

## **Silat martial ritual initiation in Brunei Darussalam**

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### **Abstract**

Almost no research has been done on the *silat* martial ritual initiations developed in Brunei even though *silat* continues to be a main cultural marker of the sultanate and it is recurrent in legendary narratives as well as in contemporary local film productions. For Bruneian people, the image of *silat* is also conveyed by the multitude of Malaysian and Indonesian movies they can watch. Therefore the upheavals that *silat* has endured since the inception of the sport's federation in the 1980's have challenged the possibility of local *silat* groups keeping alive their practice, structure and organization. These evolutions also reflect certain conflicts in the Bruneian cultural policy, as the government seeks to promote a traditional cultural heritage while at the same time transforming its content to match an alternative ideological discourse.

### **Introduction**

Martial ritual initiations have spread widely across the so-called Malay world (for debate about this notion, see Barnard, 2004), and have been extensively documented. For example, Maryono (2002) describes *pencak* and *silat* in Indonesia, De Grave (2001) deals with *pencak* in Java, Facal (2012) focuses on *penceu* in Banten, Wilson (2002) analyzes *penca* in West Java, and Farrer (2012) considers *silat* in Malaysia.

However, there has been less coverage of the situation in Brunei. This discrepancy can be explained by the secrecy surrounding the transmission and integration of the practice in a wide and complex set of transmission frames, based on an authority structure which refers to local cosmology and religious values. This secrecy is integrated as part of a system which includes a widely defined sense of protection and purification.

Among the few studies on the subject, Bruneian martial ritual initiation, locally called *silat*, is one of the least described, even though this practice was fundamental in shaping the local history of this area that constitutes a crossroads in Southeast Asia, attesting substantial exchanges with the systems developed in the region which nowadays constitutes Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and southern China.

Nowadays, in Brunei, *silat* is still regarded as part of the national culture, even if it is mainly relegated to traditional folklore. For example, we have an overview of this concept in the first Bruneian legendary film entitled *Awang Semaun*, which appeared in 2014. Indeed, since the policy of pacification was introduced in the 1960s, *silat* has not been included any more as a pillar of national unity, as was previously the case under Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddien III (1950–1967). One marker of this new policy is that in the proclamation of independence on 1st January 1984, the sultanate added the term Darussalam ('land of peace') to the name of Brunei, and as a way of promoting cultural homogenization, Islam was then designed to maintain peace in the state (Vienne, 2012, p. 108). Thus, *silat* needed to adapt to the national orientations which are based on the link between local practices and national values, specifically dealing with the various modes of Islamic practice and the specific religious discourses promoted by the government. Hence, we can consider which elements the government selected to match a discourse on Malayness designed to enhance the integration of Brunei's political unity with other neighboring Malay countries. Thus, the local schools of *silat*, the national federation and the hybrid forms of the sport that developed highlight the

representations associated with violence, the potential violence that is attributed to local cultural practices, and the policies that have been implemented to control it.

In this article, I will describe the characteristics of Bruneian *silat* streams and the contemporary forms that they have taken, regarding the apprenticeship frame and related techniques. This comparative study will also concern the *silat* schools, and the way they have shaped and transformed their structure, organization and discourse to adapt to the governmental ideology.

## History of combat practices in Brunei

In Brunei, references concerning martial arts originate from popular accounts and occasionally from the few sources of historical literature. Some of these accounts note that *silat* spread through the region as early as the 15th century, when Brunei, then called Po-ni, entered into a close relationship with the Muslim kingdom of Malacca. This era also saw the origin of the ruling dynasty which continues to this day. Brunei's national epic poem, the *Syair Awang Semaun*, relates the story of the strong, brave warrior Awang Semaun, who contributed to the existence of Brunei. He is said to have been the younger brother of Awang Alak Betatar, who eventually became the first Sultan of Brunei and became known as Sultan Muhammad Shah (1405-1415).

The different masters I interviewed argue that *silat* initially spread to Brunei from North Malaysia, and it would originally have been practiced by the sultans, their court and the noble families. The sixth Sultan, Sultan Bolkiah, who ruled between 1473 and 1521, was known to be skillful at self-defense, combat and war (Zapar, 1989, p. 22). Under the seventh Sultan, Sultan Saiful Rizal (1575–1600), the people actively participated in the struggle (called *Perang Kastila*, the ‘Castille war’) against the Spanish in 1578, and they would have used *silat* and invulnerability practices (Rosemaria, 2009, p. 44). Thereafter, several patriots excelled as warriors, including Pengiran Bendahara Sakam under the reign of Sultan Abdul Mubin (1600–1673) (Zapar, 1989, p. 21). Moreover, as a maritime power at the crossroads of Southeast Asia, Brunei built the unity of the kingdom through war and conquest (De Vienne, 2012, p. 44), and the sultanate's control extended over the coastal regions of modern-day Sarawak and Sabah and the Sulu-Palawan axis in the Philippines (which was under the control of the Sultanate of Brunei for more than two centuries).

Practitioners report that, historically, *silat* was promoted by the sultans as one of the main communal activities of Bruneians. As a ritual initiation and through its martial dimension, it mobilized a great number of people, acting as a trans-generational bond, strengthening the internal cohesion of the local communities as well as their ties with the kingdom, and reinforcing the capacity of the state to defend itself against foreign invasion. *Silat* and the invulnerability practices it encompassed (*ilmu kebal*) also enabled the rulers to legitimize their authority. Indeed, the people who were skilled in fighting and had undergone esoteric initiation rites were considered to have specific links to divine forces. They gained great prestige as authoritative leaders and they were regarded as ‘capable’ or ‘skillful’ (*pandai*).

The term *pandai* is used in Malay to designate any expert, notably referring to a person mastering some supernatural forces. In the Bruneian Malay dictionary (Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka Brunei, 2007, p. 237) two of the examples given for the definition of *pandai* are ‘*pandai bermain tangan*’ (‘skillful at playing with hands’) and ‘*pandai bersilat*’ (‘skillful at *silat*’). Another category of examples mentions ‘*pandai basi*’ (‘skillful with iron’), with particular mentions of the iron weapons *parang* and *keris*, designed for fighting and war. The word *pandekar*, which designates an expert in *silat*, may be derived from the word *pandai*. Contemporary prominent *silat* masters, such as Azlan Ghanie from the Malaysian streams Senaman Tua and Lok 9, suggest that the word *pandekar* may come from ‘*pandai akar*’ (‘skillful at using intelligence’) (interview with Azlan Ghanie, Kuala Lumpur, March 2014).

As a result, a *pandekar* can hold great titles and the rulers can be known as *pandekar* or as carrying some of the characteristics of a *pandekar*, as the capacity of being invulnerable (*kebal*). For instance, the first sultan, Sultan Muhammad Shah, was claimed to be invulnerable because he had eaten a fish from the species *Toxotes jaculator* (*ikan sumpit*), which has the capacity to catch prey (maritime insects) by spurting water on them. Indeed, during the rule of Sultan Haji Omar Ali Saifuddien III, the current sultan's father, *silat* seems to have enjoyed a prominent status, and the sultan often attended the weekly Saturday night event *Pekan Ahad*. This event originated in Kampung Berangan and was dedicated to the practice of dance and *silat*. It was the occasion for the schools from different villages to demonstrate and compete with each others. Moreover, until 1980 there were demonstrations (*majlis*) of *silat* at the palace to celebrate the Sultan's birthday, weddings and circumcisions, as well as to welcome important guests. Championships were held at the palace and the champions gained honorific and valuable shields, such as those which are displayed in the Regalia Museum in Bandar Seri Begawan, the capital of Brunei.



Figure 1: Royal swords and spears which were carried by the sons of the *Cheteria* (Common nobles) (Regalia Museum, Bandar Seri Begawan)

However, because crowds of spectators disturbed the solemnity of the palace, the competitions were moved to the central stadium in the capital. Nowadays, even though some relatives of the sultan are reported to have been initiated in *silat*, like Prince Mohammad Bolkiah, the Sultan's younger brother and Brunei's foreign minister, *silat* has been more and more abandoned by the royal family.

Historically, different villages were known to constitute traditional *silat* centers, like Kampong Sabah (located in the floating city Kampong Ayer), Kampong Setia, or Kampong

Pramu. But these places no longer represent particular centers of practice, as the local communities were disbanded and some villages were moved.

Today, *silat* is sometimes informally practiced by official bodies such as the police, the military Special Forces, and private security teams. It can also occasionally be performed during certain opening ceremonies. A federation has been created to adapt the ritual initiation for sport competition, but the practice does not seem to attract many young people. Since 2004, the number of registered practitioners has diminished, and it is difficult for the federation to find good athletes to participate in competitions. Indeed, the various schools of *silat* are more and more weakened by the national political and cultural dynamics, which seek to homogenize the local variety of these practices.

## Characteristics of Bruneian *silat*

Bruneian *silat* shares characteristics common in the Malay world, but it has also developed specific techniques and practices of its own. The *silat* practitioners who train are sometimes told to ‘play *silat*’ (*main silat*) but it is more often the active form of the action of practicing *silat* which is employed: *besilat* or *bekuntau*. It is traditionally accompanied by an orchestra called *gulintangan* or *gulingtangan* (literally: ‘rolling hands’), often composed of a drum (*gandang labik*) and eight gongs, including a thin gong (*canang tiga*) and a thick gong (*tawak-tawak*).

As is the case elsewhere in the Malay world (Farrer & Grave, 2010), martial ritual initiation can be achieved through a ritual shower called a ‘flower bath’ (*mandi bunga*). A basin of water is filled with flowers of various colors for a whole night. During the ritual, the water is then poured over the body of the initiate. The head cannot touch the water because then the knowledge would not penetrate properly (*ilmu susah masuk*). The following night, water can be added again to the basin, and another ‘bath’ can be taken the next day.

Another ritual is one designed to purify the eyes. It has various forms in Malaysia (both Peninsular Malaysia and East Malaysia), Sumatra and Java. The purification of the eyes is done with water applied with a betel leaf or through lime pressed on the eyes. As the initiate has to endure pain, the ritual adds confidence and faith in the efficacy of the content of the transmission. Therefore, it relates to a main aspect of the transmission process which is the necessity for the initiate to be opened and ‘be filled’ (*diisi*), that is to say to receive the content of the transmission.

These different rituals aim to enable the initiates to access the apprenticeship of upper level techniques. They also enhance their mastering of the techniques by modifying themselves and by engaging their relationship with the ancestors, who are told to possess the techniques and to supervise the apprenticeship process.

It is common in the Malay world that initiates use ‘power objects’ (*pusaka*), which are naturally or artificially filled with supernatural forces. In connection with *silat* initiation, the practitioners can acquire invulnerability through a range of practices, like fasting, sexual abstinence, retreats and Koran recitation (*zikir*). This forms part of the knowledge inherited from Sufi brotherhoods or related to extra-physical practice called *kebatinan*. According to Muslim cosmology, human beings are constituted of two dimensions designed by Arabic terms: one is exoteric, physical (*lahir* or *zahir*) and the other is esoteric, spiritual (*batin*). The exoteric dimension of a human concerns his physical body (*badan*), whereas the esoteric aspect is constituted of different elements, including intelligence (*akal*), soul (*jiwa*), and a centre of emotions (*ati*). *Ati* is associated with the liver or the heart, organs which are related to a sense of feeling (*rasa*) (see Grave, 2001, pp. 125-129, for a comparison with practices in Java). However, the local discourses and categories concerning the Islamic notions of *lahir* and *batin* do not totally encompass the actual local practices and representations, as physical and spiritual, inner and external, are not straightforwardly separated.



Although it is discouraged by the national orthodox Islam, *kebatinan* still influences *silat* techniques in Brunei and plays a strong role in the conceptions of the movements, especially the approach movements called *bunga* ('flowers'), something also found in Malaysia. The movements of the fingers and wrists in the choreography of *bunga* imitate the motion of a butterfly. It is also a kind of finger positioning movement (like the so-called *mudra* practiced in yoga) designed to call on the inner forces of *batin*. Other analogies with natural elements can be found, such as the opening movements with the arms (originating from Minangkabau in West Sumatra), which imitate the movement of the waves. It is said that, in the past, the practitioners who competed at the palace could kill their enemies just by crossing them during the approach phase of the combat. Their power was strong enough to make their adversaries split blood as a result of internal injuries. Contemporary practitioners maintain strong concentration and a feeling of religious faith when performing the *bunga* movements, trying to achieve a suitable state of mind and to then 'fill' their movements with appropriate intentions. As a result, the practitioners face a contradiction. On the first hand, their practice is initially oriented towards spirituality, which is complementary to Islamic practice and designed to enhance faith and sometimes to transcend mundane limitations, as is the case with invulnerability practices. On the other hand, they have to deal with official ideology which condemns practices related to Sufism and *kebatinan*.



Figure 2: Prohibited amulets and other protection objects (exposition on Syariah law in Brunei, November 2013)

Other kinds of practices associated with *silat* are healing and preservation, like Muslim prayers (*doa*), drinking of 'purification water' (*air bertawari*), reflexology with a filled object (*gilir*), cupping (*bekam*), massage (*urut*) and medicinal plants (personal communication with *silat* practitioners and Brunei therapeutics specialist Virginie Roseberg, March 2014). The

combination of behaviors and food are points of attention for the initiates. Some foods are not good for the combative physical condition of the practitioners, like papaya, pineapple and soft vegetables, like eggplant. In turn, foods like red meat are believed to enhance power. At the same time, flowers and fruits occupy a central place in the different rituals and practices of healing, some as obligatory elements while others are forbidden. Reference to them also plays a significant role in the fighting and martial dance techniques. For example, as mentioned earlier, the dance approach movements between two opponents are called *bunga* ('flowers'), whereas the martial applications of the techniques are called *buah* ('fruit').

The different socio-cosmic references and the holistic dimension of *silat* are nowadays diminished in favor of a focus on the fighting techniques and esthetic movements. The diversity of systems is also a matter of concern for national policies, which try to homogenize social practices throughout the country through the promotion of two national streams, combining ways of reinventing a national heritage while at the same time protecting the vitality of the other existent streams.

## Two main streams: Seni Silat Cakak Asli Brunei and Silat Kuntau

Several streams of *silat* are practiced in Brunei, and they are often influenced by a range of elements from Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines. The most widespread is Gerak 4 1, created by H. Ibrahim, and consisting of the four styles learnt from his masters: Panca Sunda, Silat Cahaya, Silat Kuntau and Silat Cakak Asli. Some of the other styles include Kembang Goyang, Kuntau Iban, Lintau Pelangi (originally from Belait), Pampang Mayat, Pancasukma, Perisai Putih (originally from the East Javanese school Setia Hati), Persatuan Perkasa, Persatuan Basikap, Selendang Merah ('the red scarf'), Silat Sendi, Tambong, Teipi Campaka Puteh, Gayong Kicik or Kiceh, Gayong Tiga or Permainan Tiga (which includes Gayong, Cimande and Fattani), and Cengkaman Harimau Ghaib.

The spread of these streams does not follow territorial borders, and the groups of practice are often transnational. However, the outside influences are rarely clearly expressed by the practitioners. There are many Filipinos and Indonesians in Brunei as migrant workers, and their low social status does not reflect the influence of the streams developed in their original countries. At the same time, the local streams have been subject to the process of creation of a nationalist tradition for Brunei (Fanselow, 2014, p. 90), which isolated the different indigenous groups that occupied the territories that were formerly part of Brunei. Hence, many details of the *silat* practices have been abandoned in favor of a national homogeneity.

As a result, two streams were established as national ones: Silat Cakak Asli and Silat Kuntau, and they can be seen as complementary. Cakak Asli prioritizes relaxed moves and sticky-hand techniques, to eventually break the distance, unbalance the opponent and hit with the knees, elbows and forehead. Kuntau favors punches and kicking, fast and harsh movements, therefore making it difficult for an opponent to lock. These two streams have been favored in the sultanate for many generations of rulers, so it is hard to trace their origins. According to the more trustworthy sources, the 29th sultan, Sultan Haji Omar Ali Saifuddin III, was known for having learnt both Silat Cakak Asli and Silat Kuntau and he promoted local *silat* in the 1950's, notably by organizing tournaments at the palace.

The term *cakak* means 'to lock the opponent'. The style is the only one mentioned in the Brunei Malay dictionary (Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka Brunei, 2007, p. 74). There are several variants of Cakak, like Silat Cakak, Cakak Asli, Cakak Kampar, Cakak Pohon, Cakak Bintang, or Cakak Betawi. Each one has specific types of opening forms. The demonstrations of Cakak begin with a salute called *laila sembah* (for *sembah* in the Malaysian context, see Farrer, 2009, pp. 89–90), considered as a 'prayer in movement'. Then, a series of *bunga* movements are performed, enhancing control of the gesture and footwork. A guard position with one leg raised can be performed. This action is called *titi batang*, a term which also

refers to the action of walking upon the trunk of a cut tree. Thus, the practitioner steps backwards, through a phase called *tarik sila* ('to take back the cross legs in a sitting position'). Finally, the *bunga* movement is completed with another *laila sembah* salute.



Figure 3: The *laila sembah* salutation pose of Silat Cakak Asli

Next, the practitioner waits for his opponent through seven forms of guards (*nanti*) and has the choice between different fighting techniques. These are based on six attack techniques, called the *rangkaian serangan anam* ('sequence of six attacks'). They consist of *tumbuk kanan*, *tumbuk kiri*, *balah*, *simbur*, *paras* and *tikam/radak*. Each of these is described below.

- 1.-2. *Tumbuk kanan – tumbuk kiri* ('right punch' – 'left punch'): a standing punch practiced at the same time as a step with the opposite leg. It is basically designed to hit the chest. The fist can also hold a weapon, like a staff (*tambong*) or a stick (*belantan*). The Brunei Malay dictionary gives two meanings for *tumbuk*: it is a coarse term (*bahasa kasar*) meaning 'to eat' (*makan*); but the second sense is 'to fight' (*berkelahi*) (Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka Brunei, 2007, p. 337). It is the same semantic field that prevails in the sense given to the verb *menumbuk*: 'to hit with a stick, to soften', with the notable example of rice crushing
3. *Tatak/Balah* ('to chop', 'to part'): this consists of a cutting movement executed with the edge of the hand: the arm rises straight and then moves down as if to chop something. It is designed to hit the top of the opponent's head. *Tatak* ('overhead strike') can be done in a direct overhead delivery, and sometimes it is angled to either side of the neck.

4. *Simbur* ('to spray'): the name is given to a hitting technique with the cutting edge of the hand. It is designed to hit the testicles or groin. In one case, one arm guards the upper part of the body while the other hits the lower part of the opponent's body. In another case, one arm guards the lower part of the body while the other hits the upper part of the opponent's body. It can be executed with a sharp and large weapon, such as a *parang*.
5. *Paras* ('level'): a circular strike executed with the cutting edge of the hand. It is designed to hit the side or back of the neck or the throat.
6. *Tikam/radak* ('stab'/'thrust'): a low level direct standing punch. It is designed to hit the bladder or stomach.

The appropriate defenses (*rangkaian serangan*) to these attacks techniques have also been developed, so drills (*palimpas*) can be performed. According to the masters, the drills can be more or less systemized and structured (for example, see Talib, 2009).

In conjunction with these attack movements, several steps can be executed, such as the linear displacement pattern (*pacah satu*) and the triangular displacement pattern (*pacah tiga*). Whereas *pacah satu* can be executed through expansive movements, *pacah tiga* is compact and tight. It can be used either to focus on one opponent by moving around him or else to fight multiple opponents, by moving and hitting different directions from a center point. When two opponents perform, each contact sequence between them is punctuated by approach movements which are almost dance-like.

The other main stream in Brunei is Silat Kuntau. *Kuntao* designates systems which encompass Chinese elements to various degrees. Philip H. J. Davies classifies four senses for the term (Davies, 2000, p. 349):

1. A generic term for martial arts of any origin – Chinese, Southeast Asian, or other.
2. Orthodox traditional Chinese martial arts.
3. Culturally marginal or hybrid arts that combine Chinese martial arts with local Southeast Asian methods, techniques, and traditions.
4. Completely integrated Southeast Asian styles of martial arts; e.g. arts which may have Chinese roots but in which any formal Chinese heritage has been completely subordinated to the institutions and conventions of the dominant indigenous culture.

Bruneian Silat Kuntau originated from Mount Darul Naim in Kelantan, where the population was a mixture of Malays and Hakka Chinese. A specificity of Bruneian Silat Kuntau is that there are only hitting techniques with strikes and kicks. The hits are direct, forceful and straight. There are only three techniques for hitting with the upper part of the body: *tumbuk kanan* ('punch right'), *tumbuk kiri* ('punch left') and *tumbuk dua* ('punch with both arms'). There are also only three types of guard: *nanti satu* ('guard one'), *nanti dua* ('guard two'), *nanti tiga* ('guard three'). Finally, there is one kind of displacement between the two partners, called *bersumbang*. During this phase of displacement, the opponents can try to block each other's way using a technique called *memampang*. Another kind of displacement is the 'steps of four' (*pacah empat*), which follows a cross pattern.

In both Silat Cakak Asli and Silat Kuntau, several weapons can be used. The most distinctive is the wavy-blade dagger (*keris*), but other common weapons include machete (*golok*), dagger (*parang* and *barong*), sword (*pedang*), knife (*pisau*), curved knife (*karambit*), trident (*taipei*), spear (*tombak*), staff (*tambong*), stick (*belantan*), male scarf (*selendang*) and skirt (*sarung*). Nowadays, mastery of these weapons by the practitioners is threatened because of the laws regarding the holding of weapons. Some masters circumvent it by holding small wood sticks or pencils that can be used to hit or to lock, but in the fighting systems, weaponry



is more and more abandoned in favor of empty hands techniques. This evolution follows a general tendency of institutionalization of the practice groups, which is notably achieved through the development of the *pencak silat* federation.

### **Institutionalization of *silat* and the national federation Persib**

In the Malay world, in accordance with the national independence processes, the development of sport federations led to the creation of the generic term *pencak silat* to designate the different regional martial ritual initiations. In Brunei, the federation process mostly began after the death of Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddien III in 1983. Subsequently, *pencak silat* structures and events were directed by Pengiran Mokhtar Puteh, who also held the title of Commander (*Panglima*). The national federation, Persekutuan Silat Brunei (Persib), was founded in 1986 to coincide with the SEA Games, but it existed before in a non-official form, as an association of *silat* masters. The federation is under the tutelage of the Sports Department, which is a branch of the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports. Nowadays, there are between 40 and 45 schools affiliated to the federation.

The officers of the federation are Bruneian people. Since 2009, the president has been Pengiran Muhammad bin Pengiran Haji Ludin. He was initiated into *silat* at a young age and started to participate in competitions in the 1960's. It enabled him to be very involved in the *silat* networks and to follow the evolution of the regulations. He also worked at the Public Works Department and therefore can guarantee a close partnership with the government. Indeed, he participates in several governmental programs of ideological promotion and coordinates the relations between the government and the affiliated structures. The federation is mainly in charge of controlling the existing groups of practice, developing *pencak silat* at schools, and organizing sports competitions.

There are four types of competitions. Competitions between public schools are not very developed, but the Ministry of Education promotes them as part of the general curriculum or extra curriculum. In 2013, provincial level competitions were created, involving athletes selected at the village level. There are also national competitions which involve athletes selected at the provincial level. Finally, some athletes participate in international competitions, such as Sukma (in Malaysia), the Beach Games (the first event was held in 2008 in Bali and the second one will take place in Thailand in 2014), the bi-annual SEA Games in South-East Asia, and the East Asian Growth Area (BIMP-EAGA) Games. The categories for the national competitions are adolescents (14-17 years old) and adults (17-35 years old), but a category for children will probably be implemented soon. Gold medalists are awarded a 100 dollar prize by the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports, whereas the schools which represent the national streams of Silat Kuntau and Silat Cakak Asli are rewarded by the sultanate. The champions receive a valuable shield and different amounts of money: 1000 dollars for gold, 700 dollars for silver, and 500 dollars for the 3rd and 4th places. Previously, the athletes trained in a place called the 'Sports village' (Perkampungan Sukan), but now they prepare for the competitions in a sports complex in the Berakas area. For the regional tournaments of Brunei-Muara (17 districts, 17 villages), the training sessions are held in the Belait sports complex, where aikido, karate, wushu, kempo and boxing are also practiced.

In general, the results of the national team are rather poor and therefore Indonesian specialists have often been employed to train it. They usually have an updated knowledge of the regulations and the appropriate techniques, tactics and strategies to achieve success in the different specialties of the competitions. As such, in the 1980's, the Indonesian coach Nurhali trained the national team, and between 1985 and 1987 a member of his school KPS Nusantara and reputed master O'ong Maryono stayed with him in Belait. More recently, the Javanese Suhartono Hartono (a member of the school Persaudaraan Setia Hati) acted as technical director for the preparation for combat (*tanding*) for the SEA Games of 2013. He collaborated

with the technical director for the artistic forms (*seni*), Pengiran Haji Tajudin. The Indonesian masters are paid by the federation and they collaborate with the local trainers. In turn, the Bruneian specialists regularly go to Jakarta to update their knowledge of the international rules and methods of training. They are recognized as judges and are paid by the international *pencak silat* federation (Persilat) to arbitrate in competitions across Southeast Asia.



Figure 4: Ceremonial presentation of a silver honorific vase by the representatives of the federation

The annual provincial championship is held in the month of July, some days after the festivities for the Sultan's birthday. In 2013, a new event was implemented, in concordance with the recent national aspirations of developing a patriotic feeling among the youth through the program which began in 2012: *Satu kampung, satu produk* ('One village, one product'). Therefore, during the week between 8th and 15th of December a national championship is held involving the schools at the village level. This localization of sports involvement reinforces the federation at the local level. In the same line of patriotic politics, during the months of October and November 2013, 129 students aged between 15 and 20 years from all regions of Brunei were trained at the Berakas stadium by the president of the federation, Pengiran Muhammad bin Pengiran Haji Ludin. This training was part of a national program called *Bakti Negara* ('Loyalty to the nation'), designed to train the youth by military instructors during three months. The program began in 2011 and it is financed by the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports. The young stay in a complex and are trained all day: gymnastics, survival camps in the forest and *pencak silat*. They learn discipline, physical achievement, patriotic values and bravery. The establishment of a camp is planned in the Temburong District.

These national developments are based on control of the different groups and they convey ideological values linked to patriotism and the national ideology called Malay Islamic Monarchy (*Melayu Islam Beraja*, MIB). Based on the Constitution of 1959, MIB was declared at the time of independence in 1984, and it promotes Malay as the national culture, Islam as the state religion, and the monarchy as the system of government of Brunei. As Frank Fanselow underlines, this ideology did not establish the lowly ‘folk’ cultures as the national culture, but instead it was the ‘high’ culture of the Brunei Malay court that was ‘nationalized’ (Fanselow, 2014, p. 112). Under this elite basis of reference, the local groups of *silat* practice were required to recompose and to reinvent themselves, as a way of legitimizing their history, techniques and modes of transmission.



Figure 5: *Silat* training of the Bakti Negara program, headed by the president of the *silat* federation Persib

### Challenges for the maintenance of local ritual initiation practices

Whereas nowadays *silat* is considered by the majority of the Bruneians as a sport or as a folk practice, it played a prominent role as a vehicle of political mobilization at least during the nationalist confrontations of the 1960's. Subsequently, the government meticulously dismantled *silat* networks. For example, schools like Ampang Kibau (also known as Gerak Sangkilat, Gelombang 12 in Sabah, Pukulan 7 in Sarawak) and Silat Lintau, which were active during that period, were prohibited, and their masters were jailed or banned. Some of the groups moved to Lawas (in Sarawak) and Sepitang (in Sabah), while others changed the name of their schools, as was the case for some groups of practice in Kampong Ayer. Regulations were created so all the clubs and schools had to transmit at least one of the two national styles (Silat Cakak Asli and Silat Kuntau) and to be affiliated to the federation Persib.

In addition, masters who open a school without declaring their structure are sent two letters of warning, and if they do not register they may be sanctioned. Families can train in their home, but more than three persons training outside are forbidden.

The affiliated schools are called *persatuan* ('unions') or *badan* ('bodies'), and more rarely *perguruan* as is the case in Indonesia, or *peguruan* in Malaysia. This emphasizes the national political goal of control instead of the objective of transmission (*guru* means 'master' or 'teacher', so *perguruan* is 'the group of the master'). Most of the affiliated schools are headed by a *Pengiran* (a noble title given to relatives of the royal family), who can guarantee collaboration with the authorities. He has the function of adviser (*penasihat*) and acts as an intermediary with the government. Each school pays an annual 20 dollar fee to Persib and has to pay 20% of the income from each seminar. This money is used to finance tournaments and the venue of foreign *pencak silat* schools for demonstrations. The government also provides occasional small financial support.

To avoid the affiliation, some groups declare themselves as training groups and register as enterprises under the Register Of Companies (under the Ministry of Economy). They train informally and have to pay by themselves if they want to rent a place for training. The group Silat Suffian Bela Diri is probably the most representative of this tendency. It is headed by a master who is abroad for almost all the year, and his assistant in Brunei is also connected with international practice groups. Both of them have solid backgrounds in local *silat* but also in various other martial practices. As such, they have structured a detailed system, developing effective *silat* principles into a wide range of drills (probably influenced by Filipino streams) and integrating the techniques of foreign practitioners which complement their own technical system. Moreover, the representatives of the school use advanced technological tools to film their seminars and regularly make videos available on media such as YouTube. They wear fashionable American styles of clothing and convey a trendy image. Through this technical system, the emphasis is put on self-defense, a specific style and independence from the federation, so Silat Suffian Bela Diri marks dissonance from the affiliated schools and national tendency.

Apart from these technical and structural divergences, religious variations also appear in many *silat* groups, where practices as the ritual *mandi bunga*, night retreats and meditation on graves (*tapa*) as well as invulnerability practices are still persistent. However, reference to *kebatinan* is discouraged to match with the national ideology and orthodox Islamic discourse, which pushes the masters to forbid *kebatinan* or to reinforce the secrecy of their practice. In both cases it does not participate in developing the schools' popularity among the non-initiates.

Finally, the way chosen by schools such as Silat Suffian Bela Diri seems to be a possible alternative to the dilemmas faced by *silat* schools in Brunei. Technically, Silat Suffian Bela Diri reflects the characteristics of local Bruneian *silat*, mainly several fighting principles, such as following the opponent's moves (instead of evasive movements), penetration of his guard, and the progressivity between hitting percussion techniques and grappling ones. On the other hand, it is highly integrative and emphasizes the coherence of the technical system, instead of developing a 'compilation' of unbounded techniques. Concerning the values promoted, notably thanks to the expatriate position of the master in England, the school stays ideologically neutral, which gives it great flexibility and integration of foreign referents and concepts. In this sense, it mirrors the attitude of the majority of the Bruneian people, who benefit from the material advantages offered by the socio-economic system in Brunei and so do not oppose the national ideology. As a result, as long as the people who implement the rules are flexible, *silat* should be able to survive and evolve in Brunei.



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