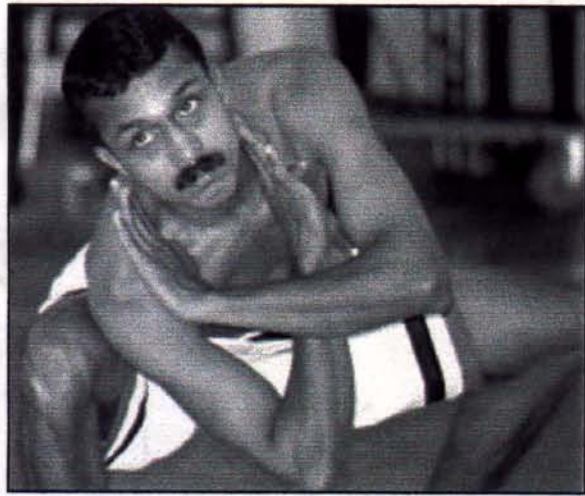


Tour highlights martial arts of India

EXHIBIT: Basic exercises are taught to audiences; spiritual aspect prevails



PRIYA SHARMA/Daily Bruin

Indian martial artist Krishnadas Menon demonstrates his art at a workshop that took place at UCLA Monday.

By Parisa Elahi
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Martial arts is not commonly associated with the rich cultural heritage of India. However, a recent event at UCLA brought attention to the ancient Indian martial art of Kalaripayattu.

This performance marked the first in a 40-day U.S. tour that the Kerela Dance Theatre is conducting around various universities and Indian cultural centers. The South Indian Associations at UCLA, Sangam and Bharatiyam, were contacted to co-sponsor the event last Monday.

The tour organizer and president of the Kerela Dance Theatre Radha Carmen, thought it valuable to showcase this art form even though the choice of martial arts seemed unusual to the Indian culture.

"I have been looking for an art form from India that can be understood by the U.S." Carmen said.

The exhibit showcased a demonstration followed by a workshop in which the performers taught basic exercises to the audience.

Martial arts is not usually associated with India but Kalaripayattu's importance is demonstrated in that it is influential to other forms of martial arts.

"Kalaripayattu is actually a forerunner to martial arts in China," Carmen said.

Kalaripayattu made its way to China with the spread of Buddhism. As Indian Buddhist monks traveled, Kalaripayattu spread and eventually became known as Kung-Fu in China.

Kalaripayattu emerged in the 12th century A.D. and was practiced in the region of Kerela, located in the southwest of India. It incorporates the ancient Indian science of war (Dhanur Veda) and medicine (Ayurveda) and continues to be used as a way of maintaining stability in society.

"It was a way society kept peace and order," Carmen said.

Under British colonial rules, the tradition was nearly lost as it became almost unknown to the general population. It was revived 50 to 60 years ago when it was first brought to the stage. Nowadays, the art form is well and thriving in the region of Kerela.

"There are many centers (for martial arts) in Kerela. There are competing tournaments; they are used in movies, theater work and dance work," Carmen said.

A graceful and skillful demonstration was put on by brothers Krishnadas and Dinesh Menon, accompanied by Hari Rangaswami, who plays percussive instruments from South India. The artists practiced their exercises with a variety of weapons including the kettukari (long staff), the kattaram (dagger) and the urumi (a sword-like whip).

They began with a series of basic exercises which showcased the fluid movement and grace inherent to the art form. These exercises, called meipayatt, included cultivate control, flexibility and grace for defensive and offensive movements.

The brothers covered the expanse of the room in a series of movements that included long extensions and high kicks. Kalaripayattu, which is often referred to as Kalari, differs from other forms of martial arts in its kicking technique.

"Karate uses a kick with a flat foot and in Kalari the foot is slightly bent," said Murali Mani, a Bharatiyam representative.

Both artists picked up short, ornamental daggers (kattaram), that are double-edged, sharp weapons made of tempered steel. The demonstration adopted a near theatrical edge as the artists' faces took on expressions of anger, fear and suspicion. The menacing thrusts, cuts, locks and throws which encompass the main aspects of a dagger fight emphasized their skill as they effectively dodged the advancing attacks of the other.

Bodily harm seems to be a very credible threat in the dangerous back-and-forth movements of the two figures on stage.

"Looking at the movement of the eyes is an effective way of keeping one's concentration in such a situation," Dinesh said.

The performance was followed by a workshop where the performers showed members of the audience basic exercises and movements of Kalaripayattu.

"Focus in front and keeping a level of concentration (are an important part of Kalari)," Krishnadas said. Breathing control through the nose is important, Dinesh added.

A spiritual aspect exists in Kalari, which is apparent in the artist's performance. Before beginning their exercises they perform a ritual in which they pay respects to their ancestors.

The brothers come from a family which practices Kalari and they are the eighth generation practicing this art, with their father as their teacher.

"The performers were praying to symbolic Kalari ancestors who started their line," Carmen said. She added that each Kalari center has its own Kalari ancestral deification.

This spirituality, however, does not give way to the confines of religion. Many Christians and Muslims as well as Hindus practice Kalari in India. And no constrictions seem to apply to the practice of the art.

"In Kalari, there is no cast, no sex, no religion for learning" Krishnadas said.