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# LAMP IN A WINDLESS PLACE

Developing an Actor Training Methodology  
through Sri Lankan Combative Art Angampora

Issue Editors: Saumya Liyanage,  
Lyudmyla Honcharova, Marlon Ariyasinghe

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*Lamp in a Windless Place*

Developing an Actor Training Methodology through Sri Lankan Combative Art Angampora

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### Cover Picture

The illustration on the cover pages is inspired by angampora wood carving piece at the *Embekka Devalaya* and designed by Nuwan Chamika.

## Angampora Challenges Gender Identities in Practice

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**Abstract:** Martial arts provide a fascinating setting for investigating the construction and performance of gender and exploring the possibility of challenging its normative manifestations. Gender difference penetrates everyday life and re-entry to the theatre gendered actors – male and female. These genderized roles in theatre is a re-establishing the binarized relation between man and woman in theatre. According to the feminist theorist Judith Butler, gender is an act that brings into being what it names: in this context, a “masculine” man or a “feminine” woman. There is no gender identity prior to language. In line with this, this paper asks, what principles can be identified and applied to overcome the ‘problem’ of gender within traditional martial arts training systems? Would it be possible to train actors using Sri Lankan martial art angampora and challenge the gender identities in practice? Drawing on comparative gender studies on mixed martial arts and theories of gender, this study will explore the place of gender in martial arts and how the training of angampora challenges gender identities. The methodology of this study consists of conducting interviews and critically analyzing the responses of actors who were part of the Actor’s Lab. This study will also incorporate my experiences as an angampora trainee in the Actors Lab. The data collected confirms that angampora training has helped to enhance the actors’ self-awareness, self-confidence and each actor could find their unique rhythm.

**Keywords:** Angampora, martial arts, gender, femininity, actor training.

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### 1. Introduction

The AHEAD DOR HEMS 73 research project at the University of the Visual and Performing Arts (UVPA) aims to develop an actor training methodology derived from angampora, a Sri Lankan martial art form. The research focused on the angampora tradition which is a dominant

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martial art form in Sri Lanka. A number of UVPA alumni and Sri Lankan actors worked closely with the research team and a team of angampora trainers to learn angampora. Sixteen female and male actors were recruited to the Actors Lab. The research team organised a series of training sessions with the selected actors and artists allowing them to undergo rigorous training under the angampora master, Guru Karunāpāla.

The study outlines the relationship between two fields, namely martial arts studies and gender studies. In this paper, gender and martial arts are analyzed together to address questions about the actor training process. My participation as an angampora trainee at the Actors Lab further enriched this study. In terms of methodology, I conducted a questionnaire and interviews with five actors. Most of the actors who participated in the interviews and quizzes had no long-term training in angampora martial arts.

Etymology of angampora explains how its name was created for instance, ‘angam’ (angé) means the ‘body’ and ‘pora’ means ‘combat’. Physical fighting can occur either with or without weapons in this angampora tradition of martial arts. (Liyanage 2018: 5).

The body plays a crucial role in the construction of gendered differences, and it is through our embodiment of gender, the realities of such differences become reified. With regard to boxing, Joyce Carol Oates describes it succinctly, “a boxer is his body, and is totally identified with it” (Oates 2006: 5). What is the amount of compensation a woman is required to pay for this reason? Exactly where does the error lie here? My objective in this paper is to explore how angampora martial art challenges gender identity.

## 2. Martial arts and gender

What is the necessity to establish the masculine soul (Subject) and the feminine body (Object)? According to Tadashi Suzuki’s opinion, without gender identities, cultured societies are those in which the perceptual and expressive abilities of the human body are utilized to the fullest extent possible (Matsuoka 2002: 163).

Linda Tompkins’ and Michael Ian Bore’s paper “Gender Performance in Women’s Mixed Martial Arts” (MMA), attempts to fill the gap in comparative studies of women and mixed martial arts. Their paper explores how gender is constructed and performed by women who engage in MMA. Their main focus is to explore how women navigate and “perform gender” in

the patriarchal subculture of MMA. Tompkins and Bore examine three female fighter types and explore different aspects of gender performance that help signify these aspects. According to this paper, three female fighter types are “Feminine inclined female Fighters,” “Neutral female fighters,” and “Masculine inclined female fighters” (Tompkins, Borer 2014: 1). They conclude that martial art is also performative:<sup>1</sup>

My findings show that some women take a masculine role to maintain “gender order” and that gender is “scripted” and not concrete. This suggests that gender is fluid in nature and that the symbols and characteristics of gender can be negotiated and changed (Tompkins, Borer 2014: 1).

They further suggest that gender is an “explicit performance” for many people, and there is heavy criticism against almost all women in MMA. They explore another possibility of future study through the experiences of women who assume the “dominant” or masculine role to maintain the “gender order.”

### 3. Butler and angam maduwa

Judith Butler collapsed the sex/gender distinction to argue that there is no sex that is not always already gender. According to her, gender is not something one is. It is something one does, an act, or more precisely, a sequence of acts, a verb rather than a noun, a “doing” rather than a “being” (Butler 2002: 33). Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being (43-44).

For Butler, there is a difference between performance and performativity. She underlines the significance of this difference in a 1993 interview. Performance presupposes a pre-existing subject; performativity contests the very notion of the subject (GP: 33).<sup>2</sup> Either a “masculine” man or a “feminine” woman. This is because gender is an act. Language constitutes gender identities, and therefore there is no gender identity prior to language. It is not that identity “does”

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<sup>1</sup> The study that is more closely related and most often referenced is West and Zimmerman’s 1987 study on “Doing Gender.” West and Zimmerman believe that gender is performative, therefore it is a routine accomplishment in everyday life, done in and through interaction and in the presence of others. Since gender is performative, it creates differences between men and women. (Tompkins, Borer 2014: 1).

<sup>2</sup> Butler also explicitly connects her use of the concept “performativity” to the speech act theory of J. L. Austin’s *How To Do Things With Words* (1955) and Derrida’s deconstruction of Austin’s ideas in his essay *Signature Event Context* (1972) (Salih 2006: 56)

discourse or language, but that discourse and language “do” gender. During angampora training at the Actors Lab, this concept was linked to my experience. First, let me share a few notes from my actor’s journal where my research question originated:

In the Actors Lab angampora training session held on 8 March, the Master<sup>3</sup> stated that if someone trains in angampora, whether male or female they will empower their bodies with the same ability. When I questioned: “Are there any particular differences in angampora training for male and female?”. He said “no.... the same training session for everyone” (G Karunāpāla 2021 pers. comm., 8 March).

In the training session on 10 March, Master taught a technique which helps if a girl is in trouble. He said that “if a man catches you, you can bite near his wrist and then he will be neutralized” and pointed to a spot in my hand (G Karunāpāla 2021 pers. comm., 10 March). Guru Karunāpāla told me that if I learned to fight with *Yashtiya*<sup>4</sup> (staff), I can use an umbrella, in the same manner, to react if I got into trouble as a girl in a public place, and this incident reminded me that I am a woman. These guidelines were only for female practitioners and not for male practitioners. The Master taught us self-defense techniques taken from angampora. However, I wondered, with the emphasis on self-defense techniques for the female participants at the Actors Lab that if the primary reason a woman should train angampora to avoid being physically abused by men?

“Girl” was the term used by the Master to refer to female actors in training. Even the phrase *lamaya* (child) is a reference to the gender politics at work in Sri Lankan society, and how the term infantilizes women. Butler argues that,

The naming of the “girl” is transitive, that is, initiates the process by which a certain “girling” is compelled, the term or, rather, its symbolic power, governs the formation of a corporeally enacted femininity that never fully approximates the norm. (Butler 1993: 232)

Further, she argues, it is therefore not a matter of choice, but a matter of forcible citation of a norm, one whose historical complexity is inextricably bound up with normative relations of discipline, regulation, and punishment (Butler 1993: 232). All of the above indicated to me that I am often identified and named as a woman in the society in which I live. It is evident from the

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<sup>3</sup> Master is a reference to the angampora trainer Guru Karunāpāla.

<sup>4</sup> *Yashtiya* (staff) is one of the major weapons in angampora.

above philosophical facts that it is a more complicated situation than the one that is often called male<sup>5</sup>

#### 4. Actor's experience

I selected five actors who have undergone angampora training at the Actors Lab. My own observations and discussions, as part of the Actors Lab, have helped me to explore the connection between angampora and gender roles in martial arts practice. I conducted semi-structured interviews with actors Lyudmyla Honcharova, Bandhuka Premawardhana, Thilakshini Rathnayake, Kanchana Malshani and Pathum Dharmarathne to understand how they perceive angampora training and how this training affected their performance, body and daily lives.

The following broad questions were posed to the actors to help me to contemplate how their understanding of gender difference was being challenged in angampora training:

1. "What effects or changes have they noticed in your daily life since you/they started practising angampora?"
2. "How has this martial art training affected their social life as a woman or as a man?"

The gender/sex binary refers to the concept that gender is determined solely by sex. Therefore, different exercise routines and motivations are carried out by men and women for fitness. In general, most women exercise to keep a thin body, whereas men exercise to build muscle. These are the archetypical body images that are used in the daily commodified bodies. Market forces determine the ideal bodies for men and women through advertising and ideologies created through these discourses on body shapes, body image and well-being. However, I have observed that when angampora martial art is employed to maintain physical fitness, it can challenge gender stereotypes defined by society.

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<sup>5</sup> Men's bodies may be appropriated as well as women's, but appropriation is not gender neutral either. Women's bodies are appropriated more often and more completely. The appropriation of women's bodies may be equally violent, but these are differences we are only beginning to observe and can hardly articulate (Frank 1991: 95)

## 5. I: Physical competence

In the angampora training session held on 14 March, we started with warm-up exercises<sup>6</sup>. It was a heavy warm-up session. Some of the exercises were hard for me, and other female actors felt the same but the male actors seemed to be executing most of those exercises with ease. When female actors were paired up with male actors to practise combat forms, they assumed their physical strength was too much for us to handle, so most of them controlled their body energy in front of female actors.<sup>7</sup> In support of the uniqueness of the practical application of angampora training, Pathum Dharmaratne, a versatile dancer trained in traditional and contemporary dance forms, said that both men and women could often be trained to fight to get rid of the “I can’t fight with men” mentality that they have developed as women (P Dharmarathne 2021, pers. comm., 4 September). Thilakshini Rathnayake. An actor based in Colombo, shared the same view as Pathum, suggested that angampora be included in the school curriculum as a practical activity and that every child should be trained in it. Because doing so provides the physical and mental circumstances for children to resist gender development education from primary education. She further argued:

I was very much afraid and I couldn’t do the jumps and rolls initially but now I can. It was like I was able to understand the technique, and I was able to go into that zone and do the roles. (T. Rathnayake 2021, pers. comm., 7 September)

Dharmaratne highlights the aspect of working with others. Working with an opponent makes a person better understand the other, especially in performative arts like acting and role playing. Similarly, angampora explores the interconnection and communion with others. (P Dharmarathne 2021, pers. comm., 4 September). Bandhuka Premawardhana, pursuing a masters through the AHEAD Project, argues that when they practice angampora at the angam maduwa, the division between male and female is blurred. However, he further identifies a distinction and a difference between bodies when a man and a woman are coupled to practice combat:

The maduwa is always full of energy and excitement, not to mention a strong sense of comradeship. The *ath sellam* seem to blur distinctions between whether someone is a guy or a girl, since it doesn’t seem to matter. But it is not completely fluid either. The energy, the feeling in

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<sup>6</sup> Exercises included activities such as jumps, rolls and creeps.

<sup>7</sup> While I was practicing angampora fighting with Harshana Jayasinghe (one of the actors in the lab), I experienced that. But while this often happens, it cannot be concluded that it always happens that way.

doing an *ath sellam* fac to face with a guy and with a girl and different. I do not know how to describe these differences. I feel like it is part of the larger social system that we are located in (B. Premawardhana 2021, pers. comm. 9 September).

Though Premawardhana contends that the gender differences are blurred in the *angam maduwa* and the training, our gender roles defined in a social context are still be activated in the training context. Lyudmyla Honcharova is a trained actor who is pursuing a masters degree through the AHEAD Project. She has trained in various martial arts and combative training prior to her exposure to *angampora*. When asked how *angampora* influenced her social life as a woman, Honcharova states:

I could not say that *angampora* somehow affected my social life as a woman. Probably, that is because I have been practising other form of combative art forms in the past and it is a norm for me. However, I noticed that not many women are practising *angampora*. Most of the times, I practise with a group of men. But, I have never felt weaker than them as I always perform all the exercises on an equal term from my side. There should not be a gender division between fighters (L. Honcharova 2021, pers. comm. 10 September).

As Honcharova argues, she does not see a gender difference or division of physical strength between men and women when she practices *angampora* at the *angam maduwa*. As she has clearly stated, not many female combats are trained in the traditional setting of *angam maduwa*. However, in recent times, with the propagation of *angampora* in films and television, and media, female performers are encouraged to learn *angampora* as a way of strengthening their bodily presence. These female characters in television and films have often been portrayed in a masculine manner to elevate the ideology of manhood of *angampora* in the social milieu.

## 6. II: Self-awareness

Dharmaratne argues that his physicality has been changed through assiduous practice. He uses *angampora* warm-up exercises to keep him fit in his daily routine. Dharmaratne further argues that *angampora* training is improving his muscle memory, and an understanding is developed on the basis of where the parts of his body are located and how they are connected to each other. His muscle memory is being developed to a higher level where he can execute actions involuntarily.

Often, our perception of our bodies is also shaped by the discourses created by society. As indicated earlier, our understanding of our bodies, care, and well-being is formed and tailored through discursive mechanisms operated in different social domains. This is also true of actor training discourses. As Phillip B. Zarrilli argues, every time an actor enacts an action, she/he refers to a particular body of knowledge. As actors, we stand in front of a mirror during our training sessions, staring at our own bodies as if we were staring at something else. With this training, most actors also reveal that they feel physically and mentally wholesome. For example, Premawardhana says that “having being exposed to angampora, I am developing a greater awareness of my body” (B. Premawardhana 2021, pers. comm. 9 September).

When the actor learns angampora techniques, an imaginary opponent is always emphasized by the Master and is an ontological existence for the actor who follows certain body movements and strikes against the imaginary figure. The actor imagines her/his opponent similar to the mirror image and seeing her/his bodily presence through a mirror. The experience of being fully embodied and completeness is experienced by the actor and cultivate such awareness of her/his body and others. When a novice starts learning angampora, she/he starts with *ath haramba*, which is hand combat designed to fight with the opponents using hands strikes. Though it is called *ath haramba*, not only hands but leg movements are also coordinated in executing actions and reactions towards the opponents. As stated above, *ath haramba* is also practice and performed with imaginary opponents and Kanchana Malshani, a Colombo based dancer and choreographer, says that she had a better sense of her own strength when she started using angampora *ath sellam*. (K Malshani 2021, pers. comm. 5 September). She explained how angampora training affected her body awareness. Based on her experience, she argues that during angampora training, focusing on a specific location using her eyes, performing basic *sellam* can build her personality. During angampora training, she sharpened her eyes by avoiding being hit by someone else, punching from her hands and kicking from her feet, and training to maintain attention even if someone unexpected came behind her. She also said it increased her self-confidence.

Rathnayake describes the effects and changes she has noticed in her daily life since she started practising angampora. As human beings, a feeling of calmness and confidence is most important to our social lives. In particular, some people miss that calmness and confidence due to many social and political reasons. Because of their physical disabilities, race, ethnicity or gender. Thilakshini states:

It actually made me feel good that I know some kind of combative art form and it made me feel secure in a certain way. I don't know how to explain. It gave my body a sort of a versatility. That I was ready to do anything. Imagine if I'm walking on the road and suddenly, I have to run then my body was like ready for that (T. Rathnayake 2021, pers. comm., 7 September).

Our awareness of our own bodies is often limited. Because our acts are influenced by society, religion, and politics and we have a restricted understanding of what we can do in everyday life. But when an actor enters the performance space, she/he must recognize those limitations condensed in the body. The data collected illustrates that angampora training has helped to enhance the actors' self-awareness and self-confidence. As women, we are often challenged by these two things daily, leading to a misunderstanding of one's existence and a decline in personality. Through this training, we have also developed a better understanding of what the body is and where its boundaries lie. There has been an increasing shift from seeing the body as purely biological towards seeing it as a historical and cultural construction and a medium of social control.

## 7. Conclusion

Saumya Liyanage has observed that "Sri Lankan theatre and especially its performance practise are diminishing with elaborated technology and stage crafts. Further, he describes, the actor's body and its capacity are also marginalized for the sake of proscenium dialogical dramatic acts that we experience in contemporary theatre (Liyanage 2020: 03).

In angampora practice, we have identified movements that help body fitness, self-confidence and concern for one's body as well as movements that increase awareness of the others. These findings suggest that actors can also improve their skills through this training. Based on the actors' answers, we already know that angampora training can address the challenges of gender identity. From my interview with actors who underwent angampora training, I discovered that each actor had their own unique style of martial arts practice that was not based on gender. The impact of the training is to create a repertory of beings that force the performer to know his/her many potential bodies (Foley 2002: 177).

Additionally, in angampora, there is no stable rhythm, and we can play with our own choice of rhythm. I noticed at times that my movements did not match those of the others. Each actor had their own body rhythm<sup>8</sup> and colours.

Martial arts are fundamentally embodied activities, so questions surrounding the body and its functions play a crucial role in understanding female challenges today. After all, the body is central to the construction of meaning attributed to gendered difference, and it is through our embodiment of gender that the realities of such differences become reified. (Channon 2018: 2). Martial arts differ in notable ways from other physical cultural pursuits<sup>9</sup>. Because, the symbolic proximity of martial artistry to the matter of physical violence (Ibidem).

In angampora, actors are not identified and named based on their gender identity. Simply put, naming a fighter does not happen orally. In addition, movements are not created to create a woman, a man, an animal, or any other being, but to highlight the primordial identities that exist within us.<sup>10</sup> However, angampora training is designed to help all of us better recognize and expose our gendered bodies. According to Butler, speech (language) does not create identities as a male or female but only creates a fighter (act). This means that we all became the fighters in angampora and challenged gender identities through angampora training.

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<sup>8</sup> Angampora training does not use rhythm like dance forms, so free movement is possible. it was also difficult to practice in the beginning. As the performing arts practitioners, when we start practicing angampora as the beginners, automatically most of us were counting (example 1234/1234).

<sup>9</sup> Athletics, dance, fitness or team games.

<sup>10</sup> For example, when studying Kandyan dance compositions, the body of the dancer is transformed into an animal in relation to each individual in training.

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