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Abstract: Pencak Silat is widely known as the martial art originating from the Indo-Malayan Archipelago. It is a generic name for an enormous variety of homegrown styles of self-defence, performance art and cultural knowledge. As a product of internationalization, organisations such as the IPSI and PERSILAT have tried to collate and unify Pencak Silat from across the archipelago for a more marketable system of self-defence. However, do systematized forms of Pencak Silat do justice to the essence of the art? The systematization and formalization of Pencak Silat for an international audience may help the distribution and acquisition of movement vocabularies, but it may overlook distinct properties of the traditional art. Traditional Pencak Silat teachers do not use the same teaching styles as martial arts teachers from China or Japan. In fact, Pencak Silat instructors in Indonesia may be more correctly conceptualized as fight-choreographers rather than self-defence instructors. Learning Pencak Silat is a collaborative exercise between teacher and student. Teachers grant themselves the freedom to adapt to and be inspired by their students. Subsequently, Pencak Silat teachers expand the knowledge and movement vocabularies of their students by increasing their awareness of how to recognize and escape from danger. Testament to the adaptability of Pencak Silat teachers is the diversity of styles of Pencak Silat found throughout the Americas, Africa, Asia-Pacific, Europe, and the Middle East. These styles have arisen through the interaction of Indo-Malayan instructors with foreign students. However, these styles are often less popular and less widely spread than the more standardized styles of Pencak Silat such as Silat Perisai Diri. Silat Perisai Diri is a highly systematized style of Pencak Silat that allows many students to be taught at once. More traditional styles of teaching only allow for a few students to be taught at a time. The essence of Pencak Silat may not necessarily be found in systematic teaching of various movement sequences. Just as traditional Indo-Malayan music is taught without notation, so too is traditional Pencak Silat taught without an over-riding system but with an underlying feeling. While those Pencak Silat schools found internationally that practice systematized forms of the art may be performing traditional movements, those schools with no systematized teaching styles may in fact be performing traditional knowledge.

## Conceptualising Pencak Silat

Pencak Silat is a socio-cultural activity practiced all over the world. You only have to google the words 'Pencak Silat' to discover its popularity. The origins of Pencak Silat are found in the Indo-Malayan archipelago, but it has found new forms outside the Archipelago.

Pencak Silat is arguably thousands of years old and probably originated from Indonesian Royalty (Maryono, 1998). The martial component developed through warfare from ancient to modern times. The music is borrowed from pre-existing musical ensembles and may vary according to the type of ensemble playing in the area. Musical accompaniment may include any combination of the following instruments: the *gendang*, (a double-sided barrel drum, a feature instrument for Pencak Silat), the *kenong* (suspended gongs), *gong* (hanging gong), *ceng-ceng* (small cymbals), *sarunai* (single reed bamboo short clarinet), *tarompét* (double reed aerophone), *suling* (bamboo flute), *saluang* (a basic bamboo flute with four holes) and/or *bansi* (a bamboo recorder). The music and movement of Pencak Silat have largely separate historical developments. In performance, the music of Pencak Silat generally follows the actions of the performers.

A typical Sundanese Pencak Silat performance often begins with the *kendang* and *tarompét* players improvising briefly in free rhythm (Nettl & Stone, 2002:709). The *Pesilat* (Pencak Silat practitioners) will ceremoniously bow to each other before commencing. For most of the performance, the practitioners will dance around each other demonstrating virtuosic movements of dance and martial technique. The movement is characterised by lots of hand movements, intricate feet manoeuvres, rolling and jumping. The actual combat can begin spontaneously or by being cued by the drum. This section is onomatopoeically called *padungdung*. The accompanying orchestra will often attempt to simulate the clashes between the *Pesilat* by playing loud crashes and speeding up the rhythm. A *tarompét* player, (if present), will rapidly rise in pitch into the highest register and use vibrato and other dramatic techniques. The fight is quite realistic and only lasts for a very brief time (generally 30 secs to 1 min). The clashes between exponents are normally marked by bangs of the drum and crashes on the gongs (Nettl & Stone, 2002:709). The end is frequently denoted by one of the *Pesilat* winning over his/her opponent.

Pencak Silat can be described as a martial art, a dance or a form of self-defence. In an early ethnography of Pencak Silat, De Zoete and Spies (1938), watching two girls performing Pencak Silat movements, made the observation that "There was no idea of a fight, only a slow dance based on the already very stylized fighting movements of *Pentjak* [sic]" (p. 255). It is perhaps unsurprising that some martial arts combine elements of dance. Martial arts are socially instituted cultural behaviours that naturally oscillate towards cooperative equilibria. Training can only proceed if there is a friendly practice environment. Jean-Michel Dumay commenting on the Japanese martial art of Aikido in the French journal, *Le Monde* (2004), made explicit that martial arts are practiced by partners, not adversaries. Martial arts are the study of conflict. They require a certain level of cooperation to train conflict. This apparent cooperation leads observers to remark

that, "...movements are fluid and dance-like" (O'Connor, 1999:4). Practitioners must share a common understanding of the significance and potential danger of a large variety of movements. The systems of movement, in any martial art, are composed of socially agreed upon attacks, escapes and defenses. The meaning in the movements arises from the interaction of a group of practitioners. The socially distributed understanding of these movements allows them to be performed synchronously and dance-like. When taken out of their social milieu, martial movements cease to be cooperative.

Pak Wongsonegoro, founder and first Chair of the Ikatan Pencak Silat Indonesia, stated that, "*Pencak* is composed of offensive-defensive movements in the form of dance that are in harmony with certain traditional codes of etiquette. *Pencak* is generally performed in public. *Silat* is the essence of *pencak*, the art of fighting or defending oneself at all costs, which may not be performed in public" (Maryono 1998:5). Pencak Silat incorporates elements of dance, but it is not pure dance. De Zoete & Spies (1938:253) explicitly delineated the difference between dance and martial movements, "Whereas dancers in general in Bali present as wide a surface as possible, in *Pentjak* on the contrary the body offers the narrowest possible surface" (De Zoete & Spies 1938:253). In the words of Clifford Geertz, Pencak Silat is a 'blurred Genre' (Geertz, 1983). It is best referred to as a 'socio-cultural activity' as opposed to a martial art or a form of dance because it is neither and it is both at the same time.

Like dancers, martial artists search for physical efficiency in their movement as well as complexity in their range of skills. However, movements for martial arts are restricted by their potential functionality. There is a high degree of selectivity in the movements practiced. Practitioners choose those movements they deem to be useful for potential combat situations. Kicks, punches, blocks, throws, escapes, locks and holds all have a potential martial function while pirouettes and tango-dips may only have an aesthetic value. Those movements that are chosen are distributed and practiced among peers. If the effectiveness of a movement is mutually agreed upon by a community of practitioners then the movement is absorbed into the movement vocabulary of the group. The movement then becomes preserved in the collective memory of the group. The movement vocabulary maintained by any particular group is dependent on the life-histories, experiences and physical abilities of the individuals. It is these shared vocabularies of movement distributed across a community of practitioners that make blurred genres of martial arts like Pencak Silat seem like a dance.

Pencak Silat, as a socio-cultural activity, is a performance art. Movements are performed for fellow practitioners and can be performed before an audience. During training, the performance of a movement elicits a reaction in a training-partner so that the rehearsal of a movement sequence can ensue. The various *jurus* (movement sequences) practiced by many *Pesilat* (Pencak Silat practitioners) are in fact choreographed fights. The *jurus* comprise of movements that are considered too dangerous to be improvised by inexperienced practitioners. They are a way for teachers to introduce the basic concepts of their *aliran* (style of learning) to new students and a way to distribute a shared understanding of the perceptual saliency of movement vocabularies across members of the *perguruan* (Pencak Silat school). Once practitioners share the same perceptual

worlds, their intertwined movements start to resemble both theatre and dance. They can symbolically gesture dangerous movements with their bodies to their fellow practitioners and expect a suitable acknowledgement and reply. This blurred genre of socio-cultural activity can at times only seem to make sense to the practitioners themselves.

### **Pencak Silat Internationally**

In order to understand the spread of Pencak Silat across the world and the effect of internationalization on Pencak Silat, it is important to understand Pencak Silat as a blurred genre. Pencak Silat has been all too quickly conceptualized as a martial art by international audiences. Likewise, Indonesian organizations such as the IPSI and the PERSILAT have been all too happy to export Pencak Silat as a martial art. By conceptualizing Pencak Silat with a more balanced understanding of the various idiosyncrasies of the art, we begin to understand the various nuances that arise regionally and internationally. We begin to understand the role of Pencak Silat teacher as more than a martial arts trainer or a self-defence instructor, but also as a fight-choreographer.

There is a vast array of styles of Pencak Silat found outside the Indo-Malayan Archipelago. Sometimes foreign styles of Pencak Silat share no similarity to styles found within the archipelago. This may lead some people to call into question the originality of each form. However, once we understand the multifariousness of the art we can begin to understand why various schools can be so different. Pencak Silat instructors have more choreographic skills than other styles of martial arts. The Pencak Silat teacher uses choreographic tools such as imagery where students are encouraged to train movements mimicking cranes, eagles, tigers, horses, otters, swallows and dragons. Pencak Silat is taught with feeling rather than by simple repetition. It can sometimes be a slow process, but it offers practitioners skills that systematized forms don't have. It also means that, depending on the teacher, the various styles of Pencak Silat are adaptable when taught in new contexts.

Another aspect of the internationalization of Pencak Silat is the 'exotic appeal' of being an Oriental art. "*Pentjak-silat* is certainly to be termed a combative form indigenous to Indonesia. But it is a synthesis product, not a purely autogenic endeavour." (Maryono 1998:36). The exotic appeal has often meant that Pencak Silat gets diluted with a number of other Asian traditions. Throughout my travels in France, Germany, Holland and Australia, I have encountered teachers and students of Pencak Silat who freely share their knowledge of the art with generous splashes of Chinese, Japanese and sometimes (much to my surprise) African philosophy. I have talked with *Pesilat* in Australia about the Tao of Pencak Silat movements and I have discussed the use of acupuncture points in subduing adversaries with Dutch *Pesilat*. This cultural dilution does not seem to matter to many Pencak Silat teachers because many have a focus on imparting a way of thinking about the art rather than maintaining a pure and fallable form. For *Pesilat*, "*Alam takambang jadi guru*," (Environment becomes the teacher), and therefore when the environment changes, so too do the movements, (and possibly the music?), of Pencak Silat.

According to Amir Syakur (2007:253), contemporary Pencak Silat has already become a sport of self-defence which is contested in regional and national arenas. During the 1950s, the style of Pencak Silat in each village was very different with no systematization or general standard (Syakur 2007:253). In many places, this is still the case. However, “Progressive schools have worked enthusiastically to standardize *pencak silat* movements into packages geared towards specific levels of proficiency” (Maryono 2002:113). Systematised *jurus* that can be repeated by large numbers of people at the same time are effective ways of distributing knowledge with great speed. This type of learning possibly draws upon the semantic memory skills of the brain which facilitates the rapid acquisition and transmission of new movement vocabularies. The traditional way of teaching using feeling and intuition possibly draws upon the episodic memory skills of the brain and requires close guidance by a single teacher. This method is restricted because it means that teachers cannot teach too many students at one time. This may account for the apparent international success of systematized forms of Pencak Silat.

Silat Perisai Diri is one such school to successfully create exportable *jurus* to an international audience. Movements are taught in a very simple attack and response manner until students can string different movements together by themselves. Only thirty years ago, Perisai Diri was already “practiced by almost 75,000 exponents throughout Indonesia and has international devotees in The Netherlands, France, Italy, Canada, the United States of America, and Australia” (Quintin & Draeger 1978:12). Today, in Australia alone, there is a Silat Perisai Diri school in each major city. However, this style of Pencak Silat more closely resembles a sport and a self-defence rather than the art form. It should also be said that the success of this group was also due to the fact that the founder of Silat Perisai Diri, R.M.S. Dirdjoatmodjo, was tolerant of non-muslim practitioners of his art. It has been reputed that some schools will refuse non-muslim practitioners. In my own fieldwork, religion has not impeded inclusion in Pencak Silat training but it has been suggested that only those practitioners who convert to Islam will acquire the magic knowledge known only to *Guru Besar*.

While both the IPSI (Ikatan Pencak Silat Indonesia) and PERSILAT (Persekutuan Pencak Silat Antarbangsa) acknowledge that there are various forms of Pencak Silat ranging from the art forms to the sport forms, there is a large focus on Pencak Silat as a fighting-art. However, this may overlook what Pencak Silat really has to offer. Pencak Silat’s niche as an art to practice fighting skills is that it offers unique ways of understanding movement catered for fighting. It blends aesthetic and functional elements into choreographed performance. The movements on their own may be unimportant, it may be the underlying feeling which is the essence and niche of Pencak Silat.

### **Music for the fight**

The role of music for Pencak Silat regionally and internationally is a point of interest to see the displacement of a socio-cultural activity. Pencak Silat can be practiced with or without music. There is often no musical accompaniment in daily practice; the music is provided generally for official occasions. To an outside observer the music and movement, when performed together, appear inextricably linked. While the music of Pencak Silat matches the movement seamlessly, “The notion of music...is not an integral

part of silat” (Mustaffa 1978:5-6). History would suggest that the martial art evolved well before the development of bronze technology used for the majority of the musical instruments. “Musicians usually know a certain amount of Silat but the Silat exponents do not normally know how to produce the accompanying music. In daily silat practices there is no music accompaniment; the music is provided only on official occasions” (Mustaffa, 1978:6). And yet, when some of the first anthropologists observed Pencak Silat they remarked that the “Music and movement are absolutely interwoven” (De Zoete & Spies, 1938:253).

Due to the national and international focus on Pencak Silat as a martial art, the inclusion of music in training and performances has often been neglected. Fewer and fewer musicians within Indonesia are adept at accompanying Pencak Silat performances and it is rare to find international *Perguruan* that train with live music. It is my contention, that the unidirectional relationship between music and movement in Pencak Silat has impeded the export of Pencak Silat music. Unlike Capoeira, an Afro-Brazilian form of fight-dancing, where the music leads the movement, in Pencak Silat the music follows the movement. While Capoeira is never trained without music because the music drives the movement, Pencak Silat is frequently trained without music.

The music of Pencak Silat, which has long been a substantial part of public performances in traditional and modern settings, has been abolished from official international and national tournaments (Paetzold, 2005). The loss of music in Pencak Silat performances is indicative of aspects of the art that are being overlooked by systematized forms that place greater emphasis on fighting-skills as opposed to the choreographic and intuitive skills developed by regional forms.

### **Blurred Beauty**

Pencak Silat in Indonesia is often used at circumcision rituals, wedding ceremonies, rice harvest celebrations, penghulu events and a variety of national festivities. The role of the traditional Pencak Silat teacher was not always limited to the teaching of fighting skills. The Pencak Silat instructor was and still is commonly asked to perform at various social occasions. In Indonesia, this has diversified the range of skills of *Pesilat* and their teachers. Outside of Indonesia, Pencak Silat may be taught as an art to train fighting skills, but it has also become elaborate form of spiritual and humanistic education (Maryono, 1999).

There are 800 different schools of Pencak Silat and 260 different styles spread across 1300 islands (Maryono, 1999). In West Java alone, there are approximately 20 styles (Wilson, 2002:39). There are many widely spread international styles and countless idiosyncratic styles found outside the Indo-Malayan Archipelago. “Despite the more recent development of standardized national and international versions of Pencak Silat,” as Wilson (2002) observed, “local variations and innovations continue to emerge.” Variant movements and styles of fight-dancing are continuously being generated. Some of the beauty of this blurred genre is found in the rich source of variety in movements and movement vocabularies. The ultimate beauty of this performance art, however, may be found in the *Keluarga* (the family), that it creates among its members.

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