

The portrayal of silat in 'Mat Kilau'



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SILAT teachers and instructors today impart to practitioners the authenticity of the movements, techniques, clothing, weapons or mannerisms, which are the style of the school of silat.

This is important because it establishes a connection with the past, which subsequently creates a sense of identity.

It can also be viewed as something irrelevant due to its association with the concept of intangible heritage, according to the 2003 Unesco Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, which Malaysia ratified in 2013.

For example, if a school of silat disowns the *keris* and instead us-

es guns and rifles in its self-defence practices, with the excuse that the latter weapons are more modern, this follows the dynamic concept of intangible heritage.

Could a silat school discard the *keris* as its weapon? The *keris* is a part of the silat school because of its identity as a unique weapon and it personifies the Malay people and their identity.

The movie *Mat Kilau* unknowingly brought up this dichotomy between the significance or irrelevancy of authenticity of intangible heritage.

Some silat practitioners have been waiting for such a movie that showcases the martial art of silat and the Malay warrior spirit.

For the *Mat Kilau* audience, the movie delivered action, suspense, a setting and a message, and the authenticity of the intangible heritage depicted is not an issue for them.

I came across comments from fellow silat practitioners and

martial arts enthusiasts on social media.

Their perception is that the elements of silat were not represented as they should be in the movie. Some even said the movie did not portray silat at all. These opinions seemed too puritanical.

But due to the fact that this yearning for authenticity comes from the practitioners of silat, their thoughts must be respect-

ed, just like those who think that the movie is fine as it is.

Therefore, what should be the outcome of this dissonance?

We have to first bring into balance the authenticity of

silat and the sense of authenticity. It's about acceptance and adaptation. Typical movie-goers have accepted the movie as it is, but they need to accept that it is just an interpretation of the life of Mat Kilau. And with it comes an interpretation of the intangible heritage of silat — the storytelling of heritage and not the

translation of a language.

Just as historians and Mat Kilau descendants would not want children to see the movie as a historical anecdote about Mat Kilau, many silat practitioners do not want people to think that the silat portrayal in the movie is the correct representation.

What the movie does well, though, is to boldly adapt the elements of silat to exude a sense of authenticity. The "puritans" amongst silat practitioners must also accept that the movie was just depicting an interpretation of silat.

The identity of silat reflects authenticity and a sense of authenticity is established by having silat in the movie. For non-silat practitioners who watched *Mat Kilau*, due to their misunderstanding of silat, the "performance" of silat could not be other than authentic.

Thus, rather than hating the movie, silat practitioners who value the authenticity of silat must accept that the movie is successful despite its interpretation of silat.

What they need to do is to relay

this fact to all silat students, as well as hold talks, seminars and shows on authentic silat. In other words, they have to adapt to the status quo that was impacted by the *Mat Kilau* movie.

So how should silat be depicted in movies? In my opinion, it can be depicted as being interpretive or authentic. The former, however, must come with a disclaimer stating the interpretive nature of silat or elements of silat.

Can there be a blend of authentic and interpretive silat? That's what Hollywood and Asian movies have been doing for ages.

They may show one aspect of a martial art that is authentic, for example, the forms or traditional movements, and combine it with a flurry of exaggerated and choreographed fighting sequences.

Mat Kilau is a stepping stone for movies to reach the pinnacle of action movies that follow in the footsteps of Hollywood.

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