





The Way of the Guru

THE SRI LANKAN MARTIAL ART OF ANGAM PORA WAS SO FEARED BY THE BRITISH THAT THEY OUTLAWED IT. OVER THE NEXT 200 YEARS IT ALMOST BECAME EXTINCT – BUT IN A SUBURB OF COLOMBO, THERE IS ONE GROUP FIGHTING TO PROTECT THEIR HERITAGE

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A 72-year-old grandfather stands in a barn crammed into his small backyard in Nugegoda on the south side of Colombo. Gathered nearby are his son, grandson and 11 of their most trusted friends. The dusty ground beneath their feet is made of crushed ant hills; the insects naturally refine the earth, meaning there won't be any rocks or glass under their bare feet. This is important because they are here to train, to practice and most importantly to learn from the grandfather, their master, the Guru Karunapala. These men are the last surviving practitioners of pure angam pora, Sri Lanka's ancient martial art.

"My Guru is a legend in this art – I am proud to say that," says Piumal Edirisinghe, one of the senior students in the group. "When he was young, some gangsters tried to open a club in the area, to sell liquor and so on. My Guru and his people were against that, so 16 people came to fight him. They came

to kill him – it wasn't a demonstration – with swords and knives. He fought with them bare-handed."

By the time the dust settled, the young master was in cuffs, but the police were so impressed by his feat, they released him and asked him to teach them "the art of death".

Lean and astonishingly fresh-faced, it's no exaggeration to say that the Guru could pass for a man 30 years his junior. He is a man of few words – but he is not a man of few fights. Over the years, he has accumulated 42 wounds from edged weapons and has the physical scars to prove it.

The Guru's path has been neither easy nor short; he learned from over 70 different masters – including his grandfather – in an education that lasted 40 years before he could be regarded as a master in his own right. Today, there are students in attendance who have themselves been learning for 30 years from the Guru Karunapala. =>

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“Our Lord Buddha says: ‘Don’t hurt anybody’ so you might be surprised because there is so much about fighting,” says Piumal. “But if you learn it deeply, you know you will never fight. Our Guru teaches that if two angam warriors fight, they are both defeated.” So the only winning move is not to play? “Exactly, that is why we have demonstrations.”

The master’s students – between whom there is a very clear hierarchy – don’t hold competitions, as the aim of angam pora is to cause as much damage to your opponent as possible. Pressure points and weak spots on the skull and the neck are typical targets for the blows, which can be administered with a range of weapons and body parts. Those who learn to higher levels could theoretically

kill someone with anything they could lay their hands on. It’s a serious business.

Between the emphasis on striking a coup de grâce and the Buddhist ethos that plays an important part in the practise, there’s no room to attempt point-scoring as one would in karate, judo or taekwondo. “The main aims of angam pora were to protect the race, religion and the country – that’s why they mastered it. It was not to fight with enemies in the street,” says 66-year-old Denzil Kuruwita, before telling the story of one of his ancestors, also an angam expert. During the 16th Century Portuguese occupation of Ceylon, his relative defeated an entire garrison of the invaders, before their captain leapt on him from an upper

floor. Both men died simultaneously, with swords drawn.

“These days things have changed of course; today it is a global village, but in those days it was very different,” says Denzil. “Before we start, we acknowledge Lord Buddha, King Ravana and Mother Nature to promise that we will use it [appropriately].”

Now, as is the case with martial arts around the world, angam pora is largely redundant on a day to day basis: too few disputes are settled honestly; or too many with a gun. Denzil learned a little of the art from his father and grandfather, but it was seen as a dying art. Then he met the Guru: “When I found my master, we just clicked,” he says. “I was like a thirsty man finding an oasis.”

That Denzil, Piumal and even the Guru can practise angam pora at all is in no small part down to the heroics and cunning of their forebears. Just as there is reverence towards the master today, so in turn he is grateful for the exploits of their ancestors.





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Long a target for foreign raiders, Sri Lanka – or Ceylon as it was known – has endured countless invasions from India, as well as colonisation by the Portuguese, Dutch and eventually the British. All of them were met with fierce resistance. While the local kings kept a large number of full-time soldiers, farmers were also trained to answer the call of the war drum should belligerents arrive on their shores. Angam pora made up a large part of this national defence and, using guerrilla tactics, unbridled ferocity and no small amount of expertise, it swayed many wars in favour of the Sri Lankans.

The Portuguese in particular were to learn the true power of angam in the most costly circumstances. Despite taking to the field with superior weapons, the Iberian forces were obliterated in the 1562 Battle of Mulleriyawa, fought in marshland against locally trained forces backed by war elephants. This would set a tone: in nearly 150 years of occupation, the Portuguese failed to conquer any more than one third of the island.

From 1656 – 1796, the Dutch enjoyed a little more success, but the resistance from native royalty was no less stubborn. In his 1681 account of life as a prisoner on the island, English sailor Robert Knox described the often fruitless attempts by the Dutch to placate the Ceylonese rulers.

“In this The Dutch therefore not being able to deal with him by the Sword, being unacquainted with the Woods and the Chingulays manner of fighting, do endeavour for Peace with him all they can, dispatching divers Embassadors [sic] to him, and sending great Presents... he neither regarding their Embassadors nor receiving the Presents, but taking his opportunities on a suddain [sic] by setting on them with his Forces.”

In 1796 governance of the island passed to the British Empire, whose campaign against the insurgents was both relentless and bloody. In 1817, having recently gained control of the previously unconquered Kingdom of Kandy, Sir Robert Brownrigg, Governor of Ceylon, acknowledged the danger posed by angam pora and took extreme measures to suppress it. The practise was outlawed via notice in the local newspaper, and many of the teaching Gurus were rounded up and their *maduwas* (training centres) razed to the ground. From then on, anyone found to be involved with angam pora would be shot in the knee.

This devastated the number of people teaching and learning the martial art. However, it was not eradicated completely. Many people, keen to keep their traditions alive, began to practise in secret and several of the foot movements were disguised in traditional dance. What would have looked like theatrical



PREVIOUS PAGE: Two fighters face off with sticks
LEFT: Action during a demonstration
ABOVE: A rice paddy field – part of a landscape that has remained unchanged for hundreds of years; the Guru Karunapala demonstrates moves for his students

prancing to the eyes of an inspecting officer were actually the graceful movements essential to angam pora’s survival. This form of traditional dancing is still on show in Kandy today.

It would have been during this period in the latter half of the 19th Century that the Guru Karunapala’s grandfather learned the ancient skills. “If you watch the Kandyan dancing, you can see that they protected our fighting moves,” says Denzil. “The dance of the peacock, the dance of the python and so on – the movements look like a dance, but if you watch their hands, you can see that they are actually going to vulnerable points. The same with the way the drummers use the sticks.”

In his formative years, the Guru briefly tried out wrestling and gymnastics, but quickly realised that in order to even begin to understand the immensely broad scope of angam pora, he would have to dedicate his life to that alone. ⇒

"It is not only attacking," he says with Piumal translating. "It consists of 18 systems: dancing, singing, gymnastics, drumming, sword fighting, stick fighting, barehanded fighting... healing is part of it too. There are some moves that come from the tiger, the lion, the bear, the snake, the monkey, the mantis, the python, the elephant, the peacock, the butterfly... The syllabus is huge."

Those hoping to learn from the Guru are carefully vetted. Although angam pora is used almost exclusively for demonstration purposes today, it is still a potentially deadly skillset. By way of illustration, the Guru stands up and unsheathes the *welaudhaya*, two six-stranded belt swords. Made with wicked lengths of metal, when he starts whipping them around his body, they sound like gusts

of fierce wind and form a deadly iron cloud around his body.

Mercifully, this technique is only taught to those reaching the highest levels of understanding. "Some high ranking police and army officers come to learn, but we don't give it to everybody – there are different kinds of people, even in the police," says Piumal. "We only teach responsible people; otherwise it would be like handing a machine gun to a crazy guy."

While it may be distinctly Sri Lankan, the doors to the Guru's maduwa are open to anyone of a suitable ilk, including boys, girls and, recently, foreigners. Last summer Oliver Hermann, a mixed martial arts instructor from southwest Germany, made a pilgrimage to Colombo. There he stayed for two months,

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training for 10 hours a day under the watchful gaze of the Guru. He was so happy with the German's dedication that he permitted him to open a maduwa of his own in Europe.

This may have been the first time angam pora had been exported. Hermann already plans to return to Sri Lanka twice this year bringing his students with him, whilst improving his own technique. Could this be the future of the sport?

“Sometimes I feel sad because some young people learn a little of angam pora and then mix it with kung fu and karate, then try to sell it on,” says the Guru, explaining that Hermann is much more dedicated than most. “The syllabus of this art is very big but

there are some people in their mid-20s trying to pass it on. They can't do it. I'm not angry about it, but it makes me sad.”

Instead, the Guru Karunapala will endeavour to protect the pure form of his art, in Sri Lanka and beyond. Watching him in action with the welaudhaya, there is no reason to believe that he won't be doing just that for years to come.

“Search around the world – if you can find it, let me know – but there isn't another martial art that teaches you how to kill someone using a newspaper,” he grins. “If you know it well enough you can use anything as a deadly weapon. This is the superiority of angam pora.” ☺

FROM LEFT: Dancers at a traditional Kandyan ceremony; a fire-eater; some of angam pora's moves are based on the movements of elephants, seen here at the Pinnawala Elephant Orphanage in Kandy



EXPERIENCE SRI LANKA

FOR ACCOMMODATION: SERENE PAVILIONS

Away from the chaotic heat of Colombo in the coastal town of Wadduwa, lies Serene Pavilions. Just a few kilometres south of the city, it provides good access to the Guru's maduwa. With 12 wonderfully appointed pavilions dotted around its beachside property, it boasts a butler service and an incredible Jacuzzi pool as well as a selection of fine food. Here there's the chance to mediate in peace and privacy – and practice some fierce angam pora moves on the beach.

WWW.SERENEPAVILIONS.COM

FOR RECUPERATION: THE WALLAWWA

After a long day of training, there's no better time for a professional massage. The Walluwwa, north of Colombo and not far from the airport, has one of the best spas in the region, if not the entire country. Following an exhaustive interview to make sure you're getting the right treatment, the W Spa uses Ayurveda and other worldly magic to melt away the stresses and strains (and possibly aches and pains) of a hard day.

WWW.THEWALLAWWA.COM

FOR ANGAM PORa:

Their school is not open to everybody, but the angam pora centre on the south side of Colombo is the only place you can learn the purest form of the art. The Guru Karunapala and his followers may practise a potentially deadly form of combat, but rest assured they are some of the warmest, most genuine people in the city, keen to improve the understanding and exposure of this treasured heritage.

[HTTP://ANGAMPORA.ORG](http://ANGAMPORA.ORG)

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