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# DEFENDERS OF THE ART OF SILAT

**ALAN TEH LEAM SENG** embarks on a journey through time to discover the origins of silat and the roles played by exponents of the ancient art of self-defence in Malay communities of former times



**D**ESPITE it being a leisurely Sunday morning at Kuala Lumpur's Petaling Street Flea Market, my heart skips a beat after coming across an intriguing Persekutuan Tanah Melayu-era stamp, which immediately brings to mind a local movie that is fast becoming a household name throughout the nation.

Prominently featuring the traditional Malay art of self-defence, the precious keepsake's silat theme resonates with the *Mat Kilau: Kebangkitan Pahlawan* blockbuster, which is now the highest-grossing Malaysian film of all time. With the hit movie cruising towards the RM100 million box office record, it is not surprising that the well-attended screenings have triggered fresh interest in silat.

#### EARLY DEVELOPMENTS

Riding this phenomenal wave are silat associations and training centres, which are experiencing a marked pickup in enrolment. Since *Mat Kilau* began gracing silver screens nationwide, public perception on silat has improved dramatically with children as young as 5 and seniors well into their 50s signing up for basic courses.

Previously considered as just an ancient village-centric pastime that was nothing more than a graceful form of fencing in slow motion designed to entertain distinguished guests at functions with images of war without its guilt, silat is now viewed positively as an age-old Malay art of self-defence that develops character, boosts resourcefulness and enhances fitness through rigorous and disciplined training regimes.

While the exact origin of silat has been lost in the sands of time, its genesis was sparked by the need for self-defence and hunt-

ing techniques among the early Malays and Chams, the only sizable Austronesians who had established themselves in South-east Asia since the Iron Age. Over time, this accumulated knowledge amalgamated with various Neolithic period influences from nearby regions to become deeply entrenched and highly indispensable.

Later infusions through Indian and Chinese silk route trade and diplomacy together with influences from the powerful Langkasuka and Srivijaya empires eventually formed the progenitor of silat in this region.

#### ORIGIN OF SILAT

The silat form that we know today is probably of Sumatran origin. Upon arrival of Muslim missionaries at the end of the 13th century, it was said that three young men, Burhanuddin, Shamsuddin and Aminuddin, journeyed from their Minangkabau homes to Aceh on the island's north-east tip to study the new religion.

Their religious teacher's house was near a forest pool fed by water that cascaded directly into the water body from a rocky ridge in the hills high above. Apart from creating a constant succession of ripples that spread to the outer edges in concentric rings, the powerful impact also produced a whirlpool that eventually drew everything back to its depths. Treasuring the scenic tranquillity, the youths spent many leisure hours bathing under the shade of a towering Bongor tree.

One morning, Aminuddin ventured to the pool with bamboo cylinders to fetch water for the household. His curiosity was roused after noticing a bright mauve Bongor flower riding a ripple that was sucked to the middle. Instead of being swallowed by the whirlpool, a timely spray from



Celebrated guru silat Haji Su (right) and his son demonstrating Kelantan-style silat in the 1950s. PIX COURTESY OF ALAN TEH LEAM SENG



All nine Federation of Malaya states issued a definitive stamp featuring the silat theme in 1957.

the waterfall acted like an animated artillery barrage that pushed the flower outwards to the edge nearest to Aminuddin.

Picking up the bloom, the young man heard a voice from the Bongor tree telling him to remember the phenomenon and share the knowledge with his friends. That afternoon, silat was born when the trio successfully adapted the floral manoeuvres into an intricate set of movements for arms and feet to ward off attacks.

Upon return to their village, the friends established a school where students studied the teachings of Islam until it was time for *Asar* prayers before practising silat until *Maghrib*. As time passed, their fame spread and young men came from far and wide to seek both spiritual knowledge and physical skills. Minangkabau gained fame as the home of silat in the Nusantara when the pupils returned to their distant homes.

#### SILAT INTRICACIES

Firmly established and practised throughout the Malay Peninsula for at least 500 years,



Newly inducted apprentices learning silat steps and hand movements in Temerloh, Pahang.

silat until today is taught to small groups of young men numbering between 12 and 20. Before training commences, a short opening ceremony gives participants an opportunity to each make a solemn promise to use the knowledge received solely for self-defence purposes.

Dressed smartly in formal Malay attire, they enter the *gelanggang* (court) for the first time in the late evening before taking turns to each present a betel box, some white cotton cloth, a knife and money to the instructor in a ceremony steeped in tradition. The amount of cloth and

cash given to the guru silat would depend on the student's affordability and course duration.

Keeping everything except the betel box, the guru silat accepts the vows before joining his pupils in a simple meal of rice and curried meat while watching a silat demonstration put up by senior pupils on the *gelanggang's* hard and smooth earthen floor.

Savouring dinner while sitting cross-legged on a low platform lined with pandanus mats, the apprentices get a clear view of the entire rectangular training area, which is surrounded by a chest-high fence of rough planks,



*A silat demonstration never fails to draw a crowd.*



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The July 1976 issue of 'Kedah In History' magazine details Tunku Kassim's role in advancing silat gayong in Kedah.



*A traditional music ensemble accompanying a silat performance.*

roofed with nipah thatch and several kerosene pressure lamps hanging from the crossbeams.

Training no fewer than six nights a week, beginners dressed in short-sleeved singlets and loose-fitting cotton trousers with their feet bare begin by learning basic terms like *langkah*, which refers to a number of standard poses used to parry various attack types.

While lessons are not intended to be applied in any particular sequence, students are taught to use their acquired knowledge on attack, defend and counter-attack instinctively to suit specific situations. In Kelantan, for example, all moves become secondary to the main intention of quickly numbing or disabling the opponent by unleashing a lethal blow to a certain neck, arm or leg muscle.

#### **PAST DUELS**

In the distant past, skilful silat exponents were revered, much like prominent modern-day social media celebrities and influencers where popularity was measured by having the most number of followers. While still

in their prime, notable champions were matched against each other for the entertainment of monarchs and members of their royal household. Quite a number of these high-profile contests, however, did not come to pass for a variety of reasons, including political tact.

Case in point was a 1905 battle royal that nearly took place in the court of Sultan Ahmad al-Mu'az-zam Shah. The monarch, who secured the Pahang throne from his brother through superior leadership, tactical skill and courage in a bruising four-decade-long civil war, invited Sutan Sailan to duel with his court champion after finding out that the notable Minangkabau silat duellist was in town.

The competition was fixed at an hour before midnight as most court functions then were held after dark to take advantage of the cool breeze blowing in from nearby Sungai Pahang. News of the impending titanic tussle spread like wildfire and a huge crowd began congregating at the audience hall after *Isha* prayers.

Everyone relished the opportunity to see Sutan Sailan, who de-

scended from a long line of prominent silat masters and was said to have inherited secret techniques that were exclusively handed down by word of mouth from the master to his heir apparent.

Sutan Sailan, however, was caught in a catch-22 situation. Although confident of defeating the local champion, he did not want to embarrass the Pahang ruler and feared hostilities might surface following his expected success. After much contemplation, Sutan Sailan drew on his vast silat knowledge and experience to come up with an amicable solution.

At the appointed hour, both contenders stood face to face wearing short-sleeved shirts, loose-fitting cotton trousers, short sarongs and batik headcloths folded low to leave the crown of the head uncovered. Unarmed, both men turned towards the Pahang ruler to pay their respects.

While returning to their initial positions, Sutan Sailan touched the local champion lightly. Almost immediately, the latter began clutching his stomach and

raced through the moonlit path at breakneck speed towards the river. Seized by an unexplained and violent diarrhoea attack, he did not return to the *gelanggang* that evening. No attempts were made for a rematch and Sutan Sailan happily set sail for home at dawn the next day.

#### **UNIFORM SYSTEM**

In the 20th century, silat continued to attract strong interest right up to the onset of World War 2. During the tumultuous Japanese Occupation, many headed back to their home villages to escape interrogations from the Kempetai secret police and debilitating food shortages, which were rampant in urban areas throughout Malaya.

Ironically, those dark days turned out to be a blessing in disguise for silat. The marked uptick in interest prompted a group of far-sighted Malays led by Datuk Onn Jaafar to formulate a uniform system to teach silat. That historic move marked the birth of silat gayong, where everyone, including the guru silat, wore black shirts, trousers and head-cloths.

Held in the open, the systematic two-year training regime involved students acquiring skills on unarmed combat in the first year before progressing on to weapon usage for self-defence. Upon graduation, a well-trained silat exponent preserved for the rest of his life keen eyesight, lightning fast reflexes, supreme self-confidence and, most importantly, instinctive counter-strokes to ward off sudden attacks.

Gaining fame for its practicality and efficiency, silat gayong began to spread rapidly after the Japanese surrendered in 1945. Tunku Kassim, the elder brother of the Kedah prince as well as Malaya and later Malaysia's first prime minister Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj, was among the first to lend whole-

hearted encouragement and support to the movement.

During the Malayan Emergency, silat made national headlines following an August 1949 incident in Pahang when eight experienced Malay martial art exponents successfully held their own against an overwhelming force of more than 60 armed communist terrorists for nearly three hours.

#### **SAVED BY SILAT VIRTUES**

Guarding Temerloh's Kampung Paya Jejawi defence post located near their homes, the men drew from the very essence of their rigorous silat training the supreme discipline and character needed to bravely stand their ground despite facing mortal danger.

Even though the guard post was eerily illuminated by flames from two nearby houses that were intentionally set on fire by the bandits to instil fear, the men continued returning fire with great economy of ammunition until the enemy was forced to melt away into the darkness at the approach of a relieving police force. The Malay art of self-defence won a notable victory that night as the gallant defenders emerged unscathed from the brutal onslaught.

This noteworthy exploit of selflessness and supreme bravery, together with many other incidents that happened throughout the Malayan Emergency and the later Indonesian Confrontation, continued to stand silat in good stead throughout the final few decades of the last millennium.

Together with the timely leg-up provided by the *Mat Kilau* blockbuster, it is hoped that the current silat revival will provide a legion of new enthusiasts with a means of developing resourcefulness and character while perpetuating an honoured ancient practice that became famous at the dawn of the Melaka Sultanate.