

The Kalarippayattu Legacy in Kerala's Folk Heritage

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DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17323359>

ARTICLE DETAILS

Research Paper

Accepted: 23-09-2025

Published: 10-10-2025

Keywords:

Kalarippayattu, Kolkali, Kalari, Vattenthirippu sambradhaya, Gurukkal, Parichamuttukali, cymbals, Vadivu, Chuvadu,

ABSTRACT

Kalarippayattu is the traditional martial art that has a rich tradition and legacy over 3000 years. It has influenced various aspects of Kerala's culture beyond its combat techniques including performing arts, spiritual growth, healing techniques, cultural identity and so on. Kalarippayattu has its own inherent cultural value and its influence can even be seen in performing arts and folklores of Kerala. Folk arts such as Kolkali. Parichamuttukali, Velakali, Oachirakali, Chavittunatakam, Konganpada, Onathallu, etc has various aspects of kalarippayattu within it. The dynamic and visually appealing movements and body conditioning techniques of kalarippayattu has played a major role in shaping many of the folk arts and performing arts of kerala

INTRODUCTION

Kalarippayattu is considered one of the oldest martial art traditions in the world. It developed in the southern Indian state of **Kerala**, where it continues to be practiced and admired for its blend of physical skill, discipline, and spiritual roots. The term "**Kalari**" comes from the Sanskrit word "**Khaloorika**" referring to a training ground for physical exercises and combat skills. According to mythological accounts, this martial art was first taught by **Lord Shiva**, who then passed it on to **Parashurama**, the sixth avatar of Vishnu and the legendary founder of Kerala. Kalarippayattu has deeply influenced Kerala's cultural landscape. Its techniques and movements have found their way into classical art forms like **Kathakali**, **Krishnanattam**, and **Theyyam**, enriching their physical vocabulary. Additionally, many



of Kerala's folk performances—such as **Kolkali**, **Parichamuttukali**, **Velakali**, **Oachirakali**, **Chavittunatakam**, and **Konganpada**—reflect elements drawn from this martial tradition, either in their choreography or in their dramatic representation.

KOLKALI

Kolkali is one among the complex dancing entertainment, where the performers hold two sticks in hands and dance in circle in complex choreographic patterns. There are usually 6 to 12 participants in a kolkali. Both Hindus and Muslims learned the Kolkali, who mainly belonged to central and north Kerala. The performers sing the song and then execute the movement. The place where Kolkali was trained were traditionally called as Kalari. In some of the styles of Kalari, Kolkali was trained along with kalaripayattu. Examples are the Kalari that follows *vattenthirippu sambradhaya* in payyannur. Kolkali demands high agility, speed, *talam*, jumps, body movements and extreme group work.



Like in kalaripayattu, the trainer of kolkali were also called as *gurukkal* and the training were undergone as accordance with the *vaithari* given by the trainer. The base of Kolkali can be seen in *mucchaan* or *cheruvadi payattu* of kalaripayattu, different types of strikes are engaged in Kolkali along with some *adavu*. The length of the kolkali stick is usually around 12 inches. The songs of Kolkali performance are usually sung in lusty folk style with the leader of the group starting the song and rest of them repeating. The dancers weave in and around within the circle striking the sticks in high speed and energy with great coordination.

PARICHAMUTTUKALI

Parichamuttukali is yet another folk dance which uses the shield. It can be called as shield hitting play. The performer holds the stick and a shield in hand just like the traditional training of sword and shield in kalaripayattu. Like Kolkali, Parichamuttukkali is also performed in circle with practitioner weaving in and around in circle in different patters along with striking of stick and shield. The stick and shield are



wielded over and around their head with wrist and elbows twisted. In each segment of dance, the complexity and vigour of the dance is increased. The dancers strike the stick over stick or shield in accordance with the song and rhythm of the cymbals. The art form demands good body control. The movements include deep body bends along with twist and turns.



The Hindu form of Parichamuttukali often draws the stories from *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. It is usually performed during marriages or any other family functions. Sadly, nowadays the practitioners don't possess the skills that they possessed prior. The body bends, *vadivu* (*postures*) and different *chuvad* (*movements*) used in this dance form clearly expresses its similarity with kalaripayattu.

VELAKALI

Velakali is yet another dance mainly performed by *Nairs* of Alappee district in Kerala. As in Parichamuttu, the performers hold shield as well as stick (representing sword). Velakali was also part of the ten-day long festival celebrated in month of march-april in Sri Padmanabha swami temple in Trivandrum. The dance includes various jumps, turns, bends, leaps and movements that are taken from kalaripayattu training. More than just being a dance, Velakali represents the historic war of *Kurukshetra* fought between Kauravas and Pandavas. This may not be the same in all other temples. It's a martial folk dance that incorporates movement from kalaripayattu.



There were various Velakali group that existed in Kerala. Vellur Narayana Kurups troupe was one among the prominent ones. Many characteristic features of valppayattu of Kalari can be seen in choreographies of this art form along with several other aspects of kalaripayattu.

OACHIRAKALI

Oachirakali is yet another martial folk art that is usually conducted in the grounds of Parabrahma temple in Oachira village as part of temple festival. A large number of people comes to witness this either as a troupe member of Oachirakali or for prayers. There is no specific shrine or poojari here. Rather exists a group of sacred banyan trees that welcomes people of all castes. There will be around 7-16 performers in each group. The troupe performance usually consists of group dance interwind with mocking combats between the performers. The performers usually shout out the syllables loud according to which they perform. The group performances include movements and steps that seems to be derived from kalaripayattu exercises. The combat techniques used in kalaripayattu can be seen in between the group performances.



Oachirakali is said to be conducted in remembrance of the war fought between the kingdom of Chembakassery and people of Kayamkulam. Earlier it was conducted as a proper fight between two troupes and many a times there were severe injuries. People who engaged in fights usually belonged to the Nair caste but now there's no such distinction and the fights are mostly stylised as a group performance with preset movements and weapons.

FOLK DANCE DRAMA CHAVITTUNATAKAM

Chavittunatakam is a kind of Christian folk art dance drama in which many aspects of kalaripayattu can be seen. It's a combination of song, dance, fight, and acting. Most of the Chavittunadakam were based on stories of great courageous deeds of people from the time of Sharlimen to that to St George. This art form came to existence mainly in seventeenth century. Origin of this art is mainly due to restrictions imposed



on Christians in showcasing their warrior skills. As a result, they created an art which could exhibit their skills in a stylised manner holding weapons and incorporating dance and music. The stage was created in two sections which could also display the martial skills of the performers. Earlier sharp swords were used in performances. The performers stamp hard on the floor with their leg in accordance with the song and rhythm giving it the name Chavittunadakam. Only those who were trained well in Kalarippayattu were included in Chavittunadakam. At one point of time there existed Kalari for training Christian gurukkals so as to stage the battlefields and fights realistically.



Chavittunadakam is a highly masculine kind of performance which allowed the Christian community to celebrate its glorious heroic tradition incorporating and exhibiting their martial skills successfully.

KONGANPADA

Apart from what's mentioned above, there are several other forms of art practises that incorporates kalarippayattu. Konganpada is one among those. Konganpada is a festival that commemorates the fight between people of Chittoor (Palakkad) and kingdom of Konganad which occurred in 17th century.



The Chittoor people defended and defeated the Kongan who came to attack them with whatever tools they could find. Meanwhile during the war, they prayed to goddess Badrakali of the local temple, under



whose support and blessings. Chittor was believed to have succeeded and saved. The whole of the events is recreated and conducted every year in this temple.

ONATHALLU AND KAIPPORU

Onathallu kaipporu is yet another sport that's been a part of onam celebration every year. It was one among the major entertainment of the warriors during the time of *Samoothiri*. The people who participated in this were trained kalaripayattu practitioners and they followed the traditions of Kalari before entering the fight and during the fight.

Apart from this there are many tribal folk dances that incorporates kalaripayattu within it.

CONCLUSION

Kalaripayattu's impact extends far beyond its martial roots, deeply ingraining itself in Kerala's cultural landscape. Its distinctive movements, discipline and philosophy have influenced a diverse range of performing and folk-art forms. These art forms not only preserve the physical expressions of Kalaripayattu but also carry forward its spirit of courage, coordination, rhythm and community. As a living tradition, Kalaripayattu continues to shape Kerala's artistic expression and cultural identity.

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