

# Misty Corridors of Traditional

# ANGANPORA

One of our most ancient traditional martial arts, Angampora, that was used in many a battle against foreign invaders like the Portuguese and Dutch and then went underground when the British prohibited it, is seeing a new revival today.

'Angampora', is a traditional martial art in Sri Lanka, which is known to be one of the oldest fighting disciplines in the world. It's a deeply spiritual form of combat which has its roots in different philosophies of nature and astrology and also has a strong connection to music, employing rhythmic and flowing movements. 'Angampora' means 'unarmed combat'. Combat techniques wherein weapons are used are called 'Illangam'. 'Maya Angam' is a technique which involves the use of spells and incantations to confuse or bring an opponent down.

## HISTORY

What did Kataragama Mahasen of the Yaksha tribe, as legend would have it, who strode this land 25,000 years ago and showed off his prowess during a sura-asura battle, Ravana's grandfather Pulathisi, Kuveni, Acharya Pandula, Parakrama Bahu I, Dutugemunu and the Dasa Maha Yodayas, Vijaya Bahu I, Seethawaka Rajasinghe, Leuke Disawa, Meegasteene Adikaram and Wickremasinghe Mudliyar have in common?

Some genes for sure, as the Sinhala saying goes, "Thun Sinhalema Nedeyo", but the inextricable link is angan shastraya though known in those days as a parani deeshiya satan kramaya (ancient martial art).

There are written evidences to prove the existence of this combat form that dates back over 5000 years and myths and folklore that goes as far as 38,000 years that speak of the art of fighting named 'Angam', making it one of the oldest known forms of martial arts in the world.



## EARLY BEGINNINGS

According to the Sinhalese folklore, origin of Angampora dates back to over 33,000 years. It says that the fighting style had originated among the Yaksha tribe, one of the four helia-tribes which lived in Sri Lanka back then. Two ancient scripts named Varga Purnikawa and Pancha Rakkhawaliya identify nine hermits as its founders. The folklore describes Rana Ravana, a mythical warrior said to have lived 5,000 years ago, as the most feared Angam warrior of all time is worshiped as a fighting God even today.

There were two major schools of Angampora: Maruwaliya and Sudhaliya during the Kandy Period. These schools routinely fought each other in the early modern times of Sri Lanka. Leaders of these schools were known as Maruwaliya Muhandiram Nilame and Sudhalaya Muhandiram Nilame. These fights took place in the presence of the king, and were known as Angam-kotāganeema. The huts used by Angampora fighters for training, were known as "Angam Madu". These were built according to the concepts of Gebim Shasthaya, the traditional architecture.

## LEGENDARY MULLERIYA BATTLE

In 1562, Portuguese troops came to conquer Seethawaka Kingdom on behalf of Kotte Kingdom who were in favour of foreign Portuguese Colonial Army. This storied battle was between them and Angampora Army of Seethawaka Kingdom headed by Prince Tikiri. These foreign troops fought under the command of King Don Juan Darmapala of Kotte Kingdom and the mission was to take down Seethawaka Kingdom to Kotte Kingdom. Portuguese troops were massacred by Angampora Troops of Prince Tikiri and after this battle, it's said that the water of Mulleriya Lake turned to blood.

The Sinhalese forces, headed by Prince Tikiri, took down over 1600 Portuguese soldiers and were thus victorious within their struggle to free the motherland from the invading foreigners. The fighting technique utilized by the locals during the clash was Angampora, a famed combat practice that dominated the local martial arts scene.



Despite the fact that there had been number of armed conflicts between Seethawaka forces and Portuguese troops during the years 1550, 1552, 1561, 1562 and 1583 respectively, the first triumphant battle effectuated by Seethawaka combatants was on August 23, 1562. All relevant information pertaining to the Mulleriyawa battle (1562 AD) and Tikiri Kumaru Rajasinghe cannot be incorporated in a concise write-up similar to this. Hence, further historical particulars can be acquired by perusing [www.angampora.info](http://www.angampora.info).

## COLONIAL PERIOD AND BEYOND

'Angam' was freely practiced till the British Government banned and suppressed it in the 1800s. Under British rule, those practicing the art were shot below the knee, forcing people to abandon the art. But the experts in this fighting art educated the youth and secretly protected the art and they still continue doing it.

Considered one of the few very ancient forms of martial arts practiced long before karate and kung-fu and at a time sans guns and bombs, it was Anganpota that vanquished the Portuguese at Seethawaka. Having used it also against both the Dutch, and the British in the 1818 uprising triggered by Keppitipola, the British colonialists had in desperation prohibited Anganpota through a Gazette notification in 1827.



The weaponry used in Angampora was also banned while its practice and teaching were strictly prohibited. If anyone broke this law, the British had warned, they would be shot at sight below the knee, hence it was then that this martial art went underground. As the British set ablaze Angam Madu across the country, the exponents of this technique quickly added the movements and steps to different dance forms to keep it alive.

There were several traditional martial art families in Ancient Sri Lanka and the truth about current time is that most of those families are obsolete. From those ancient traditions, history ancestry was recognized as "Korathota Arachchi Tradition" who were a strong Angampora tribe who lived surrounding Korathota Village in Kaduwela at the time of aforesaid Mulleriyawa Battle.

## PRESENT DAY

Angampora has been the subject of a number of films and television dramas in Sri Lanka. Jayantha Chandrasiri's tele-dramas Dandubasnāmanaya and Akāla Sandhya were also based on Angam. These dramas have boosted the recent revival of this now-declined martial art.

## THE STUDENTS

The opportunity to study the indigenous combating technique is rare and those accepted into the circle are chosen with utmost caution. Korathota Angam Muhandiram (Grand Teacher) Ajantha Mahantharachchi explains that the words of the Ola leaf are what help make that vital choice. "Not everyone can become a student of Angampora. The horoscope must be read. It carries weight and tells us what the past life experiences of each individual have been. We need to know what the person's life expectancy is and if they possess the qualities of a warrior.

Purity of thought and the potential to develop one's mind is comprehensible through the message of the Ola leaf. We need to know if their knowledge of the Angam Satan Kalawa (the fighting techniques of Angam) will not lead them to take advantage of others or use it unjustly.



## THE LEARNING

Angampora involves combatants making use of both striking and grappling techniques, often fighting until death or till the opponent is caught in a submission lock. In combat, the perimeters of fighting are defined in advance, and in some of the cases take place in a pit-like arena, known as the 'Ura Wala'. While the usage of weapons in Angampora is optional, its evolution is seen during the advent of European invasions in Sri Lanka. The techniques of combat depend heavily upon psychological development, physical exercise, healthy eating and Ayurvedic healing.

The school of Angampora is divided into a number of sub-categories. Angam: unarmed combat utilizing parts of the human body, such as gataputtu (locks and grips) and pora haramba (strikes and blocks), Illangam: using various types of arms and weaponry comprising the ethunu kaduwa (sharp strips of metal tied together), spears, knives and swords, Nilangam or Nila Shasthaya: involving the use of pressure point attacks to inflict pain or permanently paralyze the opponent and, its most unique feature, Maya Angam: spells and incantations as a fighting technique. Mahantharachchi also stresses on the importance of music in the success of the overall method of combat. For instance, rana bera wadanaya (beating of the war drums) and hatan kavi (battle songs) played an imperative role in the preliminary stages of war.

