

Pencak Silat in the Indonesian Archipelago

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Many of the readers may wonder what pencak silat actually is. In the Philippines, with its many martial art forms, pencak silat is still relatively unknown. And yet, pencak silat is part of our common Malay culture which covers Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, Brunei Darussalam, the Philippines and some small islands close to them. In all these countries pencak silat can be found although its name may vary. In Malaysia, people talk of "bersilat" to indicate their self-defense techniques comprising of more than 260 different styles. The same term is also used in Singapore and in South Thailand, while in Brunei Darussalam and the southern Philippines people use the shortest version of "silat". In other Philippine regions, the term "pasilat" is also used. According to Mark Wiley, pencak silat entered the Philippines from Riau and together with the Chinese martial art of Kuntao influenced the development of "Kali", which he and other martial art experts consider the "mother art of the Philippines" or the source of all martial arts in the country.

In my country, Indonesia, the official name used to indicate more than 800 martial arts schools and styles spread across more than 13,000 islands is "pencak silat". However, this is actually a compound name consisting of two terms used in different regions. The work "pencak" and its dialectic derivatives such as "penca" (West Java) and "mancak" (Madura and Bali) is commonly used in Java, Madura and Bali, whereas the term "silat" or "silek" is used in Sumatra. The ambition to unify all these different cultural expressions in a common terminology, as part of declaring Indonesia's unity and independence from colonial power was first expressed in 1948 with the establishment of the Ikatan Pencak Silat Indonesia (Indonesian Pencak Silat Association, IPSI). However, it could only be realized in 1973 when representatives from different schools and styles finally formally agreed to the use of "pencak silat" in official discourse, albeit original terms are still widely used at the local level.

The richness of terms reflects a wide diversity in styles and techniques across the regions due to the fact that pencak silat has been developed by different masters who have created their own style according to their preferences and to the physical environment and social-cultural context in which they live.

Let's take as examples West Java, Central Java and West Sumatra. West Java is inhabited by a specific ethnic group with specific cultural and social norms. For them, pencak silat is part of their way of life or as they say is "the blood in their body". In their language they say "penca" or "menpo" (from 'men poho', which literally means play with trickery) to indicate their four main styles Cimande, Cikalong, Timbangan and Cikaret and all the schools and techniques which have derived from them.

The Sundanese people have always utilized 'penca/mempo' for self-defense and recreation, and only recently have started to use it as a sport in national and regional competitions. In its self-defense form, using hand fighting techniques combined with a series of characteristic footsteps such as *langkah zigzag* (zigzag step), *langkah tilu* (triangular step), *langkah opat* (quadrangular step) and *langkah lam alip*, penca can be very dangerous.

Penca as art (*penca ibing*) has been a source of inspiration for traditional Sundanese dances, such as *Jaepongan*, *Ketu'tilu*, *Dombret*, and *Cikeruhan* and actually it resembles dance in its use of music instruments. These instruments called "pencak drummers" (*gendang penca*)

are devoted exclusively to *penca* performances and consist of two sets of drummers (*gendang anak dan kulantir*), a trumpet (*tetet*) and a gong. Pencak performances also use standard music rhythms, such as *tepak dua*, *tepak tilu*, *tepak dungdung*, *golempang* and *paleredan*. *Penca* as art is not considered dangerous and can be openly shown to everyone. From generation to generation until today, *penca* performances animate wedding parties, rituals of circumcision, celebrations of the rice harvest and all kinds of national festivities.

In contrast, in West Java and Central Java, Javanese people have traditionally used pencak only for self-defense and are not inclined to show it in public. Furthermore, the spiritual aspect (*kebatinan*) is much more dominant. This is probably related to the fact that pencak silat in Central Java developed from the Sultanate of Yogyakarta and later expanded to surrounding neighborhoods after the kingdoms lost their political role in the 15th and 16th centuries. In the *keraton* (Sultan's palace) pencak silat had undergone a transformation from pure martial art to be used in combat, to an elaborate form of spiritual and humanistic education. In this later form it spread outside the *keraton* walls where it developed the use of self-defense techniques to reach spiritual awareness as well as the use of inner powers to attain supernatural physical strength.

Again pencak silat in West Sumatra is a different cultural expression in both its forms and meaning. Similarly to West Java, in West Sumatra a distinction is made between self-defense, called *sile'* or *silat*, and the related version called *pencak* which has influenced many traditional dances such as *Seewah*, *Alo Ambek* and *Gelombang*. The ethnic group of Minangkabau who lives around the Merapi Mountain in West Sumatra regard *silat* as their village's heirloom (*pusaka anak nagari*) which is meant for the youth to defend themselves while travelling ashore and it is not intended for outsiders. Instead *pencak* as a dance is accessible to everybody. In this region almost every village (*nagari*) has a different style (*aliran*) of silat as reflected by the many names, some of which refer to the founders (like Silat Tuanku Ulakan, Silat Pakik Rabun, Silat Malin Marajo) and some to the original locations where the style was developed (Silat Kumango, Silat Lintau, Silat Starlak, Silat Pauh, Silat Painan, Silat Sungai Patai and Silat Fort de Kock). These styles can be classified into two main groups according to their foot-stands (*kuda-kuda*) they use. In the coastal area, silat styles use a very low *kuda-kuda* and prefer hand techniques whereas in the mountain area the *kuda-kuda* is higher and foot techniques are dominant. This is due to the different environments in which silat has developed. On the sand, a high *kuda-kuda* would not be stable and in the mountain, where the ground is oblique and uneven, a low *kuda-kuda* would be impossible to practice. As a Minangkabau proverb says: "*Alam takambang menjadi guru*" (the surrounding nature is our teacher).

These styles and regional diversities are only few arbitrary examples to show what a rich cultural phenomenon pencak silat is in Indonesia. Much more needs to be said about its origin, history, techniques and social role, but this will be for another time....