⁹ Therefore I was able to notice the changes in the KKA gurukkal's interpretation of the art, and the change in appearance of the KKA. In the following I want to list some of the changes I observed in the KKA *kalari* and the changes in interpretation I covered in the previous chapters.

2.1 Cultural (re)interpretation of Kalarippayat

In chapter 6.8 I have shown that Kalarippayat shares certain patterns with other arts such as yoga and the classical dance forms Bharatanatyam and Kathakali. These patterns include procedures such as the greeting procedure used in Bharatanatyam, which is similar in intention to the greeting procedure in KKA Kalarippayat. Yoga shares several body postures (*vadivu*) with KKA Kalarippayat, and the Kalarippayat shares the use of massages, to make the body flexible, with Kathakali dance. Similar 'ways of doing' (cultural patterns),

³⁵⁴ Oral Transmission Period I and II

³⁵⁵ Cf. chapter 2.6.3

³⁵⁶ Ibid., p.83

³⁵⁷ Cf. chapter 2.2

³⁵⁸ Elias, 1978, p.118

³⁵⁹ paragraph 5

common to Malabaran (or Keralan) culture, are used over and over again. Apparently Kalarippayat is enough a part of the local culture to have incorporated such 'ways of doing'.

2.2 The metaphysical (re)interpretation of the exercises: the KKA gurukkal

I have shown before that the personal conviction and understanding of the gurukkal is essential to the interpretation of the exercises and body movements of the art. Examples are the different interpretations and executions of the acceptance ritual (see chapter 2.6) and the different ways of paying respect to the *puttara* (see chapter 3.3.2).

The KKA gurukkal told me that he is a confirmed Muslim: he believes that there is only one God (*tauhid*), Allah, that Mohammad is the last prophet (*naebovaet*), and that there will be a judgment day (*mo'ad*). I was talking with him about his personal beliefs about one year after my acceptance to his *kalari*. He told me that there are five duties in Islam (*vajebat*). The first one is that a believer should pray five times a day, using prescribed words. The gurukkal believed that these five times refer to an ideal situation: in reality not too many people are able to do this. Praying, according to him, should be done with a concentration on God. Without this concentration the prayer consists out of mere words, that are empty and without meaning. He had a similar idea about the yearly fasting period, another one of the five duties. The KKA teacher opposed the fasting in the manner that most people of his society were doing it. He said that the fasting for many people just meant that the three daily meals were shifted from their normal time to another time. Keralis eat their breakfast at eight, their lunch at twelve, and their dinner at eight. During the fasting period, the meals are, according to the KKA teacher, eaten at seven at night, when it is the end of the fasting of that day, then at eleven or twelve o'clock that same night, and just before the start of the fasting in the morning, after prayer, at around six o'clock. This is, in the view of the KKA gurukkal, not fasting, but a mere shift of mealtimes.

The KKA teacher stated that instead of normal food people eat a specially prepared meal, a kind of party food, which contains fewer vitamins than normal food, and which is very high in fat as well. When the fasting period is observed in this way, it is even very bad for one's health, as the KKA gurukkal told me.

For the KKA gurukkal all religions have one thing in common: each religion teaches a way to reach God. He expressed this belief many times inside the *kalari* during practice. All the ways are correct, in his view, and each person has to choose one of these ways. For him personally this is Islam, because he thinks that Islam provides an easy shortcut to God.

The KKA gurukkal promotes the Kalarippayat he is teaching as being independent of any religion. He stressed very often that Kalarippayat and religion should be considered separate: according to the KKA teacher, there should be no religion in the *kalari*. This is a very peculiar point of view, because instead of paying homage to the *puttara*, *ganapatittara*, and *guruttara*, the usual start and finish of a practice session, he faces the direction of Mecca (*gheble*), and folds his hands in the position for performing the preparatory part of the prayer

(*niyyaet*)³⁶⁰, in the way the Sunnis do. The KKA gurukkal allows his Muslim students to do the same. All others should pay homage in the usual way. In my opinion, with this adaptation he introduced at least some religion into his *kalari*, probably unwillingly. He explained to me that this part of the practice should be done because one should empty the mind, leaving all worries and thoughts behind because they would be an obstacle to the practice of Kalarippayat³⁶¹; performance of *niyyaet* accomplishes this.

Next to the greeting ritual to the *puttara*, there is yet another change the KKA gurukkal made because of his religious conviction, as far as I have understood: he eliminated a part of the acceptance ritual. As we have seen in chapter 2.6, the acceptance ritual ends with the blessing of the gurukkal. In a Hindu *kalari* the student should touch the feet of the gurukkal. The evening we were talking about religion the KKA teacher told me that he deliberately omitted this part, because, as he pointed out to me, as a Muslim, he is convinced that all people are equal in the eyes of God, and that no one should bend down in the dust for another person.

The KKA gurukkal has no problem with performing exercises such as *vandanam* and *vanakkam*, however, which he himself explains as greetings to the *puttara* and the principles of Shiva and Shakti in the case of *vandanam*, and as greetings to the teacher, God, snake deity, directions, weapons, and the sun and moon in the case of the *vanakkam* of Kathadanad Kalarippayat³⁶². Also within the Shiva and Shakti forms there are some poses mimicking the trunk, ears, and the only tusk of elephant-headed god Ganesha³⁶³. According to the KKA gurukkal, these exercises are an intrinsic part of the Kalarippayat tradition, and cannot be omitted. There is no prayer to God involved in these exercises, as the KKA teacher told me; and that is why there is no problem with practicing them: they are merely body movements, and the meaning of these movements is influenced by the culture of Kerala, which is considered by the KKA gurukkal as part of his own roots³⁶⁴.

Though the KKA teacher stresses the Muslim faith for himself, he is able to connect his beliefs with other religions or philosophies. One time I was with him and one of the senior students, a Hindu, in the *kalari*. He told me that all religions have the same purpose, and that, in that respect, there was absolutely no difference between religions. All the religions came directly from 'God', transmitted to mankind through certain favored people³⁶⁵. In order to demonstrate that those religions had the same origin, the KKA gurukkal told me that the Islamic prayer (*naemaz*) was basically the same as the Hindu 'sun greeting' (*surya namaskaram*). Both are a set of movements, performed in a similar fashion. According to the KKA gurukkal, there is no difference even in the type of movement. He stated that between these forms of body movements there

³⁶⁰ On *niyyaet*, see chapter 2.4

³⁶¹ Told to me frequently during Oral Transmission Period I. Cf. chapter 2.4

³⁶² Cf. chapter 3.3.2.2

³⁶³ My observations during Oral Transmission Periods I, II, and III

³⁶⁴ Private conversation with the KKA gurukkal, last week of Oral Transmission Period II

³⁶⁵ Conversation in the KKA *kalari* at the end of Oral Transmission Period II

was basically just one difference: the *naemaz* is done in a way that everybody, even elderly and ill people, can do it, while the *surya namaskaram* can be only performed by flexible and healthy people. This can be seen for example, in the fact that when the *surya namaskaram* requires that the nose touches the knees, the *naemaz* only requires that the hands are put on the knees. The inflexion is similar, but when a person does the *surya namaskaram*, he or she should perform complete movements, such as a complete bending down in the example mentioned. In order to demonstrate the similarities between the two forms, the KKA gurukkal and his senior Hindu student stood next to each other, each performing their 'praying movements',³⁶⁶

On the other hand one should not overrate the importance of religion within the system of Kalarippayat as taught in the KKA *kalari*. Apart from his slightly different behavior during the start and finishing of a training session, the KKA teacher never showed any sign of religion when teaching Kalarippayat.

As I have said above, the KKA teacher was open to relating his personal beliefs and his interpretation of Kalarippayat to different views or different interpretations. This is also demonstrated by the fact that during a few years he was a member of his teacher Abdul Kader Kutty's Sufi group³⁶⁷. The KKA gurukkal, during the periods I was studying under him, did not go to the Sufi gatherings anymore. When I asked him about his opinion of Sufism, he answered me evasively. I had the impression, though, that he was not too enthusiastic about Sufism, at least the way it was practiced in the area of the KKA *kalari*, because he told me that "it worked too much on your brain"³⁶⁸.

Though the KKA teacher is open to any interpretation of Kalarippayat, the reason that he maintains that Kalarippayat is not related to religion, in my opinion, is the following: the KKA gurukkal wants to avoid any connection with religious groups. This attitude became apparent during one occasion. The KKA teacher told me that most Sufi groups in the neighborhood were connected to fundamentalist Islamic political groups, and that it was better not to get involved with them. When I got curious about them, and just to go sightseeing I went to several Sufi places in a nearby village where Sufism was very strong, the KKA gurukkal learned of my actions and was very upset about it. He forced me, with all the powers he had, not to go to that village anymore. The reason was, as he told me, that he wanted to keep his *kalari* from becoming connected with any political or religious movement.

It seems to me that the KKA teacher personally *does* connect Kalarippayat with Islam, and that he sees the art as a way of life; however, he does not want to have any relations with specific religious or political groups or parties. Often religion and politics go hand in hand in Malabar.³⁶⁹ This may have several reasons. Firstly the KKA gurukkal wants to have an international *kalari*; when he

³⁶⁶ Ibid.

³⁶⁷ Cf. Chapter 1.4.2

³⁶⁸ Ibid.

³⁶⁹ According to what I have seen, several parties participating in the election for Kerala's parliament, are religiously based

connects himself to a specific political or religious group, he may have problems promoting his art to people from countries outside India, who have a different faith and background. Another point is that when the KKA gurukkal associates himself or his *kalari* with certain political religious groups, the KKA will probably lose its status as official school, because there is a chance that the government of Kerala will see such a group as a threat. That this threat is not merely fictional is evidenced by the fact that during the periods I was living in Malabar, frequently a politician was killed. Such an act was always followed by a prohibition to travel by any motorized vehicle.³⁷⁰

The strict attitude of the KKA teacher towards any connections with religious groups may be fostered by the fact that the KKA *kalari* is situated in an area where the Muslim population is not much smaller than the Hindu population. During my three stays I noticed in Cannanore that generally Hindu and Muslim communities were strictly separated: in general, a Hindu sent his children to a Hindu school, worked for a Hindu company, and had Hindu friends. The same can be said of Muslims.³⁷¹ As an example of this I want to mention the main shopping street of Cannanore, the Pillayar Kovil Road. Most of the shops, and this is certainly true for restaurants, were either Muslim or Hindu, working almost solely with people of their own faith. There are, however, people who give more importance to other forms of relationships than religious. The KKA gurukkal, for example, was earning his living as a shop owner, and his staff was of mixed religious background. The Hindus in his service were students of his, coming from poor families. The question is whether this example is a representative exception, however, because, as a Kalarippayat gurukkal, the KKA teacher feels responsible for his students.³⁷²

My sense is that an institution such as the KKA stresses its neutral attitude towards religion, because it wants to form a bridge between the different religious identities in Kerala. During his teachings many times the KKA gurukkal stressed the unity of Kerala as a country with one culture, which should be cherished by her people. Kerala, as the KKA teacher stated frequently, is a country of one people; religious differences were considered by him to be of secondary importance.

Based on my experience, the KKA gurukkal looks at Kalarippayat with two faces. On the one hand he acknowledges the value of the martial art, and he tries to be as 'authentic' teacher as possible. This means that he accepts the (to him) 'pagan' altars of the Hindu gods inside his *kalari*. Likewise he accepts all rituals which he thinks belong to Kalarippayat. In this way he claims to be a 'traditional' teacher and to have a 'traditional' *kalari*.³⁷³ On the other hand the KKA gurukkal does not want to perform any act that goes against his

³⁷⁰ Cf. chapter 2.5

³⁷¹ This attitude is not always true regarding the schools, however. Most people, in my experience, were trying to send their children to an English Medium School. These schools were run by Christians, especially by the Roman Catholic Church, at least in Cannanore.

³⁷² See chapter 6.2

³⁷³ Private conversation with the KKA gurukkal last week Oral Transmission Period II

interpretation of Islam. He found, in my understanding, two solutions for this dilemma. The first solution is that he has found Islamic equivalents for those rituals, that directly invoke divine powers, such as the greeting and finishing rituals. In these two cases, for example, he replaced the short meditation facing the altars with the *niyyaet*, facing Mecca.

A second solution is to let other people perform the rituals which he himself should do. An example is the rituals during Navaratri: when I was there during Oral Transmission Period I, he asked his teacher Chandrashekar Gurukkal to perform the duties on his behalf.³⁷⁴

2.3 (Re) interpretation of past patterns

In chapter 1 I explained the 'history' (or what is considered to be the history) of the KKA Kalarippayat. The KKA gurukkal uses this 'history' to show where his martial art comes from. He uses these stories also to demonstrate that Kalarippayat is part of Kerala's cultural heritage³⁷⁵. He linked the exercises he is teaching directly with Kerala's past. As an example I want to mention the Central Style, which came into existence, according to the KKA gurukkal, because of the celebration of the *mamankam* festival³⁷⁶. Thus he interprets his exercises in terms of the situation in Kerala during its Middle Ages.

But the KKA gurukkal goes one step further: since Kalarippayat is connected to Kerala's past, and thus part of the cultural heritage of the Keralan people, Kalarippayat *belongs* to Kerala and its people: it is part of the cultural identity of the Keralan people³⁷⁷. Though the martial art was in the past connected with only some of the castes of Kerala³⁷⁸, the KKA gurukkal apparently does not make this connection for the present day situation. For him, Kalarippayat is independent of religion, caste, political background, and social status. This way of thinking is not only subscribed to by many other gurukkals, such as Soman Gurukkal, Sri Jayan Gurukkal, Chandrashekar Gurukkal, and the different CVN *kalaris*,³⁷⁹ but by the Keralan government as well.

Kalarippayat is promoted by the Keralan government through three departments: the Department of Tourism, the Department of Cultural Affairs, and the Keralan Sports Council. The Department of Tourism and the Department of Cultural Affairs both advertise Kalarippayat as being part of the common cultural heritage of the Keralan people.³⁸⁰ This kind of advertisement is probably done because of the promotion of tourism, which is of economic interest to the Keralan state.³⁸¹ The Keralan Sports Council tries to promote Kalarippayat under the

³⁷⁴ See also chapter 5.5.2.2

³⁷⁵ The KKA gurukkal connected Kalarippayat frequently with the cultural heritage of Kerala during lessons in the *kalari* and during private conversations in Oral Transmission Periods I, II, III

³⁷⁶ Cf. Chapter 1.4

³⁷⁷ The KKA gurukkal repeated this opinion frequently during lessons in the *kalari* and during private conversations in Oral Transmission Periods I, II, III

³⁷⁸ Cf. Chapter 1.3.4 (and notes)

³⁷⁹ I obtained the information from the gurukkals mentioned through personal conversations. On the CVN *kalari*, see www.kalarippayat.com.

³⁸⁰ Cf. Chapter 6.5.2

³⁸¹ Ibid.

youth of Kerala as Kerala's national sport,³⁸² probably to promote health among the youth. The Keralan government does not discriminate against any class of people in their promotional activities of Kalarippayat, just as the KKA gurukkal does not discriminate based on the background of his students.

The attitude of the KKA gurukkal and the Keralan government indicates, in my opinion, that there is yet another reason to promote Kalarippayat as being independent of religious conviction, caste, political background, and social status. Kerala is a state which is home to several religions. Though Hinduism is the religion of the majority, Islam and Christianity are very big minorities.³⁸³ In section 2.2 I stated that many of the people who belong to a particular belief, usually live within that particular religious society: in Malabar a Muslim eats in a Muslim restaurant, works for a Muslim employer, and most of his or her friends will be Muslim.³⁸⁴ The same can be said for Hindus. This attitude of the people can create a divided society. Another division may be caused by political preference: I have mentioned in chapter 2.5 that the political climate can be quite explosive. That politics is a hot issue is evidenced by the fact that I saw communist monuments in every city and village I visited, even in remote areas.³⁸⁵ Every now and then I also witnessed communist marches, in which hundreds of people participated.

Though I have not seen any problems between religious groups during my stays in Kerala, the KKA teacher assured me that many religious groups were political active as well.³⁸⁶ Recent problems between Hindus and Muslims in India, such as the riots in Gujarat in February 2002, could occur in Kerala as well. As far as I can see, the policy of the Keralan government is directed to keeping the society together and to preventing violence. Arts such as Kalarippayat are promoted as being the common cultural heritage of the Keralis, about which every Kerali can be proud. This heritage should transcend differences of political or religious background. I believe that consciously or unconsciously, people such as the KKA gurukkal contribute to this feeling of Keralan unity and nationalism. This feeling of unity and nationalism was already connected to Kalarippayat by Karnaran Gurukkal and his student C.V. Narayanan Gurukkal, who in 1958 marches the first CVN *kalari*, as a result of nationalistic feelings that were a reaction to British colonial supremacy in Kerala.³⁸⁷

³⁸² Ibid.

³⁸³ The official website of the Keralan government (<http://www.kerala.gov.in/statistical/vitalstatistics/1.07.pdf>) gives the following information regarding the different religions (dating from 1991, the numbers are in percentages of the total population). Kerala: Hindus 57.28%, Muslims 23.33%, Christians 19.32%. Compare this to India as a whole: Hindus 82%, Muslims 12.12%, Christians 2.34%.

³⁸⁴ I lived in Cannanore and surrounding areas, so I experienced this behavior from the people in this area only. The KKA teacher, however, assured me that this separation is accidental and characteristic for the Cannanore area; the rest of Kerala does not have such strict division: all Keralis work and live together.

³⁸⁵ The communist monuments consist usually of a red hammer and sickle on a pedestal, decorated by soviet flags. For information on this communist party, see www.cpim.org.

³⁸⁶ Cf. paragraph 3.2. Examples of religious parties in Kerala are the Indian Union Muslim League (www.iuonline.com) and the Hindu oriented Bharatiya Janata Party (www.bjp.org).

³⁸⁷ Cf. chapter 1.3.5 and chapter 6.4.1

The history of Kalarippayat and Kerala is presented by the KKA gurukkal as ‘a history of the Keralan people’. Arts such as Kalarippayat had come into existence within this common history. For him Kalarippayat is something all Kerali have in common, and thus ‘binds’ the Keralan people together.

2.4 Changes referring to the presentation of the art

The presentation of the art is what is shown by the gurukkal to the outside world (including students): the ‘face’ of the KKA. This falls into two categories: the organization of the structure and method of teaching the art, and the environment in which the art is taught to the students.

In order to identify a change, one needs a reference to which the change can be compared. This will be achieved by using the three main periods of my stay in the *kalari* as ‘reference periods’. These three periods are defined in paragraph 2 of the Introduction:

- Period I: January 15, 1996 – March 31, 1998
- Period II: July 17, 1999 – September 28, 1999
- Period III: December 6, 2002 – February 25, 2003

I will describe these three periods for each of the two categories mentioned above. After that I will try to give an explanation of the changes found in both categories within the framework of the ‘tradition’.

2.4.1 Changes in the way of teaching of Kalarippayat

Period I

During this period in the KKA *kalari* the KKA teacher concentrated on collecting as many different Kalarippayat *sampradayams* as possible. He was interested in each teacher in Kerala who could tell him some new fighting concepts.³⁸⁸ The result is that a student can learn at least five different traditions in the KKA *kalari*. There was also much attention given to the specific *marma* techniques hidden within the forms of the different *sampradayams*.³⁸⁹ The techniques and concepts were tested for their efficiency.³⁹⁰ There was a direct contact with a kickboxing and karate school in Germany that had developed a new fighting system called Kadgamala.³⁹¹ This school is among the top schools in Europe; they are very successful in kickboxing and freestyle fighting championships on a European and worldwide level. The KKA gave a few of the Kadgamala students some additional training several times. This was all that was needed for that German school to win several European and world championships in kickboxing.³⁹² In short, the KKA *kalari* was teaching a martial art with much emphasis on the fighting aspect.

Period II

³⁸⁸ On the difference between ‘techniques’ and ‘concepts’, from a martial point of view, see chapter 1.1

³⁸⁹ *ibid.*

³⁹⁰ *ibid.*

³⁹¹ Kadgamala, Hamburg

³⁹² European championships (a.o.): 1992 (Hamburg), 1994 (Rimini), 1996 (Graz); World championships (a.o.): 1995 (Ottawa), 1999 (Madrid)

Kalari massages involve the manipulation of the *marmas* of the body, as explained in chapter 5. The technique of *marma* manipulation can be used to promote health or to damage the body. An interest in the subject of *marmas* and its related lethal techniques led the KKA teacher to the medical side of Kalarippayat.³⁹³ Because of this, the point of focus of the KKA teachings shifted from collecting the best ‘fighting concepts’ to collecting the best *kalari* massages.³⁹⁴ This process was also enforced by the popularization and internationalization of the KKA. Kalarippayat had drawn the attention of some groups of people in several European countries. Those people were not so much interested in the martial side of Kalarippayat as in the healing and even meditation aspect of the art, however. At this stage the KKA teacher refused to respond to requests for a specific *kalari* meditation, but in an attempt to make the art more popular he did respond to the demand for the (to western eyes, esoteric) *kalari* massages.

The KKA gurukkal also understood that the profound and very demanding Northern Style was not so popular among westerners. The problem was solved by partly departing from the traditional way of teaching: he switched the focus of the lessons to holds and locks; by doing so he brought exercises from the fourth stage of learning (see chapter 3.9) to the first stage, de-emphasizing the Shiva and Shakti forms.

During my first period in the KKA, the KKA teachings were strictly taught according to the ‘indigenous traditional method’.³⁹⁵ The second period in the *kalari* was marked by another major change: the KKA introduced the use of a syllabus and a curriculum. The latter was not as fully developed yet as it became a few years later. The big difference from the previous way of teaching was that each item was taught for a certain amount of time, at a certain moment, as prescribed by the curriculum. This way of teaching contrasts with the ‘old way’, in which only the teacher decided if a student was ready to enter a new stage of training based on that student’s abilities and understanding.

In an attempt to modernize the art, the KKA gurukkal looked for a substitute for the Japanese belt system, in which the color of the belt shows the rank and progress of the student. Though an equivalent of the belt has not been found, as far as I know, the KKA now offers a complete graduation plan, with diplomas to indicate the student’s progress. With this the KKA has left the idea behind the system of Kalarippayat taught during my first period: the students and the teacher are equal in the eyes of the divine, and the teacher should be considered rather as a *primus inter pares* than as somebody of a higher rank.

Period III

³⁹³ Cf. Chapter 4

³⁹⁴ On fighting concepts, see chapter 1.1

³⁹⁵ According to the lessons the KKA teacher himself received from his teacher during his own training period. These ‘traditional teachings’ may have been inspired by the training syllabus of C.V. Narayanan Gurukkal. It is also possible, however, that the CVN curriculum was inspired by the indigenous methods of teaching.

In period II the KKA gurukkal brought exercises belonging to the fourth part of the training schedule to the first part, de-emphasizing the Shiva and Shakti forms³⁹⁶. This process reached a peak in period III. With this new way of teaching the students progressed in a shorter time, so the KKA teacher could teach more foreign students at the same time. This, however, required more of his attention for each of these foreign students. The result was that the number of local students dropped dramatically. During period III there were no local students in the *kalari* on weekdays, and only one, one of the KKA teacher's own sons, on Sundays. This was in contrast to the first two periods, when the *kalari* was overcrowded (around 18 people were present) with Indian students, especially on Sundays.

Since the year 2003 the KKA teacher has also added a meditation aspect to his teachings: a more metaphysical dimension was added to the interpretation of the concepts of certain forms. To demonstrate how drastic this change is for a man such as the KKA teacher, I recall an event that happened during period I.

In Kerala there are stories about masters of the art who could hit an opponent from a distance. Up to recently, the KKA teacher despised the idea that such things would ever exist. I remember that one day there was a fancy fair in Cannanore. The KKA gurukkal visited the fair accompanied by some of his students. A Kalarippayat master performed a show in this fair. He let himself be attacked by his students. However, before his students could even reach him, he used his inner *shakti*, and the students were literally blown away in all directions. On seeing this, the KKA gurukkal sent one of his seniors on stage, challenging the master. The master in question refused to answer the challenge, and slipped away.

This story illustrates that the KKA teacher always desired to get rid of these kinds of what he considers to be 'impurities' in the art. The art was, and still is, sacred to him and in his eyes such display degraded the image of Kalarippayat as a fighting system. However, traces of such techniques have been introduced in the most recent teachings of the KKA: he showed me several methods to manipulate the third eye (*ajna chakra* or *ajnamarma*) from a distance of around two meters.

Another change which I noticed is that the KKA *kalari* was 'discovered' by several (temporary) western students who were just looking for spiritual guidance, among them a few Hare Krishna's. They saw the *kalari* as a meditation center and Kalarippayat as a form of yoga. During period II the KKA teacher refused to teach meditation in connection with Kalarippayat, but period III was marked by a shift to the inner *kalari* practices.

Most recent changes

In the years 2005 and 2006 the KKA gurukkal and I had several times contact by telephone. In 2005 he told me that a teacher Kadathanad Kalarippayat had taught him a new way to move into the *vadivu* (body postures).³⁹⁷ The movements involved should be done in slow motion. The KKA gurukkal told me

³⁹⁶ See chapter 3.3; I refer to the stages under block II

³⁹⁷ Cf. chapter 3.3.3.2

that these exercises were meant as a kind of Kalarippayat version of yoga. Further, he has incorporated new *meippayat* forms which he took from Sri Jayan Gurukkal. The old *meippayat* forms he categorized as 'fire-forms', while the newly obtained exercises were named 'water-forms'. Along with the exercises he imported more of the theory of the working of the human body as it is presented in the Sushruta and the Charaka Samhita into the KKA system.³⁹⁸ The KKA gurukkal started to stress much more the importance of *prana* (life force) than he had done before he received the new teachings. In the following I will try to give a summary of the newly introduced ideas.

According to the KKA gurukkal the life energy of the body flows through *nadis*. The main *nadi* is the *shushumna*, which runs from the tip of the coccyx to a small area between the anterior and posterior fontanel. The seven *chakras* of the human body are located on the *shushumna*.³⁹⁹

The life energy (*prana*) is able to flow through the body because of the working of the wind element (*vayu*).⁴⁰⁰ There are ten different flows of *prana*, indicated by ten *vayus* or winds, but, according to the KKA gurukkal, only five play a role in actual practice of Kalarippayat. These five *vayus* are:

1. *Prana vayu* is located in the mouth, and controls respiration (not to be confused with *prana* itself, which is the collective of the ten *vayus*)
2. *Udana vayu* is the wind (or energy flow) going upward, piercing through lungs, throat and mouth
3. *Samana vayu* is circulating in the stomach and those intestines used for digestion
4. *Vyana vayu* is circulating through the limbs; it sees to perspiration, and blood flow; it controls the joints and the muscular system
5. *Apana vayu* represents (in opposition to *udana vayu*) downward action; it controls excretion and birth

Each *vayu* is connected to its specific *chakra*: the KKA teacher stated that by means of the *vayus* the *chakras* regulate the human mind and body. The increase of *prana* causes the increase of strength (*balam*) and power (*shakti*), with which a warrior can become superior to his adversary. *Prana* can be increased by 'waking up' Kundalini Shakti, which lies, as the KKA gurukkal pointed out, dormant in the *muladharam chakra* in the form of a three and a half time coiled serpent. If Kundalini Shakti 'wakes up' the *muladharam chakra* is said to 'open up'. Once the *muladharam chakra* has been opened, the Kundalini Shakti does not stay there, but moves up to the next *chakra*, the *svadisthanam chakra*, located four fingers below the navel. This process is repeated, according to the KKA teacher, until all seven *chakras* of the body have been opened.

³⁹⁸ Cf. chapter 4.1.1

³⁹⁹ In chapter 2.3 we used the definition: "energy centers in which the life energy of the body is concentrated". Now the KKA gurukkal has refined this definition to: "energy wheels along the spine, which are a regularizing factor of the human mind and body during the flow of *prana* through the *shushumna*"

⁴⁰⁰ Cf. chapter 4.1.1

The awakening of the Kundalini snake does not only give a warrior a superior strength in combat, but it is beneficent for the health in general as well, because it balances the three humors (*kapha*, *pitta*, and *vata*) and purifies the *nadis*. The latter is supposed to result in a better flow of *prana*.

The ascension of Kundalini Shakti and the consequent opening up of the *chakras* results in insights in the working of the universe. When all *chakras* are open a person reaches enlightenment and unity with 'God'. This process is represented by the *puttara*; each step of the *puttara* corresponds with a *chakra* and is equated with a level of understanding Kalarippayat, and thus the 'God'.⁴⁰¹

According to the KKA gurukkal, the word 'kundalini' is Sanskrit and means 'coiled in a pit (*kunda*)'.⁴⁰² The Malayalam translation of the Sanskrit *kunda* would be *kuzhi*. He asserted that the *kalari* used for daily practice, the *kuzhi kalari*, has a direct connection with Kundalini Shakti.⁴⁰³ The *kuzhi kalari* is a model for the *muladharam chakra*: Kundalini Shakti, which is the goddess of the *puttara*, lays coiled up in the pit (*kunda* or *kuzhi*) of the *kalari*. By practicing Kalarippayat, the serpent wakes up, and ascends the *shushumna*, which is represented by the seven tires of the *puttara*. The *kalari* is in this way understood as a representation of the energy system of the human body. According to the KKA teacher, the life energy of the body, *prana*, runs clockwise; exercises should therefore be performed clockwise as well. Thus performing *kalari* training is stimulating *prana*; the more one practices, the more one increases one's *prana*.

The KKA gurukkal stressed that it is possible to wake up the Kundalini Shakti or to open up the *chakras* by stimulating the specific *chakra* and its corresponding *vayu*. By practicing *meippayat* the practitioner assumes animal postures (*vadivu*). Each *chakra* corresponds to a specific *vadivu*. At certain points in the performance of the *meippayat*, when assuming a *vadivu*, the practitioner should retain his breath for a moment (*pidutam*). When moving into an animal posture, certain *vayus* are involved; the retention of breath increases the pressure of the wind, and as a result stimulates the *chakra*.⁴⁰⁴ As an example of this process the KKA gurukkal explained me the following:

Gaja vadivu (elephant posture) is related to the *muladharam chakra*. Each *chakra* has its own corresponding element and *vayu*. The element of the *muladharam chakra* is earth (*prithavi*), and its wind is *apana*, which is the downward moving *prana*. Practicing the elephant posture strengthens the excretory and reproductive organs and helps to awaken Kundalini Shakti. It also helps a person to become more grounded and centred, since the elephant posture works on the *apana vayu*, which acts in combination with *samana vayu*. The movement of getting into the elephant posture is

⁴⁰¹ Cf. chapter 2.3

⁴⁰² Cf. Monier-Williams, Sanskrit-English Dictionary, Kessinger Publishing, Whitefish (USA), 2004 (on internet available via the <http://webapps.uni-koeln.de/tamil>): *kunda* means pit, bowl, well, pitcher.

⁴⁰³ On *kuzhi kalari* the see chapter 3.1

⁴⁰⁴ The retention of breath is to keep the *vayu* for a moment 'locked up' within the *chakra*. According to Zarrilli (1998: 130), many Kalarippayat practitioners use a *kacca*, a loin cloth of several meters wrapped tightly around the waist, which has the function to keep the *vayu* inside the *svadisthanam chakra*, stimulating swiftness, power, sense of perception, and one point focus (*ekagrata*)

motivated by the *prana vayu*; assuming the posture involves a combination of *samana vayu* and *apana vayu* and getting out of the posture is a combination of *udana vayu* and *vyana vayu*. A person which is grounded and centred both physically and mentally is hard to beat in a fight. The practice of the elephant posture makes that person physically and mentally strong, because the elephant posture training causes purification of *muladharam chakra*; this removes the physical obstacles from the body like diseases, and the mental obstacles from the mind like fear, negativity, lack of confidence, feeling of insecurity, etc.

In the last sentences the KKA gurukkal connects the elephant god Ganesha, remover of obstacles, with the *gaja vadivu*, the *muladharam chakra*, and the heaviest of elements, earth.⁴⁰⁵ Though the KKA gurukkal did not mention to me a connection between *chakras* and deities, Zarrilli reports that each *chakra* is represented by a specific deity.⁴⁰⁶

The following table shows the connection between the *chakras*, *vayus*, and elements. There are some empty spaces in the table: the *ajna* and *sahasrara chakras* correspond to pure mental levels, while the first five *chakras* refer to physical levels. That means that there is no direct connection between the two highest *chakras* and *vayus* and elements, which are merely operating on a physical level. The table does not connect *vyana vayu* to a particular *chakra*, because this wind flows through the entire body.

| chakra | location | vayu ⁴⁰⁷ | element |
|---------------------|---|----------------------------|----------------|
| <i>muladharam</i> | At the tip of the coccyx | <i>apana</i> | Earth |
| <i>svadisthanam</i> | Four fingers below navel | <i>samana</i> | Water |
| <i>manipurukam</i> | Solar plexus | – | Fire |
| <i>anahatam</i> | Heart | <i>prana</i> | Wind |
| <i>vishuddhi</i> | Throat | <i>udana</i> | Ether |
| <i>ajna</i> | Between the eyebrows | – | – |
| <i>sahasrara</i> | Crown of the head, in front of the posterior fontanel | – | – |

In figure 4.2 of chapter 4.1.5 we have discussed how the five elements are able to destroy each other. In the figure we see, for example, that wind destroys fire. According to the KKA gurukkal that means that in the body the fire element controls the wind element. The wheel of control is similar to the wheel of destruction (figure 4.2), only with reversed arrows:

- Wind controls ether
- Fire controls wind
- Water controls fire
- Earth controls water
- Ether controls earth

⁴⁰⁵ On the god Ganesha, see chapter 2.6.2; on the earth element, see chapter 4.1.1

⁴⁰⁶ Zarrilli 1998, p.126

⁴⁰⁷ Cf. Amrita-Nada Upanishad 35-36

Because each *vadivu* is connected to an element, one can control a *vadivu* with the *vadivu* connected to another element. For example, the lion posture (*simha vadivu*) is connected to the element water, and the elephant posture (*gaja vadivu*) is connected to the element earth. The idea that earth controls water can be applied in real combat in the following way: the elephant pose should be used against somebody who launches an attack in the lion pose.

Fighting tactics are now explained and determined in terms of their philosophical background. In my opinion this mystifies the use in a fight of the *vadivu*, because of their close connection to their particular *vayu* (and thus *prana*); in fact the system says that one can beat an opponent by analyzing his use of *prana*, and to give a counter application in the form of a different use of one's own *prana*.

Before 2005 the KKA gurukkal hardly paid any attention to animal postures out of the context of the *meippayat*; after having received the new teachings he clearly distinguishes eighteen *vadivus*, each connected to a specific *chakra*.⁴⁰⁸

The KKA gurukkal claimed that the KKA is the only *kalari* teaching breathing techniques through the practice of *vadivus*.⁴⁰⁹ For him these exercises came into being as a blend of ancient yoga techniques brought to Kerala by the Aryans and Dravidian yoga exercises. He sees the newly obtained exercises as a kind of martial Hatha-Yoga, which was practiced by Kalari Yogis. Hence he introduces these exercises to his students as 'Kalari Yoga', establishing a definite connection between yoga and Kalarippayat.

2.4.2 Changes in environment

Not only has the KKA *kalari* interpretation of Kalarippayat changed, but so have the buildings undergone some alteration. The *kalari* itself, built in a traditional fashion, did not change, though, because the KKA still strives to do everything strictly according to the tradition. As the *kalari* is the center of the tradition, the KKA considers it as blasphemy to alter the building.

Period I

Apart from the *kalari* itself, one other building was used by the KKA. A traditional Keralan house, 50 meters from the *kalari*, was used as a guesthouse for visiting gurukkals and students. These guests had to wash themselves at a water pit, adjacent to the house. Furthermore the building housed a library as well, a dusty room full of books on all kinds of martial arts and many volumes of at least a decade of subscriptions to the most prominent martial arts magazines published in English.

⁴⁰⁸ Zarrili (1998: 99) observed in several schools a number of eight *vadivus*. As examples he mentions CVN *kalari* and the system taught by P.K. Balan gurukkal.

⁴⁰⁹ Zarrilli says that Vasu Gurukkal was teaching "a form of brahmanaka pranayama" (1998: 134). He mentions as an example a breathing exercise performed in the cat posture. One of the teachers of the KKA gurukkal, Chandran Gurukkal, teaches Lo Har exercises (Lo Har also uses *vadivu*), which are clearly influenced by yoga. Apart from being a Kalarippayat gurukkal, Chandran Gurukkal is a well-known and respected yoga teacher. From these examples it is clear that yoga and Kalarippayat are often seen as two different -sometimes these differences even fade away- expressions of the same ideology.

Period II

In the garden where the *kalari* and the traditional house are situated, there are also two other small houses for rent. During period I they were rented out to two local families who had no connection with Kalarippayat; during period II one of them was rented out to a foreigner, while the other was still occupied by a local family. In this period the KKA gurukkal managed to get a third house, near the beach, about 10 kilometers distance from the *kalari*. This house was let out to foreigners as well.

Period III

The house near the *kalari* was transformed into a treatment center just before the start of the third period, complete with oil bath. The treatment center offers all known Ayurvedic oil treatments. One of them is the oil bath therapy (*pizhichil*), used for neurological and musculoskeletal disorders. The patient lies in a special bath, and medicated oil is poured over the body. The treatment should be repeated for several consecutive days. Many liters of specially prepared oil are used each time the bath is used, and this makes the treatment very expensive. The oil bath is known among many Indians as rejuvenating. A second treatment given at the house is the *sirodhara* or oil⁴¹⁰ bath for the head, which is also believed to be rejuvenating. The *sirodhara* is prescribed when the patient suffers from neurological problems and chronic headaches.

A few kilometers down the road from the *kalari*, also near the beach – like the house the KKA gurukkal obtained during the second period (see previous paragraph under period II) of my stay –, a piece of land was rented with a house on it. During the third period of my stay this house was being rebuilt to serve as the new housing for students and visiting teachers. Adjacent to this guesthouse a new building was built, which had to serve as a *ceru kalari*, a *kalari* used for medical treatment.

2.4.3 Adjustment or tradition?

The KKA gurukkal and many other teachers in Kerala believe that Kalarippayat is the oldest existing fighting system in the world⁴¹¹. This belief is accentuated by the story, well known among martial artists, that the famous Chinese Shaolin boxing is based on the teachings of a Buddhist monk Bodhidharma, who is supposed to have come from South India.⁴¹² Many gurukkals in Kerala therefore consider Kalarippayat to be the direct predecessor of the Chinese Wushu systems. In this light it is difficult for those gurukkals to accept that Kalarippayat is unknown in the world, and does not play a decisive role in the world of martial arts. For teachers such as the KKA gurukkal it is almost a duty to make the effort to gain a place among the known martial sports such as Karate, Kung Fu, and Taekwondo⁴¹³. The KKA gurukkal therefore decided to promote the art on an

⁴¹⁰ The oil used during *sirodhara* is mixed with milk or curd.

⁴¹¹ For example Soman Gurukkal, Chandrashekar Gurukkal, Sri Jayan Gurukkal. But one can find the same claim in each of the CVN *kalaris* (cf. www.kalarippayat.com).

⁴¹² Around the 6th century AD

⁴¹³ Cf. chapter 1.3.3

international level. Over the years he discovered that this implied that his way of teaching had to be adjusted to international standards. He tried to reinterpret Kalarippayat as a fighting system that could be used in the ring as well as on the street, in keeping with international standards by which a martial art is nowadays judged. At first the international connections of the teacher attracted martial artists to the KKA. Some of the European schools with which the KKA was associated, promoted Kalarippayat as a form of yoga. In general, yoga schools in Europe attract a different public than a martial art school, and many of the yoga students practice yoga for its spiritual and health promoting values. It was probably this connection between yoga and Kalarippayat which caused an increase of its popularity on an international level, but at the same time a growth in the number of foreign students who were only interested in health and spiritual guidance. In general, these students skipped the heavy training and participated in short term programs in which they could choose between different curriculums, depending on their interest. Health and spiritual guidance do certainly form a part of the Kalarippayat tradition, but they are incorporated and deeply rooted within the martial system. Even the KKA teacher states that without learning the basis of the art, one cannot learn and understand these aspects of the art.

It may seem that the picture as described above is in contradiction with much of the basic principles of the art of Kalarippayat. One can, however, relate the shift in teaching of the art to the age and spiritual maturation of the KKA teacher. According to the 'tradition' – as it is known nowadays among gurukkals with whom I became acquainted with – the focus of a martial artist who gets older should no longer be on the actual fight, but on contemplation and meditation. We have seen in chapter 5 that the Kalarippayat tradition consists of four stages of development:

1. Learning the forms on a physical level
2. Learning the meaning and use of the forms in a fight
3. Becoming a gurukkal and one with the art
4. Contemplation and meditation

The higher the stage, the more importance is given to the spiritual aspects of the art and the less emphasis on physical action. The older a gurukkal becomes, the less he will practice the intense training. At a certain point the gurukkal will be solely devoted to teaching. The three periods that we have identified coincide with the last three of the four stages of (mental) development of the KKA gurukkal. During period I, the KKA teacher emphasized the application of the exercises in an actual fight (compare stage 2). Period II was marked by a deeper understanding of the art, and an interpretation of it in terms of medical treatment (compare stage 3), while period III introduced direct attention to the mystical and contemplative aspect of Kalarippayat, which was developed even more during the years 2005 and 2006 (compare stage 4).

As I have argued before, it seems to me that the KKA gurukkal, maybe unconsciously, tries to follow the life stages (*ashrama*) of an Indian man⁴¹⁴. This

⁴¹⁴ Cf. chapter 5.6

is possible because he wants to live according to his interpretation of the philosophy of Kalaripayat.

The adjustment to the internationalization process, and the fact that the KKA teacher gets older as time passes, caused him to introduce a way of teaching different from the traditional way. Both processes have supported each other.

2.5 Changes referring to the exercises and their interpretation

Most gurukkals try to transfer the forms and exercises of the art as authentically as possible, i.e. the same way as that gurukkal learned the art from his teacher. Changes in the forms do occur, however, as I have shown in chapter 2.8. Usually changes with respect to the exercises have two faces: on one hand the teacher says to hand down his legacy accurately, while on the other hand many gurukkals try to improve their art by adding and skipping exercises, in order to create the best martial art. The KKA gurukkal is a good example, because he merged several *sampradayams* into one cohesive system.

Another important (recent) reinterpretation of the existing exercises is the different view of the martial art Kalaripayat as presented by Chirakkal T. Balakrishnan Nair and the view of the art according to C.V. Narayan. The latter saw in Kalaripayat an art suitable for performance, while the first one thought that Kalaripayat should be understood as a practical way of fighting. Chirakkal T. Balakrishnan Nair and his followers more or less condemned the esthetic movements performed by C.V. Narayan and his group⁴¹⁵.

3. Conclusion

The KKA is proud of the *sampradayam* it inherited and of the art of Kalaripayat in general. The school has always tried to collect other *sampradayams*, and to give to the learned techniques and concepts the correct interpretation. It believes that Kalaripayat is the mother of all existing martial arts in the world. Therefore Kalaripayat should have a place next to well known arts like Kung Fu and Karate. In order to accomplish this dream, the KKA believes that the art should be internationalized. The internationalization was sought through training three foreign students up to the master level, through making contacts with foreign martial art schools, through demonstrations at martial arts festivals in Europe and other Asian countries, and lately by promoting Kalaripayat as a healing art (see also chapter 6). The latter induced a shift in the interpretation and way of teaching of Kalaripayat. The emphasis on the martial aspect was partly replaced by an emphasis on the medical aspect of the art. This process was stimulated by the spiritual development of a gurukkal himself, which, according to the tradition, should be a natural result of his progress in understanding the art. The more a gurukkal matures in the art, the less emphasis should be put on the martial aspect of Kalaripayat, and more on meditation and becoming one with the divine. Becoming less interested in 'the self' and serving other human beings should prevail. This automatically brings the medical aspect of Kalaripayat more into the limelight. The internationalization process and the maturation process of the gurukkal go hand

⁴¹⁵ Cf. Chapter 6.4.1

in hand, and induce a change in the way the KKA teaches and looks at Kalarippayat.

We have seen in chapter 6.4.1 that the KKA was founded to serve several goals. One was to be a Kalarippayat research center and another was to provide a place where as many *sampradayams* as possible can be collected. By integrating these collected *sampradayams* into one system, the KKA tried to restore and maintain the manifold aspects of the Kalarippayat tradition⁴¹⁶. But by blending these *sampradayams* into one, the KKA not only preserved tradition, it also reinterpreted tradition in terms of its own *sampradayam*, without taking into account regional, historical and family differences, for instance. Thus a new tradition was created. This reinterpretation was also influenced by the above mentioned development process of the KKA teacher (which are, in fact, the four stages of development of a practitioner). Each *sampradayam* added was 'internationalized', and due to the process of stressing less intense training, a great many exercises were hardly taught to any student. The consequence is that, though the KKA has collected many Kalarippayat traditions, in the third Oral Transmission Period only part of the exercises has been transferred to its students⁴¹⁷. As a matter of fact, only a few students have gone through the basic exercises of each *sampradayam* offered by the KKA. The statutes of the KKA (chapter 6.4.1) show that the KKA wants to make all exercises available to each student, in order to reduce the chance that (a part of) a certain (Kalarippayat) tradition is lost. With this the KKA wants to break with the 'traditional' situation, in which only some basic exercises were taught to the students, while the essence of the art was only reserved for trusted students (see for example sections 2.1 and 4.2.2). In the attitude of the KKA, the 'openness' clearly comes through, but due to the internationalization and modernization only a small part of the available *sampradayams* is taught, so the resulting situation is not far from the 'traditional' situation.

⁴¹⁶ Each *sampradayam* specializes in certain aspects of 'the fight', i.e. each *sampradayam* has its own view on it. Collecting many *sampradayams* implies collecting different 'specializations' or views.

⁴¹⁷ This is based on my experience during Oral Transmission Period III

Conclusion

1. Kalarippayat

As we have seen, Kalarippayat is a martial art practiced in India, and particularly in Kerala. It is supposed to have originated in the state of Kerala. The art is practiced in a gym, called *kalari*. The center of the *kalari* is the teacher (*gurukkal*). The teacher has a special bond with each of his students (*shishya*), comparable to the relationship between father and child. This bond is based on an unconditional trust in the *gurukkal* on the part of the student, and a responsibility towards the wellbeing of the student, both spiritually and physically, on the part of the teacher. The *gurukkal* legitimizes his position by referring to his 'martial lineage' (*sampradayam*), the chain of *gurukkals* who taught the art before the present *gurukkal*. Ultimately this 'martial lineage' is traced back by the *gurukkal* to its origin: the divine. In this thesis I focus on an example of such a *kalari* and her teacher, the KKA (Kerala Kalarippayat Academy) *kalari*, situated in the village of Puttiyateru. The KKA *kalari* belongs to the KKA, an organization with the mission of promoting, teaching and maintaining Kalarippayat, which she sees as an integral part of the cultural heritage of Kerala.

The martial art Kalarippayat not only teaches a way of fighting, encapsulated in body movements, but also a way of life. This way of life acknowledges several spiritual stages, the highest of which is union with the divine.

The *gurukkal* can be equaled with his *kalari* and his lineage. He is the representative of the divine in the *kalari*. He maintains this position only within the *kalari* itself: he is, within his *kalari*, the only authority with respect to the teachings of Kalarippayat, which originate in the divine.

Kalarippayat, as it is taught in the KKA *kalari*, provides a way of life and a way to unite with the divine. Daily practice is started and finished by paying homage to representations of the art. These representations include the *gurukkal*. Homage is paid by her practitioners in the same way as they would approach the divine within their own religion. Looking at these facts, it looks as if the KKA *kalari* is the center of a cult, with her teachings as her doctrine and theology, and the *gurukkal* as her main ritualist. The purpose of this research is to see if Kalarippayat is a cult form; and if it is not, what alternative description there might be. In order to give such description of the phenomenon, we should first look at the ideas behind the KKA Kalarippayat. Furthermore, why is the art of interest to people, and what is her place in the local society? If an institution is embedded in a society, how do its members want it to be seen in order to maintain its status?

I will arrive at an answer to these questions through a phenomenological description of Kalarippayat of the KKA *kalari*, using mainly my own experiences and observations in the KKA *kalari* and the opinion of other authors on the subject. In so doing, I will try to look at my own experiences from a distance, in order to be able to give an objective approach. I will analyze the information using the theoretical framework, as pointed out in paragraph 4 of the Introduction. This framework aims to analyze field data by relating them to a

chosen background (the scene of the act and actors), by giving a description of the relationship between the people involved (especially paying attention to the status of the individuals), and by acknowledging that the obtained data are just a snapshot. In order to give an accurate description the researcher should ideally follow the development of the subject during a certain period; the snapshot becomes than a 'photograph taken with a long shutter time'. Moreover, if possible, the researcher should take several of these snapshots. In order to accomplish this I myself have become an initiate in the art. I have stayed three periods in India –of which the first period covered over two years– following the developments very closely.

I intended to analyze my data in several steps. The first step is to consider Kalarippayat as a ritual, using Bell's definition for this term. She sees 'ritual' as a set of actions, carefully set aside from other actions, placed in a specific context, to serve a certain purpose.⁴¹⁸ I have chosen this definition, because it is close to the way Kalarippayat is seen by her practitioners: Kalarippayat is a way of fighting (a set of actions), which should be performed without being involved personally, so that they merely mirror the acts of the divine (the actions are set aside because of their divine origin); the mere purpose is the fight itself (because the warrior is not involved personally); the context of the fight (the why, where, when of it) are determined by the working of *dharma* (universal law).

As a second step I had to choose the scene in relation to which I wanted to describe Kalarippayat. The principal scene is the *kalari* herself. This scope provides us with a description of Kalarippayat practice, its rituals and customs.

Thirdly, widening the angle of our scope, I have focused on the relation between the KKA *kalari* and the community in which she is located, and her relations with other Keralan (martial) art organizations. Thereto I have identified several of such relations, which have a direct influence on the KKA.

Fourthly I have given a description of the hierarchy within the KKA *kalari*, which involved not only individuals, but also divine and metaphysical entities. The hierarchy is defined according to the *sampradayam*, the 'martial lineage' of the gurukkal, which include the *kalari* goddess, the elephant-headed god Ganesha, and the lineage of deceased teachers.

Fifthly I have stated that the teachings of Kalarippayat are time dependent. The time dependency of the martial art is mainly caused by the fact the *kalari* can be identified by the gurukkal, as I have shown in chapter 2.2. The art is taught according to the views and insights of the gurukkal; if these views and insights are changing, so do the teachings.

I will use the above mentioned five points to order my data and to interpret the phenomenon of Kalarippayat. The following is a summary of the information I collected in the previous seven chapters.

2.1 The *sampradayam*

The South Indian martial art Kalarippayat was taught within certain families until the first half of the 20th century. Each of these families had their own interpretation of the art. This gave rise to the existence of family styles

⁴¹⁸ Bell, 1997, p.82

(*sampradayams*). Kalarippayat was popularized due to the efforts of Karnaran Gurukkal and C.V. Narayanan Gurukkal, among others: it became accessible to the general public⁴¹⁹.

In his book *Kalarippattu*, the prince of Chirakkal, Sreedharan Nayar, proposed in 1963 a partition into three branches of the various known (family) styles (*sampradayam*) of Kalarippayat⁴²⁰. This partition into three branches is currently subscribed to by everybody who has any connection with the art. Sreedharan Nayar called the three parts the Northern, Central, and Southern traditions (*sampradayam*), also referred to as Northern Style, Central Style, and Southern Style⁴²¹. Sreedharan Nayar arrived at this division because he observed that most family styles share certain characteristics. In the KKA *kalari* the KKA *gurukkal* teaches several family styles, each belonging to one of the three groups:

- Northern Tradition: Arappukai, Pillaitanni, Kadathanad
- Southern Tradition: Ati Murai
- Central Tradition: Madhya Sampradayam, Lo Har

The styles of the Northern tradition, also called the Northern Style, teach extensive and ardent forms, the practitioners move along a straight line when exercising, and the forms are complex and full of ritual. The use of weapons, especially iron or 'sharp' weapons, is most important. According to the KKA *gurukkal* the origin of the Northern Style family traditions can be traced back to the mythological founder of the art, Parasurama, who was a student of one of the main gods of the Hindu pantheon, Shiva. The medical tradition connected to those northern traditions is Ayurveda, which is considered to be the medical system introduced by the Aryans. Furthermore, the KKA *gurukkal* stressed the way the Northern Style was used in the past: two experts in arms were dueling on behalf of two parties which had a conflict. The Northern Style was presented in the KKA *kalari* as a typical, so-called, 'Aryan' fighting system, introduced by *brahmins* from the north of India. This style is the counterpart of the Southern Style, which is considered by the KKA *gurukkal* as Dravidian. According to him, the founder of this style was not the 'northern' Parasurama, but the 'southern' Agastya. Agastya, however, was born in the north, according to the tradition. While the Northern Style is connected to the 'Aryan' Ayurveda, according to the KKA *gurukkal*, Southern Style bases her medical arts on the 'Dravidian' Siddha treatment. When practicing Southern Style Kalarippayat, compared to the Northern Style the exercises seem simple, short, not ardent, and crudely straightforward. It involves fewer ritualized movements and is taught in a direct way, mentioning the practical applications of the different exercises already in the first lesson. Other differences from the Northern Style are that the practitioner moves in the pattern of a cross instead of a straight line. There is also no use of iron weapons, so characteristic of the Northern Style; rather, Southern Style devotes a lot of attention to all kinds of stick fighting. The KKA *gurukkal* maintained that the Southern Style was used mainly on the battlefield, hence its

⁴¹⁹ Cf. Chapter 1.3.5

⁴²⁰ Sreedharan Nayar, pp. 9-11

⁴²¹ Ibid.

cross-like footwork patterns enabling the practitioner to fight opponents on four sides.

The KKA teacher stated that the Central style was an offshoot of the Northern Style. They share the same founder, and Central Style *kalari* treatment is based on the same medical system as the Northern Style: Ayurveda. The Central Style exercises as taught by the KKA teacher tend to be interpreted not only as a way of fighting, but also in terms of the Islamic – and even Hindu – mystical traditions. This is possible, because the Central Style forms are taught in a very condensed manner⁴²² with complicated footwork patterns: it is up to the practitioner to give an adequate interpretation, even of the fighting applications of those exercises.

The KKA gurukkal makes a distinction between a ‘fighting concept’ and a ‘fighting technique’. The first is merely a movement that should be interpreted at the moment of a fight. This interpretation is the ‘technique’. The shape of the ‘technique’, i.e. the interpretation of the ‘concept’, depends on the actual circumstances in which a fighter finds himself in the fight. All exercises taught in the KKA *kalari* are ‘conceptual’ movements, that are not yet matured into a ‘technique’. The KKA gurukkal makes use of this principle to transmit his knowledge to his students.

2.2 The gurukkal as a representation of the divine

Kalarippayat is seen as a branch of divine knowledge, and an instrument that can lead its practitioners to a higher mental state and to an immediate experience of that divine. Because the source of Kalarippayat is divine, the art is in essence divine as well.

Performing the art is acting in accordance with the divine order of the universe (*dharma*). When Kalarippayat is done completely in harmony with the art -that is when somebody has merged with the art and the art itself has become part of the very soul of that person- the practitioner is in harmony with the order of the universe itself. The latter bestows power on the practitioner to rule creation, and in a certain way to be one with the Creator Himself. Just as the *kalari sampradayam* of a teacher is embedded in the legendary and divine past of Kalarippayat, the divine origin of that art is shown and proven in the person of the gurukkal. This ‘proof’ is reinforced when a teacher is also able to show that his *sampradayam* is linked to the heroes of the past. This not only proves that the practical application of his art works in reality, but also that his lineage contains people who were powerful *because* of their union with the divine. In other words: there really is a connection between the divine and the practitioner in practicing Kalarippayat.

The divine can elevate a normal human being to a divine level of understanding. This only happens if that human being acquires a certain attitude. This attitude is one of complete trust in, reliance on, and devotion to that divine. This image is mirrored in the relationship between teacher and student. The teacher is in a certain way the embodiment of the divine on earth, because he represents the tradition that is his lineage or his *kalari sampradayam*, which has

⁴²² Cf. Chapter 1.4

a divine source. In this position the gurukkal is able to elevate his student from a state of ignorance to a state of knowing divine knowledge (that is the martial art). In the same way as the divine requires trust and devotion, so does the gurukkal. This means that a student should trust the gurukkal blindly, and be dedicated to his person and his teachings. This way of thinking is symbolized by the acceptance ritual. The gurukkal only accepts a new student if that student will devote him- or herself to the teacher: the student should feel no doubt about the intentions of the gurukkal, in any way. Then and only then the novice will be accepted as a student. The place of teacher and student in the *kalari* is depicted in the rite of the giving of the coin. The coin is put at the base of the *puttara*, which is a representation of the art itself. The art, in the form of the gurukkal, traditionally accepts only gifts as a payment for the teachings. The gurukkal should not be concerned with the quantity of the gift: the teacher assumes the role of a beggar in this case. In this way he shows that he is unattached to earthly goods. This implies that the gurukkal has reached a certain state of enlightenment, and that he is able to be a representative of the divine (that is, Kalaripayat).

The first act of this 'sacred begging' is performed within the art itself. The art shows that 'giving' is the only required form of 'tuition fee'. This concept is emphasized in the symbolic gift of the one rupee coin. It illustrates that the teacher and, by extension, the system itself is unattached to the material world, and are therefore divine.

At the same time, the teacher shows the student the path to the divine. Giving is the practice to become unattached to earthly desires, and a prerequisite for reaching a higher level of understanding, closer to the divine. By becoming 'beggar' the teacher provides the student with the opportunity to overcome his 'materialistic' bonds, and shows him or her the way to reach union with the divine through the art.

Since the gurukkal is the embodiment of the art, he is truly, in the words of Bell, "simultaneously defining (imposing) and experiencing (receiving) the values ordering the environment"⁴²³. As an embodiment, he has reached a personal union with the art. This means that the art has become a part of the inner being, even personality, of the teacher. The teacher not only teaches a (martial) skill, but he guides the student to a state in which that student becomes one with the art. In other words, a part of the personality of the teacher is poured into the soul of the student. The voice of the teacher will be always audible to the student. And this is why a student is considered to be a child of the gurukkal: as with naturally begotten children, parents often see a part of their own character or body mirrored in their children. When he has shaped his students, the gurukkal sees his interpretation of the art and his way of thinking about the art (and about many other subjects as well) inside the student. Like a real parent, he sees a part of his being mirrored in the being of his pupil.

Basically the very 'glue' between the gurukkal and his student is bidirectional: one direction is from the student towards the teacher, and the other direction is from the teacher towards the student. The former is based on the student's

⁴²³ Bell, 1997, p.82

respect for and trust in his teacher, and the student's dedication to his teacher and Kalaripayat. The latter is based on the unspoken promise of the teacher and the art to the apprentice that one day he or she will be able to reach union with the art, and as a result of this, union with the divine. This gives the art a sacramental, if not a mystical, air.

The student is not alone, though. His fellow students, who follow the same pursuit, will assist him or her on the journey towards the divine. Therefore, the fellow students are as important as the teacher, because they will help to create the required basis for learning the martial art. The *kalari* as an institution, which is in the first place the gurukkal and the students, tries to create for each of its student members the required conditions to grow. These conditions not only include their spiritual needs, but also their material ones. It is very difficult to travel the path shown by Kalaripayat if problems are troubling the mind of her practitioners. Then he or she is not able to concentrate sufficiently on the art, because such problems will usually stay in the mind of the practitioner. In order to promote concentration on the art, the help provided by the KKA *kalari* is designed to bring as many of her members as possible into a state of wellbeing, from which the spiritual journey can be undertaken more easily. This task becomes easier when many people support the institution, because each individual has several contacts within the society. By using these contacts, the KKA is able to provide more help to her students.

According to the KKA gurukkal and many of her practitioners, the source of Kalaripayat is defined as 'God'. Within the KKA *kalari* this source is represented by the *puttara*, which is sometimes explained as the embodiment of the *kalari* goddess (during the greeting ritual at the start of the practice) or as a combination of the *shiva-shakti* opposition during the greeting exercise to the *kalari*, the *kalari vandanam*. According to the history of the KKA *kalari* as told by the KKA gurukkal, in mythical times 'God' taught it to a saint (either Agastya or Parasurama), who handed it down to his successors, until it reached the gurukkal. This line of succession (*sampradayam*) is equated to the divine origin. As the gurukkal is supposed to have become one with the art, a part of his being reflects that divine source. This results in a situation in which the divine source, the *sampradayam*, and the gurukkal are interchangeable. The gurukkal is the embodiment of the *sampradayam*, which in turn mirrors the divine. It is the gurukkal who, by his acts and teachings, 'define[s] the special qualities of the environment', i.e. the gym (*kalari*). The gym is literally measured out by the size of the gurukkal's feet. The gurukkal not only creates an air of '*kalari* sanctity' in the gym, but he really defines the sacred space. Even the altars should be molded out of clay by the gurukkal himself. On a mental and spiritual level it is the teacher who decides how Kalaripayat should be practiced and interpreted. In other words, the *kalari* is the representation of the mind and body of the gurukkal. It is the symbol par excellence of the supreme authority of the gurukkal on the subject of Kalaripayat.

The gurukkal not only defines the sacred environment, but each gurukkal whom I have come to know feels that he *is* Kalaripayat. He acts by the power

drawn from that environment, legitimated by the divine power, which lies at the foundation of the art.

The relationship between teacher and student is a very close one, with the purpose of 'binding' both parties to each other through qualities such as loyalty and trust on the part of the student and the father-like intention on the part of the teacher. This relationship is affirmed and reaffirmed by the execution of the acceptance ritual. It is the 'bond' that is expressed in the acceptance ritual. The acceptance ritual includes three aspects:

- Paying respect to the system of Kalarippayat in the form of salutations to the *puttara*, the *ganipattitara*, the *guruttara*, and the *gurukkal* (the latter is done through what I have called a *kalari* handshake)
- Placing a coin at the base of the *puttara*
- Receiving the blessing (and eventually a weapon) from the *gurukkal*

The *kalari* handshake is used to create a kind of brotherhood between the students. It is remarkable that, according to Barbosa, a similar rite was performed to assure the bond between a local ruler and his knights⁴²⁴. Therefore, I suggest, that the acceptance ritual should be interpreted as a bonding ritual between a higher-placed person and a lower-placed person (be it teacher-student or king-knight), expressing loyalty and trust from the lower-placed person, and protection and care from the higher-placed person. The latter should ideally serve the best interests of his protégé.

2.3 The training

The (male) practitioners of the KKA *kalari* train Kalarippayat in a *langutti*, a loin cloth⁴²⁵. The rest of the body is naked. The training starts with oiling the body. Then respect is paid to the *puttara* (the altar of the *kalari* goddess), the *ganapatitara* (altar for the elephant-headed god Ganapati), and the *guruttara* (altar representing the past teachers in the *sampradayam*). The practitioner should greet the *gurukkal* and the senior students last.

The *kalari vandanam*, a short ritualistic exercise, acts as an introduction to and the start of the training itself. The exercise is done to pay homage to Shiva and Shakti, the male and female principles. The greeting to the *puttara* (*puttara vandanam*) and the *kalari vandanam* represent the fight with our own being, our problems, good and bad sides, and our attachments to the events of life. Since the warrior is going to put his life at stake, he should overcome or control the fear of death, which is said to be caused by man's attachment to life and its qualities. Though the two *vandanams* do prepare the warrior for actual battle, they also make him realize that the first and most important battle is fought within one's own mind.

In the KKA *kalari* the training schedule consists of four parts:

- Empty-hand training
- Training with wooden weapons
- Training with iron weapons

⁴²⁴ Cf. Chapter 2.6.4

⁴²⁵ Regarding the dress for women, see chapter 2.9

- Empty-hand training, which focuses on the vital spots of the body (*marmas*)

The less advanced students are only allowed to participate in the first part, while the more advanced ones go through two or more parts.

When a student wishes to finish a training session, he must get permission from the gurukkal, or, in his absence, the most senior student. Finishing a training session is done in the following way: the student has to perform seven straight kicks to cool down the body. This is done to calm down the seven layers (*dhatus*) comprising the body.

The seven kicks are followed by the *puttara vandanam*, once more. At the start of the practice the sequence of actions of the *puttara vandanam* is repeated seven times, in order to raise the life energy of the body (*prana*), which is associated with the female principle *shakti*. At the end of a training session the sequence of actions of the *puttara vandanam* is repeated three times, however, symbolizing the acts of 'creating', 'maintaining' and 'destroying'. This brings the body and mind ritually back to its 'normal' state.

2.4 Kalarippayat as a medical system

The gurukkal often functions as a local physician. He knows many different types of massages, and he is considered to be an expert on muscular and bone problems. Several gurukkals, whom I have mentioned above, work in their own clinics, where they treat their patients with Ayurvedic medicines and massages.

The idea is that we can use knowledge of the human body not only to heal it, but also to harm it. The KKA gurukkal uses his interpretation of Ayurvedic medicine as the theoretical background to explain how to use Kalarippayat in real combat. He assumes that the body (and mind) is made up of three humors, called *kapha* ('mud-like'), *pitta* ('fire-like') and *vata* ('wind-like'). These three should be in balance in order to be healthy. This balance is specific to each person. Each organ and each part of the body can be labeled *kapha*, *pitta*, or *vata*. The 'life-energy' (*prana*) runs through the *nadis* (vessels) to each part of the body, in just the same way as blood runs through blood vessels to each part of the body. When a *nadi* is blocked, the 'life energy' cannot reach certain parts of the body. The longer such a block persists, the more 'lifeless' that part of the body becomes, until it dies. This is what Kalarippayat uses in her fighting applications: the aim is to block the *prana* by pressing *marmas*, or vital points, of the body. If the *marma* is hit at the right angle and the correct depth of penetration, the *prana* is affected, and the person who is attacked this way will suffer from failure of internal organs or other parts of the body.

The *marmas* can be used to stimulate the *prana* as well. This can influence ill parts of the body. Stimulating *prana* is making the ill body part 'alive', as it were. Since the gurukkal, more than anyone else, is a specialist on *marmas*, this adds to the trust the local population often has in his skills.

Stimulating *prana* is usually done through massage. During the massage *marmas* are pressed lightly to give an impetus to the energy stream. There are different massages used for different purposes: there are sports injury massages,

physiotherapeutic massages – used for all kinds of ailments –, massages to counteract an attack on a *marma*, and a massage to increase muscular flexibility.

2.5 Four stages of Kalarippayat

The *puttara*, the altar of the *kalari* goddess, looks like a step pyramid in the southwest corner of the *kalari*. Seven steps lead to its top. According to the KKA gurukkal, these seven steps stand for seven stages of spiritual and mental self development. The first step symbolizes the learning process of the movements of the different exercises and forms. When a student arrives at the second step he comes to know the practical application of those forms and exercises in the fight. The third step is to become one with the art, and being able to understand the art not only on a physical, but also on a metaphysical level. With the fourth step the physical exercises are almost completely abandoned, and replaced by meditation and contemplation. The same is said of the fifth and sixth step. The seventh step, the peak of the *puttara*, symbolizes union with the divine source of the art. In the KKA *kalari* only three of these stages are integrated into *kalari* practice; stages four through seven are seen as one stage: the physically inactive stage of meditation. Thus the KKA *kalari* counts only four stages of development. The reason for this is that these stages are probably compared to the life stages (*ashrama*) of an Indian (Hindu) man, fitting the *kalari* stages into a well known and familiar pattern of Indian culture, as indicated above. These four stages appear to be repeated in the rituals connected to the KKA *kalari*.

In the Introduction (section 5) I identified five kinds of rituals in the KKA *kalari*: rituals for starting the (daily) practice, the practice itself, rituals for stopping the (daily) practice, rituals for accepting a new student to the *kalari*, and rituals connected to the *kalari* year. All these rituals consist of four parts. The rituals concerning the start and end of the daily practice and the acceptance ritual are built up of four greetings or four acts of paying homage: to the *puttara*, *ganapatittara*, *guruttara*, and the gurukkal. The practice of Kalarippayat itself is divided into four parts: the *meyttari*, the *koltari*, *ankamtari*, and *prayogam*. The *kalari* year consists of four seasons: rainy season, cold season, warm season, and hot season.

I have shown that for each type of ritual the stages lead from physically active to physically inactive with a gradual increase in spiritual interpretation of the art. The four seasons start with the rainy season with the most physically intense exercises, and finish just before the start of the hot season with *marma* attack training, which is a more theoretical exercise than physically conditioning. During the hot season there is no training, and the physical inactivity reaches its peak. The order of paying homage is based on a similar pattern. The *puttara*, representing the *kalari* goddess, is Kalarippayat in her most abstract form, and symbolizes the higher stages of the art. The *ganapatittara* is the altar for the elephant-headed god Ganapati, god of wisdom, who represents the third stage of Kalarippayat: understanding the art on a physical and metaphysical level. The *guruttara*, representing all the teachers in the lineage before the present gurukkal, ends with the gurukkal himself. He is the most physical one of those to whom a student should pay homage. He is the first stage of learning of

Kalarippayat, because he is the one who teaches to the student the first steps on the way of self-development, using the method Kalarippayat prescribes.

2.6 The KKA as an organization

In chapter six of this research I have paid attention to the KKA as an organization. Usually an organization comprises a group of people. These people are interconnected by means of relationships. Elias' view of society as a "network of interdependencies formed by individuals" may be very well applicable.⁴²⁶ One way to give an idea of how a society –in our case this is the KKA– works, according to Elias, is to give a description of the inter human relationships within that society. But the KKA is a 'society' within a bigger society, the community of the Keralan people. Considering the KKA as an 'individual', we can see the KKA acting and interacting within the society of Kerala, using the same argumentation.

In order to give an idea of the KKA as an organization, I have distinguished internal and external relationships of the KKA *kalari*. Internal relationships are the different relationships within the KKA *kalari* as a community, while the external relationships deal with the relations between the KKA *kalari* as an organization and those people who are connected to it, as illustrated in figure 0.1. I have divided the internal relationships into the following:

- The gurukkal and his *sampradayam*. The gurukkal is identified with his *sampradayam*. He is the absolute authority on Kalarippayat as it is taught in his *kalari*. The source of the *sampradayam* is considered to be divine, and the gurukkal is seen by his students as the embodiment of the art.
- The gurukkal and his students. The KKA gurukkal feels like a father to his students. He considers himself responsible for them, even in non-Kalarippayat matters. He tries to guard over their wellbeing, even in daily life. If a student has financial problems or is jobless, the gurukkal uses his connections to solve the problem. In the case of emotional problems, such as when a student loses a family member, the gurukkal gives emotional support. The gurukkal is able to do this because he enjoys the full confidence of his students. They see him as a counselor and as a supportive rock in life. Most of the students always consider the gurukkal's opinion, even in matters such as the choice of a bride.
- The gurukkal and those who are directly involved in the KKA organization, the chairman and secretary. The chairman and the secretary are enthusiastic volunteers, who have dedicated their life to support Kalarippayat and to take care of what is for them the sacred heritage of the art, in order to prevent it from dying out. They organize or participate in the organization of big events, such as the pan-Keralan Kalarippayat games. In the same way as the teacher, they try to cherish any external relationship – for example, national and international martial arts organizations – that might be useful for the popularization and promotion of the art. Those relations are also important to support the teacher in his aim to be a caretaker of the wellbeing of his students. The chairman, the

⁴²⁶ Elias, 1994, p.214

secretary, and the KKA gurukkal are the KKA organization: they try to complement each other. In this respect I consider their relationship as equal. Still, these two volunteers only spend their free time because of the respect they have for the gurukkal, his qualities and (*kalari*) abilities, and his lineage.

The external relationships that I cover are:

- The KKA and the local community. Through one of his senior students the gurukkal provides cheap medical treatment to anybody who wants or needs it. The Keralis of the neighborhood of the *kalari* all know the KKA gurukkal, and they treat him with respect. Many go to him or his senior student to get treatment or medical advice. The relationship between Kalarippayat and the local community is not only limited to medical treatment. Though nowadays there are fewer and fewer people who want to learn Kalarippayat to become a teacher, many small children go to the local Kalarippayat school. Kalarippayat is apparently considered to be part of the national heritage of Kerala, and as such stories about famous Kalarippayat warriors are taught in the schools.
- The KKA and other *kalaris*. The KKA gurukkal is a collector of *sampradayams*. Because of the younger generation's lack of interest in Kalarippayat, many *sampradayams* are about to die out. The KKA teacher tries to visit old gurukkals and tries to convince them to teach him his *sampradayam*. Although normally a gurukkal is reluctant to teach other gurukkals (see chapter 2), usually the KKA teacher is able to get the information he wants, because there is usually no one else who is willing to learn Kalarippayat from such an old gurukkal. In this way the KKA teacher collected a lot of knowledge, and he learned to look at the interpretation of the movements of Kalarippayat from different angles.
- The KKA and other (non-*kalari*) institutions. In order to promote Kalarippayat in general, and to be able to support the quality his students' lives, the KKA gurukkal, together with the secretary and chairman of the KKA, try to maintain close connections with other parties. An example of such a connection is that between the KKA and the Indian government. Because the KKA is acknowledged by the Indian government as an official school, it is necessary to maintain this status. This requires a good relationship with local and national authorities.
- The KKA and other Keralan arts. The KKA tries to see Kalarippayat as a part of the cultural heritage of Kerala, and connected to other art forms. The KKA has good connections with dance and yoga schools and their teachers. There is even a relationship with people who are performing the *teyyam*, an ecstatic form of divination in Kerala. Interestingly, there are many similarities between Kalarippayat and other art forms of Malabar, with respect to the way the forms are taught and presented. Kalarippayat, as it is taught in the KKA *kalari*, follows the same patterns as other arts in Kerala (see section 6.8). This reflects how the Kalarippayat of the KKA *kalari* is embedded in the culture of Kerala.

2.7 Analysis of KKA Kalarippayat

2.7.1 The hierarchical structure of the KKA *kalari*

According to Bourdieu, the status of a person is determined by the amount of symbolic capital that person possesses.⁴²⁷ In the KKA *kalari* skill, knowledge, and understanding of Kalarippayat can be considered symbolic capital, because it is believed that the possession of those brings the practitioner closer to the divine source of the art. This is not only true for living persons, but for divine entities as well. Some of the rituals performed in the *kalari* express the hierarchy between the different players, supernatural and human. Bell calls the process of creating a hierarchy by means of rituals 'ritualization'.⁴²⁸ Examples of such rituals in the KKA *kalari* are the rituals for starting and finishing the training session, rituals for accepting a new student, and rituals connected to the *kalari* year. However, one should be aware not to reduce the function of those rituals by merely seeing them as generating a hierarchy within the *kalari*. I have shown this earlier in particular for the relation between the student and the gurukkal.⁴²⁹ This relationship, though having a hierarchical component, has the purpose to lift the student up to the level of the gurukkal, not to make the student servile to the teacher. As I have shown in chapter five, the main rituals in the KKA *kalari* are divided into four parts, corresponding to the four basic stages of spiritual and mental self-development. This is the method KKA Kalarippayat provides to reach union with the divine, the ultimate goal of the art.

The KKA gurukkal is the one and only authority in the KKA *kalari* on Kalarippayat, while the *sampradayam* is his direct connection with the source of the art, the divine. The rituals for starting and finishing the training session, for accepting a new student, and the practice itself, stress the personal relationship between the gurukkal and the student on one hand, and the relationship between the student and Kalarippayat herself – in the form of her *sampradayam* – on the other. It is this relationship, which legitimizes the existence of a hierarchy in the KKA *kalari*. At the top of this hierarchy is the divine. KKA Kalarippayat presents itself as a way to reach union with that divine, ordained by that divine for this particular purpose. The present gurukkal, the KKA teacher, is connected with the divine through his 'martial lineage', which is his teacher, the teacher of his teacher, and so on. Because of the special relation between student and teacher, one can consider the teachers who are part of the martial lineage to be on a higher level in the hierarchy than the gurukkal himself. The student has the lowest position in the hierarchy.

There is also a hierarchy among the students, which is determined by two factors: the period that a student is a member of the *kalari*, and the progress of the student; that is the '*kalari* age'. These two components are often interlinked. The longer a person is a member, the more he or she has learned, the closer he or she is to becoming one with the art. Inside the KKA *kalari* there is no explicit sign of hierarchy, because everybody, including the teacher, is dressed in a *langutti*, stressing the equality between its members. The hierarchy in the *kalari*

⁴²⁷ Bourdieu, 1998, p.47

⁴²⁸ Bell, 1997, p.81

⁴²⁹ Cf. Chapter 2

is only implicitly present. If somebody has progressed in the art, he or she has become more humble. In this light there is no reason to show that certain people are higher in rank than others, and thus enjoying certain privileges. The *kalari* applies this way of thinking to many fields. For example, it does not promote one particular religion as being better than other. This issue is very important in the Malabar society, because of its diversity of religious backgrounds.

The relationship between student and teacher not only defines a hierarchy, but also forms the basis for a kind of community, which basically consists of the students and the teacher. There is yet another relationship within the community of the KKA: the relationship between the secretary, the chairman and the KKA gurukkal. These three figures have an equal relationship, as far as I witnessed. However, the difference in status can be implicitly present, such as the hierarchy in the *kalari*. There is, as far as I could see it, also no hierarchical difference between the chairman and secretary on one hand, and the students on the other.

2.7.2 Interpretations and reinterpretations

According to Bell, ritual is a part of a historical process, in which past patterns are not only reproduced, but also reinterpreted or retransformed.⁴³⁰ This aspect is very important, because the *kalari* and the martial system taught within her precincts are personified by the gurukkal. When the gurukkal starts to think differently, the Kalarippayat he teaches changes with him. The process of reinterpretation is not only dependent on changes of understanding during the gurukkal's lifetime. We may assume that in the past cultural reinterpretations have taken place, which makes it likely that the interpretation of Kalarippayat today differs from its interpretation during the lifetime of one of the deceased gurukkals from the 'martial lineage'. Several examples that we encountered illustrate this process.

Firstly we have seen that several rituals or habits are used not only in the martial arts, but also elsewhere. As an example, the structure of the salutation to the *puttara* can be equated to the salutation to the wood used in the dance Bharatanatyam, and the *vadivu* (postures) are related to and sometimes the same as the body postures in yoga (see chapter 6.8). The way of paying respect to the altars in the *kalari*, to the weapons and the fellow practitioners (in the form of touching the object or person, then touching the forehead, followed by touching the heart) is practiced throughout India for sacred objects and persons, and in particular in Kerala proper, where it is even a way to excuse oneself (see section 6.8). We recognize a sequence of similar rites, though one has a martial and the other a dance connotation, reinterpreted as suited to that form of art.

Secondly, the metaphysical interpretation of Kalarippayat depends on the religious conviction of the gurukkal. The KKA gurukkal presents himself as a Muslim, although he displays a strong personal opinion about how to give meaning to his religion. He is a man who accepts other religions, and because of that the KKA *kalari* is open to anybody, regardless of the student's religious background. He has interpreted some of the rituals in terms of Islam. He allows Muslim students to do the same, if they want to. The other students are

⁴³⁰ Bell 1997, p.83

supposed to perform the rituals in the ‘traditional’ way – as taught in the KKA *kalari*. An example of a change in ritual due to the religious conviction of the KKA gurukkal is that he has omitted from the acceptance ritual the rite of the touching of the feet of the gurukkal. He also replaced, for himself and his Muslim students, the act of paying respect to the *puttara*, the Hindu symbol for the divine, with the act of paying respect towards Mecca, the Islamic symbol of the divine. Though the idea may remain the same, the act itself is transformed and reinterpreted, and may contain part of the practitioner’s ‘religion’, which is expressed in the apparently authentic – in the sense of ‘traditional’ – rituals of the KKA Kalarippayat.

Thirdly, many *kalaris* I have visited in Malabar stress the fact that they are open to anybody, regardless the student’s religious background. The gurukkals leading these *kalaris* see Kalarippayat primarily as an expression of Keralan culture. This is quite remarkable in a society – at least the society of Malabar – which is divided by almost unbridgeable religious oppositions. I found many people living and working within their own religious groups. In contrast, Kalarippayat of Malabar presents itself as a universal art, independent of cultural and religious differences, and as an expression of Keralan culture. With this attitude Malabaran Kalarippayat tries to ‘glue’ Keralan society together, making of Kerala one nation with one identity. This interpretation of the art may be due to the fact that the English prohibition against practicing Kalarippayat was lifted with the emergence of Keralan nationalism in the early twentieth century.

The feeling among many Malabaran gurukkals that Kalarippayat is a typically Keralan -or even Indian- art, may be a reinterpretation of the Keralan medieval feudal system. If we are to believe Barbosa, many *kalari* warriors used to fight for their lords, such as the Chirakkal raja and the Zamorin⁴³¹. In my opinion it is possible to consider the feeling of loyalty towards the overlord being replaced by the loyalty towards Kerala and India. This idea is supported by the tendency of many teachers of Malabar to see Kalarippayat as an art independent of any religion, and one of the treasures of Keralan – and in a broader perspective, Indian- cultural heritage.

Fourthly I want to mention the difference in interpretation of the art during the lifetime of the gurukkal himself. A practitioner should first understand Kalarippayat as an art of fighting and killing. During my first stay (Oral Transmission Period I) the KKA gurukkal was almost exclusively interested in the application of Kalarippayat in real combat. During Oral Transmission Period II he stressed much more the medical dimension of the art; he paid much more attention to the different massages for medical treatment. Finally, during Oral Transmission Period III, he tried to interpret the art as a way to attain liberation and reach closeness to and even union with the divine. This attitude he would stress more and more during later years. These stages refer to the maturity and spiritual development of the practitioner, and how much the art is internalized. Those stages are, according to the KKA tradition, directly related to the age of a practitioner. In the case of the KKA gurukkal the process of internationalization enforces these age-related changes in interpretation. The shift in emphasis on

⁴³¹ Cf. Chapter 1.3.4

different aspects of Kalarippayat due to internationalization is a natural process, however, because if the KKA wants into internationalize, it must meet international standards, and a reinterpretation of the art cannot be avoided.

Fifthly, the difference between CVN *kalari* of Narayanan gurukkal and the KKA *kalari* introduces two different approaches in the interpretation of the martial art. While the CVN school stresses gymnastic movements and displays Kalarippayat as an art suitable for stage performance, the KKA only believes in its martial applicability. The KKA teacher got his training from several teachers without the martial interpretation. Due to his early contact with the founders of the KKA, and due to the somewhat contradictory assumption that nobody could tell the KKA teacher how Kalarippayat could be used in an actual fight, despite being called a martial art, he tried to find the martial purpose in each of the forms and concepts he had learned. This led to a reinterpretation of the tradition in a martial way, which is unique to the KKA gurukkal. An example of this different approach is the interpretation of the forms, especially the Shiva and Shakti forms. According to the KKA gurukkal the CVN *kalari* sees these forms merely as conditioning exercises for the body, while they do not involve the martial aspect of these forms sufficiently in their teachings. The KKA gurukkal, however, recognizes hidden *marma* attacks in the same forms.

2.7.3 Face of KKA Kalarippayat

The *kalari* institution tries to help its members and contacts in the *kalari* field⁴³². The institution tries to provide jobs for its poor members, and financial or mental aid to those of its members who need it. The financial aid stretches out towards efforts to construct a pension plan for elderly gurukkals.

The mission of the KKA is not only to help its members, but also to collect and preserve the art of Kalarippayat in general. Although currently three northern styles, one southern, and one central style are cherished by the KKA, the institution strives to save all family styles available in Kerala. But also other Keralan arts are supported by the KKA. To this end, the institute is a member of an organization for the protection of Keralan arts and culture.

The intention of the KKA to help to preserve Kalarippayat, and the idea accepted by the KKA that Kalarippayat is the oldest existing martial art, has prompted the school to come to the decision to try to internationalize Kalarippayat. Contacts were established in various ways, by attracting several foreign students, by cooperating with a top school in the field of martial arts located in Germany, by publishing articles in international magazines, and helping in the production of international television documentaries.

3. The essence of Kalarippayat

Kalarippayat, as it is taught in the KKA *kalari* involves the veneration of the gurukkal through the student-teacher relationship, the veneration of the *sampradayam*, the 'martial lineage' and the system itself, and the divine. The gurukkal is the embodiment and the representative of the art, the 'martial lineage', and the divine. The last four components are equal and

⁴³² See figure 0.1

interchangeable. The teacher is the absolute authority within the precincts of his *kalari*.

The ultimate goal of Kalarippayat is union with the divine. This can be reached through seven steps of spiritual self-development. The first step consists of learning the movements and forms of Kalarippayat, the second step is understanding the practical (martial) application of those forms and exercises. The third step is becoming one with the art, i.e. understanding the working of Kalarippayat on a physical and metaphysical level. The fourth, fifth, and sixth step stress meditation and contemplation, and refer merely to stages of mental 'enlightenment', resulting in union with the divine as the seventh and highest level.⁴³³ When a student starts to learn Kalarippayat, the physical component of the exercises is stressed: the student has to first get his body into good physical condition in order to be able to perform the exercises. Then, having arrived at the second level, the student is not only taught the movements of the exercises and forms, but also what they mean: this means that a physically inactive component is added to the curriculum. When the student moves on to the higher levels, the physical component becomes less important, while the spiritual component grows in importance. Kalarippayat, as it is taught in the KKA *kalari*, teaches a path to the divine through the understanding of certain physical exercises, and through placing the martial art in a ritual and spiritual context, which establishes the cult of this art.

To see whether we can identify KKA Kalarippayat as a kind of 'cult', which was the main purpose of this research, we can compare the above data with the definitions given by the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, which provides us with a definition from an English language perspective, and with the definition given by Anthony Wallace, which emphasizes the cultural anthropological approach to cultic phenomena. I have discussed both meanings of the word 'cult' in the Introduction, section 5.

The first three definitions of the Merriam-Webster dictionary equate a 'cult' more or less with a form of religious worship (1. formal religious veneration; 2. a system of religious beliefs and ritual; 3. a religion regarded as unorthodox or spurious)⁴³⁴. KKA Kalarippayat can definitely be seen as a form of religious veneration, especially when we take into account the starting and finishing rituals of a training session. Since there is no direct connection with any of the main religions of Kerala, one could even call the worship unorthodox. The fourth meaning given by the dictionary, 'a system for the cure of disease based on dogma set forth by its promulgator', is also true, because as I have shown in chapter 5, many gurukkals act as healers in Keralan society, and the KKA Kalarippayat has a strong medical component which is taught alongside the fighting techniques and concepts.

In paragraph five of the Introduction I showed that KKA Kalarippayat seems at first glance to fit the Stark and Bainbridge entrepreneur model of a cult. This

⁴³³ The seven steps correspond to the seven steps of the *puttara* and the seven chakras of the body. The latter is explicitly related to stages of 'enlightenment'.

⁴³⁴ Cf. Introduction, paragraph 5

model is essentially based on considering a cult as a business. It seems to me that this comparison does not cover what Kalaripayat is really about. The model opposes the important ideas of the 'holy beggar' as it is expressed by the ritual of the giving of the coin.⁴³⁵ Moreover, for the gurukkal, the secretary, and the chairman of the KKA, running the organization remains a hobby, because they earn their salary from regular jobs.

Zablocki connects the term 'brainwashing' with a cult. Though he gives his own definition of this word, the term remains having a very negative connotation. For him 'brainwashing' is equivalent with 'exercising social influence'. I have compared the teaching of Kalaripayat with a parental education. This comparison follows automatically from the kind of relationship between teacher and student. If teaching Kalaripayat can be indicated with Zablocki's 'brainwashing', so can parental education. Zablocki also thinks that there is no distinction between religion and cult, except that religion survived the death of its founder, and cult does not. In fact, according to Zablocki, all religions once started as cults. It is in this light we can even say that KKA Kalaripayat is a religion, because the KKA teacher is the successor of his own teachers, and the lineage of teachers which goes back to the divine origin of the art. I will come back to the point of considering KKA Kalaripayat as a religion later.

One could argue that the definition of a 'cult' given by Wallace is applicable to KKA Kalaripayat as well: KKA Kalaripayat can be categorized as Wallace's 'communal cult', which is characterized by one or more "non-specialists, organized in terms of age grades, men's societies, clans, or lineages, who are assuming responsibility for their own welfare or for the welfare of the society. Though the communal rituals may employ specialists, such as spirit mediums, orators, and highly skilled dancers, once the ritual performance is concluded, the participants revert to a common daily routine."⁴³⁶ The gurukkal is the specialist on Kalaripayat, and the organization is modeled on a hierarchical structure, as I analyzed in section 7.1.

Although the KKA *kalari* does teach a way of life, which has the purpose of uniting her adherents with the divine source of Kalaripayat, and though her doctrine identifies several stages of spiritual self-development, it is difficult to understand Kalaripayat as a 'religious system' as such. There are several reasons for this.

KKA Kalaripayat herself does not claim to be a religious system, though historically it has its roots in the religious traditions of India, and in particular Kerala. Moreover, even if she teaches that there are several stages of spiritual self-development, only three of these stages are actually practiced inside the KKA *kalari*. Those three stages emphasize the physical and martial aspects of the art, and to a much lesser extent the spiritual. Strictly speaking, the KKA *kalari* is meant as a space for performing physical actions, not as a space for meditation. KKA Kalaripayat does not say anything *how* to fulfill the four meditation stages, but says only that they are there. Primarily KKA Kalaripayat is concerned with martial art movements – how to attack and defend – and with

⁴³⁵ Cf. Chapter 2.6.4

⁴³⁶ Op. Cit. Harris, p.454

chivalrous behavior – how to be brave, to act without emotions of hatred, fear, anger, grief and passion, and to be a ‘gentleman’. The spiritual concern is primarily a matter of the atmosphere in which the martial art is practiced, and in which the gurukkal is very much concerned that the students take personal responsibility. The atmosphere is partly established by rituals and partly by the teachings of the gurukkal.

KKA Kalarippayat derives her origin from the divine. This attitude is not strange for an art in Malabar. Most teachers of the art schools to whom I have spoken, think that their art originates in the divine and expresses divine knowledge, which can help their practitioners to reach union with that divine⁴³⁷.

In my experience the KKA gurukkal has never taught any explicit religious values or rules, and never tried to convert any of his pupils to the Islamic faith. Though we should acknowledge that religion does play a role in the KKA *kalari*, the religious aspects of KKA Kalarippayat are rather implicate than explicit. KKA Kalarippayat offers a structure in which chivalrous behavior and martial body movements play the most important role. But there is also space reserved within this structure which each practitioner can fill with his or her personal religion or convictions. In this way KKA Kalarippayat presents a religiously inspired framework, which intends to be open to various religious convictions. Because of this the KKA *kalari* has become more an ecumenical space, which makes it possible for many religions to come together and may serve more as a model for an inter-religious dialogue than a place for a particular kind of worship. But the KKA *kalari* offers even more than that.

Religion is just one aspect of Keralan society. Kerala is a state with people not only of different religious convictions, but also different castes, political backgrounds, and social status⁴³⁸. Often a religious conviction is related to certain political parties, and this combination, in particular, can result in frictions between people who belong to different social groups. There are not only religiously oriented parties, however. If we look, for instance, at the communist party, we see that many people are enthusiastically communist. During my stays I witnessed demonstrations in favor of the communist party several times in the city of Cannanore. When living in Kerala, you notice that now and then there is political unrest among people⁴³⁹. In order to keep all these people with different backgrounds together, there is a tendency towards a kind of nationalism, in which the Keralan history and culture is promoted as belonging to all Keralis. Kalarippayat is seen as one of the indigenous Keralan arts, and though in the past the martial art belonged to certain castes⁴⁴⁰, nowadays it is represented as being part of the common past and culture of the Keralan people. This particular kind of nationalism is supported by the Keralan government and by many Keralis, among whom are the people who are at the core of the KKA, the KKA gurukkal, the secretary and the chairman. Because the KKA *kalari* is open to everybody

⁴³⁷ The same claim was made by for example the Kathakali teacher, who had visited the KKA *kalari* several times, and the School for Classic Indian Dance in Cannanore.

⁴³⁸ Cf. Chapter 7.2.3

⁴³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁰ Cf. Chapter 1.3.4

regardless of background, the KKA contributes to the national unity of Kerala and its people. KKA Kalarippayat offers a structure in which everybody is able to bring along his or her background without consequences. There is no pressure to accept any religion or conviction, and not a single suggestion is made towards her students to convince them to follow any religion. KKA Kalarippayat welcomes each background, and teaches her students to be 'gentlemen', 'chivalrous warriors'. The latter is an attitude that can contribute to a dialogue between people of different backgrounds.

If we associate religion with a particular system of doctrinal convictions, the KKA can hardly be interpreted along those lines. To do justice to the phenomenon it would make more sense to follow Ninian Smart and his emphasis on 'worldview'. He does not exclude doctrinal issues, but they are not placed in the foreground:

(...) we should not define religion too narrowly. It is important for us to recognize secular ideologies as part of the story of human worldviews. It is artificial to divide them too sharply from religions, partly because they sometimes function in society like religions, and partly because the distinction between religious and secular beliefs and practices is a modern Western one and does not represent the way in which other cultures categorize human values.⁴⁴¹

Smart then offers a description of a 'worldview' in terms of seven characteristics, which he calls 'dimensions',⁴⁴²:

- Practical and Ritual: practices to which every tradition adheres
- Narrative and Mythic: experience is often channeled and expressed by sacred narrative or myth; the 'story side' of a worldview
- Experiential and Emotional: what the followers of a worldview undergo themselves
- Social and Institutional: the shared attitudes and practices of a group of adherents of a belief system; often rules for identifying community membership and participation
- Ethical and Legal: rules with respect to human behavior
- Doctrinal and Philosophical: systematic formulation of religious teachings in an intellectually coherent form
- Material: ordinary objects or places that symbolize or manifest the sacred or supernatural

Within a particular worldview each of these dimensions can be stressed more or less, or, in other words, within a particular worldview more importance is given to some dimensions than to others. Applying Smart's idea, KKA Kalarippayat can be laid out in these seven dimensions as follows:

⁴⁴¹ Smart, p.10

⁴⁴² Ibid., pp.13-21

- Practical and Ritual: rituals for starting the (daily) practice, the practice itself, rituals for stopping the (daily) practice, rituals for accepting a new student to the *kalari*, periodic rituals connected to the seasons, and periodic rituals connected the progress of a student (see chapter 5)
- Narrative and Mythic: stories related to Kalarippayat, her 'martial lineage' and her origins (see chapter 1)
- Experiential and Emotional: the practice of the exercises (see chapter 3) and the giving of massages (see chapter 4); emotions resulting from performing the rituals
- Social and Institutional: rules with respect to the hierarchy within the *kalari* (see chapter 2 and section 2.7 in particular), and the relation between the KKA Kalarippayat practitioners and society (see chapter 6)
- Ethical and Legal: KKA Kalarippayat is much concerned with chivalrous behavior – how to be brave, to act without emotions of hatred, fear, anger, grief, and passion, and to be a 'gentleman' (see also sections 1.1.1 and 3.3.2.2)
- Doctrinal and Philosophical: each practitioner uses the doctrines that he or she chooses; this can be anything from a political to a religious background
- Material: the (KKA) *kalari*

From this framework it is clear why KKA Kalarippayat can contribute to a dialogue between people of different backgrounds: KKA Kalarippayat accepts any doctrine to fill in the Doctrinal and Philosophical dimension of Smart's definition of 'worldview'. This individual worldview can thus be incorporated within the system of KKA Kalarippayat.

By using the expression 'worldview', and explaining this in terms of 'dimensions', Smart rejects the distinction between religious and secular doctrines, since both are a manifestation of one and the same thing: a way of looking at and apprehending the world, a 'worldview'. He considers ideologies as forms of religious phenomena, which can be approached in several dimensions. From this perspective the worldview of the KKA *kalari* is such that each practitioner can bring the doctrines from his or her specific background to the *kalari* and use these doctrines to give meaning to the spiritual part of the practice in terms of the values from ones background. Because this attribution of meaning is a personal affair, and because each student is taught to be a 'gentleman' towards other people, there will be no conflicts as to the rightness or wrongness of any doctrine.

This also answers the question why Keralis, coming from all kinds of religious backgrounds, send their children to a Kalarippayat class so easily. There is no specific doctrinal religion involved, only a code of chivalrous behavior, which provides, in fact, a kind of 'identity'; so few people will object to their children's participation in such a community, given that it even has the reputation today of being part of the cultural heritage of the Keralis.

4. Modern Times

Brahmins are the priest class of India. They are the highest caste. Several *brahmins* I have met during my stay in India (period I) felt that they were more or less elevated above non-*brahmins* in the sense of purity and status. One *brahmin* I had contact with was a very kind man, though he never ate with me from the same table, and from the same food. Another Brahmin I met refused to shake hands with non-*brahmins*. One can recognize a *brahmin* by the sacred thread (*yajnopavitam* or *punul*) he is wearing.

There are however, *brahmins* who refuse to be identified as a *brahmin*. I have met several of such people. When talking confidentially with one *brahmin* I used to know well, he opened his shirt, and proudly showed that he did not wear the sacred thread. He told me that a man is just a man, and that wearing a sacred thread would not make him a better man. There were also bad people among *brahmins*, according to him, and purity can be found in everybody irrespective of caste.⁴⁴³

The opinion of this *brahmin* is not unique. All big newspapers of India contain adverts for marriage in the personal column. These adverts are very important, because in India many people believe that a marriage can be only successful when the stars of man and woman are matching. In search of people born under the correct circumstances, the families of a boy or a girl place such adverts.⁴⁴⁴ There might be other reasons to place an advert in the personal column as well, of course, similar to the reasons why people place such adverts in our Western civilization. Important for us is, that to many of those wedding adverts the remark is added that caste is not important, and sometimes, but more rarely, that religion is not important. Apparently many people in India share the opinion of our *brahmin*.

The tendency among (young) people to think 'modern', that is to not to be limited by caste or religion, is stimulated by the government, at least by the Keralan government. As I have argued before, the Keralan government sees for herself the task to prevent fights and problems between the many religious groups living in this state.⁴⁴⁵ She tries to bring unity among the people by promoting the cultural heritage of the Keralans as being caste and religion independent, as something which belongs and is common to all Keralans.⁴⁴⁶ In the same way sports, films, music, and dance are presented: one can hear people speak of a sportsman from Kerala, a film made in Kerala, music and

⁴⁴³ The name of this *brahmin* was Narayanan, who was in 1996 a receptionist of the Plaza Hotel in Cannanore. There is yet another possible explanation for Narayanan's not wearing the sacred thread: he may have lost his caste. According to the *Laws of Manu* individuals can be degraded to a lower caste or even lose their caste after having committed certain crimes (11: 67-71). This may result in a social isolation of such people. Narayanan and his wife appeared to have hardly any contact with the rest of their family. The man himself, however, stated that he did not lose his caste, but that the lack of contact was caused by disagreements with his family. Cf. Klostermaier 1994: 380. There is another, more likely, possibility. Not all *brahmin* families in Kerala wear a *yajnopavitam*.

⁴⁴⁴ As an example I want to refer to the website <http://www.kalary.com>. This site has marriage adverts especially for Kalarippayat practitioners.

⁴⁴⁵ Cf. chapter 7.2.3. Actually we should speak of 'many groups with a different worldview', in the sense of Smart, because of the popularity of communism.

⁴⁴⁶ Cf. chapter 6.5.2

dance from Kerala. Nobody I have met would connect sports and arts with religion or caste, but merely with national identity. The Keralan government promotes art and sport schools as places to learn art and sport, which should be independent of caste and religion.⁴⁴⁷ In this way the government stimulates the establishment of small ‘model communities’, in which people can come together irrespective of background.

The traditional arts, and among them Kalarippayat, have a special status, because they are often embedded in cultural and religious doctrines. In the KKA *kalari* these doctrines have taken the form of rules of conduct: chivalrous, noble, and tolerant behavior takes a prominent place. On the background there is the *puttara*, actually (re)presenting the *kalari* goddess, but reinterpreted as the presentation of the system of Kalarippayat – which it actually *is* because the *kalari* goddess equals the martial art – to which one just pay respect. The latter is very interesting, because by paying respect to the system, one pays respect to her ideas and teachings, which includes the code of behavior. In this way a practitioner remembers this code each time he or she stands in front of the *puttara*, resulting in a sinking in of the teachings in the mind of the students. Day by day the mind of the practitioner is exposed to this behavioral doctrine, until he or she will apply this without thinking. The more people join a community like the KKA *kalari*, the more the government of Kerala reaches its goal: unity, acceptance, and peace among its people.

In this line of thought it is important not only to create a place where people are coming together and are able to express their religion and convictions in an inter religious dialogue, but also a place independent of other social factors. The KKA *kalari* tries to underline several of these, what I call, ‘independencies’:

- Religion: I have explained above in section 3 that everybody can bring along his or her religious or other convictions in the *kalari*. The way this happens, is well described by the term ‘worldview’, as it has been presented by Ninian Smart.
- Caste: I have indicated in chapter 7.2.3 that nowadays most *kalaris* are caste independent, though Kalarippayat was connected in the past to certain castes.
- Wealth: The gurukkal is responsible for his student, which is considered, in fact, as his child. In chapter 6.2 I have shown how the KKA gurukkal tries to help poor students.
- Age: Kalarippayat is for all ages, according the KKA gurukkal. In chapter 4.1.4 I described how a teacher is able to determine the body type of a student. The teacher will give his student exercises which restore balance between the three humors *vata*, *pitta*, and *kapha*. This means that the gurukkal does not give exercises according to the age, but according to body type (this takes automatically the age into account).
- Gender: In chapter 2.9 I have shown that there is no problem for women to practice Kalarippayat, if they are dressed properly. The latter means

⁴⁴⁷ Ibid.

that they should wear more than the prescribed *langutti*. Two of the most revered figure in the heroic literature of Kerala (the Northern Ballads) are Tacholi Otenan and his sister Unniyarcha.⁴⁴⁸ The latter is often mentioned as the example of a female warrior. This shows, according to the KKA teacher, that Kalarippayat is not particularly something for men and that women can be very strong warriors as well.

- Status: In the *kalari* there is no difference between the students except that some students have progressed more than others. The gurukkal is the representation of the system and the divine; he is the father who considers his students as his children. There is no other form of status. Because of this no student is treated differently because he or she is from a family which has a certain status in society.
- Race: Some racial issues play a role in Kerala. I have noticed that Tamils were generally considered ugly (their skin is more dark than that of Keralis) and simple minded. These ideas were never expressed in the *kalari*, because the KKA teacher valued each human being; for him Tamils were welcome to learn the art, if they wanted to. The KKA gurukkal has also taught me, a foreigner, which is, in fact, another sign of his race-independent way of thinking.

We see that for the KKA gurukkal people should not be refused to become his students because of convictions, gender, status, or race. Each student has in fact a freedom to act, a freedom of speech, and opinion, and a freedom to be what they are – as long as the student subscribes to the principles of tolerance of the *kalari*. But, on the other hand, we should keep in mind that the *kalari* is made and ‘ruled’ by the gurukkal; his opinion and way of thinking are decisive within the boundaries of the *kalari*, and even outside. The KKA gurukkal always wanted to avoid his students to be involved in riots or fights.⁴⁴⁹ For him his students were the representatives of his *kalari* and his teachings. So his students should always, even outside the *kalari*, behave according to the code of conduct of Kalarippayat. The way of teaching is such that students will eventually think as the gurukkal want them to think.⁴⁵⁰ Because the gurukkal and student relationship is considered to be equal to a father and child relationship, all students have a great respect for the teacher. This respect sometimes borders on veneration. It is this aspect, caused by the special relationship between teacher and student, which makes students to obey the teacher almost blindly. Therefore the freedom of opinion of the student is constantly in tension with the authority of the gurukkal.

Admittance to the KKA *kalari* is not depending on discrimination in any form whatsoever. To practice in the KKA *kalari* the student should behave according to a code of behaviour which stimulates chivalrous and noble behaviour. I have shown that (KKA) Kalarippayat has a very strong religious basis. The gurukkal

⁴⁴⁸ Cf. chapter 1.3.4.2

⁴⁴⁹ Cf. chapter 2.5

⁴⁵⁰ The teachings are given as a ‘parental education’. On the way of teaching, see chapter 2.1

uses this basis to teach people having another 'worldview' (in the sense of Smart) than the gurukkal has, and even non-religious people. The *puttara*, originally the altar for the *kalari* goddess, has been reinterpreted an altar for the *system* of Kalarippayat, and not so much a representation of a living deity. This reinterpretation is possible because the *kalari* goddess equals the system of Kalarippayat and the *kalari* building. These three entities are largely the same and interchangeable. The entity 'system of Kalarippayat' is, however, much more neutral regarding her connotations than the entity '*kalari* goddess'. The KKA *kalari* shifted the emphasis from the goddess to the system, though remaining perfectly within the boundaries of her teachings. Because of this shift, the KKA *kalari* has in a way 'de-religionized' Kalarippayat for her students. Much less importance is given to what the worldview of a student in fact is. The same is true regarding the worldview of the teacher. This created the possibility to open up the teachings for anybody, as long as her adherents are capable and willing to accept each other with their opinions. This willingness finds its expression in the fact that students are expected to devote themselves to the system (and the gurukkal, who is the representation of the system on the human plane of existence). To be devoted to the system of Kalarippayat means that students should give it a place in his or her life, alongside and intertwined with their worldviews. This results in a space for reinterpreting of the system in terms of the student's own worldview. Shifting the emphasis from the *kalari* goddess to the system results in the non-discriminative character of the KKA *kalari*.

The government of Kerala supports traditional arts, because they are propagated as part of the common heritage of the Keralan people. In other words, they are advertised as values in which all Keralis are united, and values in which they can recognize themselves in their identity. Traditional art schools like the KKA educate people to live together, and to act chivalrously towards each other. The relationship between teacher and student is such that the student has a lot of trust in the teacher; therefore the teacher plays an important role in the life of the student. The belief of the student in the teacher makes him or her voluntarily obey the teacher, and listen to his advice. It is this thrust that the student is made to believe in and to act according to the rules set out by the teacher. The Keralan government is using the traditional relationship between student and teacher in her attempt to improve unity and peace in Kerala. The more teachers of the traditional arts underline a similar code of behavior, and the more popular the traditional art will be, the more people of the state of Kerala will give importance to tolerance, and are willing to approach each other in ways which overcome doctrinal and racial differences.

5. Final thought

To conclude this thesis, I want to indicate the difference between the interpretation of what a martial art *should* be, according to the doctrine of KKA Kalarippayat, and just any arbitrary way of fighting. Though the martial art is designed primarily to kill, a second equally important aspect is spiritual growth.

The art is seen as a way of life for a warrior, which should eventually lead to liberation.

A *kalari* warrior should control, even banish, his emotions during the fight, because anger, fear, and other emotions divert the concentration. These emotions can create a very dangerous situation for the warrior himself: his reactions slow down and his accuracy decreases. But this is only one side of the story. Kalarippayat promotes self-control and a way to elevate us in our way of thinking to a level of chivalry and dignity, and eventually to detachment from any matter in this world. The warrior fights because he is destined to fight, not out of any emotion. He should concentrate on the act of fighting, not its result, such as satisfying a feeling of revenge. And it is this that distinguishes a martial art from a just any way of killing someone or inflicting pain on a person.

In the *Bhagavad Gita*, a work highly respected among Kalarippayat practitioners, it is this idea that is raised by Krishna, who helped the warrior Arjuna overcome his doubts when he was forced to go to war against his relatives.

He who takes the Self to be a slayer, and he who takes It to be slain, neither of these knows. It does not slay, nor it is slain.

This (i.e. the Self) is never born, nor does it die. (...)

He that knows This to be indestructible, changeless, without birth, immutable, how is he to slay or cause another to slay? (II: 19-21)

Work (with desire) is verily far inferior to that performed with the mind undisturbed by thoughts of results. Seek refuge in the evenness of mind. Wretched are they who act for results. (II.49)

Therefore, do thou always perform action, which are obligatory, without attachment; by performing action without attachment, one attains the highest. (III:18)

He by whom the world is not agitated and who cannot be agitated by the world, who is freed from joy, envy, fear, and anxiety-he is dear to Me.

He who is free from dependence, who is pure, prompt, unconcerned, untroubled, renouncing every undertaking-he who is thus devoted to Me, is dear to Me.

He who neither rejoices, nor hates (frets at receiving anything desirable), nor grieves (at parting with a beloved object), nor desires (the unattainable), renouncing good and evil, full of devotion, he is dear to Me.

He who is the same to friend and foe, and also in honor and dishonor; who is the same in heat and cold, and in pleasure and pain; who is free from attachment; to whom censure and praise are equal; who is silent content with anything, homeless, steady-minded, full of devotion-that man is dear to Me.

And they who follow this Immortal Dharma, endued with Shraddha⁴⁵¹ regarding me as the Supreme Goal, and devoted-they are exceedingly dear to Me. (XII:15-20)

⁴⁵¹ An attitude of reverence and faith in something or somebody; in the case of Kalarippayat this can be the *kalari*-system or the *gurukkal*

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