

## Chapter 3

# The Performance of Enchantment

This chapter provides an abstract, general, anatomical impression of Malay *silat* as I work towards a concrete view of Seni Silat Haqq Melayu. The essential components of Malay *silat*, including its art and aesthetics, strategy, tactics, kinesthetics, training methods, stance, footwork, dance, patterns, weaponry, and rehearsed combat scenarios are reviewed.<sup>1</sup> Together these components make up the performance factor of the performance of enchantment. Earlier I noted that war magic should be regarded as having cognitive, performative and embodied aspects. By the performance of enchantment I mean the technical components that make up *silat*, the embodied skills that underlie *silat*, skills that when honed to perfection over years of practice may give the bearer the appearance of supernatural prowess. The performance of enchantment is inseparable from the enchantment of performance, which concerns the “supernatural” effect that the performance of enchantment has, and the two are here only roughly separated for analytical purposes. This chapter focuses upon the performance of enchantment, the concrete base of practical, if esoteric and closely guarded skills that the enchantment of performance arises with. The enchantment of performance is richly embellished with myths, stories, and legends, but this is the subject of the next chapter.

Recent debates in anthropology raise critical questions pertaining to aesthetics in relation to beauty, power and truth.<sup>2</sup> The rejection of aesthetics is untenable when art is regarded as performance.<sup>3</sup> Aesthetics should be regarded as an active doing

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<sup>1</sup> English speaking martial artists refer to martial arts techniques as “moves.” Although “moves” does not sound very polished, in the context of describing martial arts it is more apt than “gesture” which denotes the conveyance of meaning between actors, and “posture” which is too static to capture the dynamic aspects of martial arts. By “technique” I mean a single martial arts move, taking into account the whole body in motion, and including cognitive strategies for execution, emotional cathexis, bearing and demeanour. “Form,” “set,” and “pattern” are used interchangeably to indicate a string of consecutive techniques. “Style” refers to a particular school or type of *silat* and not to aesthetics.

<sup>2</sup> American Anthropological Association’s 101st Annual Meeting: panel “Back to Aesthetics: Critical Anthropological Perspectives on Beauty, Power and Truth,” 21 November 2002.

<sup>3</sup> Contemporary debates in anthropology have fluctuated from perspectives that direct attention “beyond aesthetics” (Gell 1998; Pinney and Thomas 2001), to those which call for a return to

in the world, and not merely a matter of passive individual taste. The aesthetics at the heart of *silat* reflects a division of “noble” from “low” culture, a division that is constantly reinforced in ritual and performance, such as Malay weddings where the bride and groom become king and queen for the day (*Raja sehari*). Kahn (1994: 33) notes that contemporary performances of *silat* in Malaysia represent the aesthetics of the middle-class, which configures its identity by imagining and performing itself as “Malay,” and this in turn is consumed through television, theatre, leisure and tourism. I would add that middle-class aesthetics are contested by the imaginings of déclassé aristocrats who struggle for *difference* in their emulation of the royal pomp and ceremony, power and performance of the golden age of the former Melaka sultanate, and who may occupy structural positions in the middle-class by virtue of the advantages bequeathed to their parent’s generation by a British colonial regime eager to govern through “noble” Malay representatives. Here I have in mind the Malay College in Kuala Kangsar, Perak, once known as “the Eton of the East.” Anthony Burgess taught there, and the school was attended by Pa’ Ariffin’s mother and his uncle Pa’ Tam, and by many royal personages including H.R.H the Sultan of Brunei.

## The Art and Aesthetics of Seni Silat Melayu

Draeger (1972: 23) claims that *silat Melayu* is a primordial martial art that squats at the root of the modern Malay systems. However, Malay *guru silat* maintain that *seni silat*, at least in Malaysia, is not merely a series of technical antecedents, crude or otherwise, but an art and aesthetics of movement, an art which springs from the ground of *silat Melayu*. In other words, the performance of *silat Melayu* embodies a cultural ideology or tradition – *seni* – where power is not expressed through the visible, the brash, loud, hard, and crude *zahir*, but through the smooth, soft, and silent *batin*.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Errington contrasts the noble aesthetics of the *keris* with the aesthetics of the axe:

How gender is mapped onto potency brings up ... the “effeminacy,” to European eyes, of the high status *halus* (refined, potent) men of the insular Indic States. The Javanese hero

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aesthetics (Sharman 2002). Are aesthetics merely reflections of art or does aesthetics provide a guide for perception and action? In his rejection of aesthetics Gell (1999: 160–161) argues that the anthropologist of art should be a methodological philistine just as the anthropologist of religion should be a methodological atheist (Berger 1967: 107). The idea of shelving one’s values alongside one’s taste is rejected with the turn towards a more reflexive anthropology. The strong anti-aestheticism of Gell and Bourdieu seems to have been a product of 1970s counter-culture (Blau 2001: 22; Weiner 2003: 16). Aesthetics is a tricky concept that following Kant’s “transcendental aesthetics,” or Strathern’s “comparative aesthetics” can be used to refer to “the specification of the forms of perception by which phenomena are made to appear” (Weiner 2003: 87), and not just to matters of beauty and taste. Ultimately, the “for or against aesthetics” debate is sterile because aesthetics and consumption condition the arena for the production of art, and the production of art in turn leads to changes in aesthetics and consumption.

<sup>4</sup> *Zahir* refers to manifest, bodily, outer, exoteric knowledge; *batin* to inner, spiritual, esoteric knowledge.

Arjuna, who appears in shadow-theatre, is slight of build, soft of voice, with downcast eyes, and quiet demeanour. These are precisely the qualities valued in high-status ladies. Yet Arjuna confronts the *rakasasa* (monsters), who reveal themselves to be such by their huge ungainly shapes, their insolent staring, bulging eyes, hideous laughs, and growls and shouts – and Arjuna wins with a flick of the finger. This confrontation, of course, is not between empty dignity and active “power,” but between the *keris* and the axe, between conscious potency and unconscious brute force. The point is not that the high potent noble man is effeminate, but that he and high-noble women are more like the *keris* than the axe (Errington 1989: 287, italics added).

Errington concludes by saying that “the unity of potency ... implies duality, because being a centre implies having a periphery; being a *keris* implies having an axe to serve you” (1989: 289 italics added). However, in Malaysia the *parang* is more relevant than the axe. Being the *keris* (Sultan) requires having other *keris* to serve you (aristocrats or *bangsawan*), followed by *parangs* (*rakyat*).<sup>5</sup>

*Seni silat* means the art of *silat*. *Seni silat* is a compound category that denotes the fluid movements of *silat*, and connotes *ilmu* – knowledge, magic, science or skill. *Seni silat* refers to the creation of *silat*, and to the strategy and tactics of individual and group defence. Alongside art, *seni* also encompasses aesthetics, because *seni* refers to the essential characteristics deemed to typify an ideal *silat* performance.

Due to the sheer range of *silat* styles it is difficult to specify a single set of features they all share in common: some prefer very low stances, some high, some concentrate on speed, and others upon power, some focus upon developing the legs, others upon the arms, and so forth. Malay *guru silat* recognize particular movements and the smooth circuitous flow of these movements as signature traits that epitomize *silat Melayu*. These include the flat outstretched palm where the thumb stands erect protruding out from the palm at a ninety degree angle (*undang pahlawan*); the upright posture of the spine where the back is held straight despite the adoption of low stances; and the sidelong downward gaze.<sup>6</sup>

One of the finest performances of *silat Melayu* I saw was a private impromptu demonstration by *guru silat* Muhamad Din Muhamad of the *sembah* (opening salutation) of *silat hulubalang Melaka* (otherwise known as *silat kuntau*). Some of the movements were remarkably similar to *taijiquan*; indeed the opening move of this *sembah* is identical to the *taijiquan* technique called “Buddha’s warrior pounds the mortar.”<sup>7</sup> Din’s performance looked more graceful, stylised, smooth, and circular than *taijiquan*, partly because of the skill of the performer, but also because of the less angular, less protruding nature of the movements. It’s as if

<sup>5</sup>This is in line with the shadow complex in Southeast Asian praxis, an idea I develop in Chapters 4 and 5.

<sup>6</sup>In “old Malay” *undang* (a Javanese loanword) means invite, so since *pahlawan* means champion fighter, *undang pahlawan* more or less may mean “to invite” (challenge) a champion fighter (Pa’ Ariffin). Perhaps the thumb symbolizes the penis, and the penis symbolizes the manikin, therefore the erect thumb signifies one of the seven souls, or the life force (*semangat*) itself (Róheim (1930) 1972: 22).

<sup>7</sup>“Buddha’s warrior pounds the mortar” is the second position adopted in Chen style *taijiquan*.

the embodied aesthetic of *taijiquan* were masculine, as compared to the feminine aesthetic embodied in *silat Melayu*; or it's as if the shadow of a *taijiquan* expert was incarnate in the movement of *silat* (Farrer 2006a: 30).

Most though not all styles of *silat* use techniques of evasive entry, and engage the opponent with a chess-like logic of combat. Each movement is conditioned by the predicted outcomes, the opponent as a whole is sized up, and their attack analysed and countered within an instant. Stealth, trickery, and bluff appear in the form of feints, sucker punches, half-steps, a dodge left to go right, a bob up prior to crouching down low, and in the use of concealed weapons, especially a knife. Hypnosis, misdirection, distraction and "stealing the opponent's awareness" are also reported (Draeger 1972: 62; Sanders 1999: 237).

Techniques are often named after animals, for example, the tiger (*harimau*), leopard (*selegi*), crocodile (*buaya*), and the horse (*kuda*), but they may also be named after plants and common everyday movements, such as sewing, looking in the mirror, and chopping wood. Some moves are reminiscent of *doa* (Islamic prayers), or of Hindu offerings (*sembah*), others draw energy from the performer, environment or opponent. Rather than rely on force derived from greater size or physical strength, *silat* exponents characteristically utilize centrifugal force, leverage, momentum, gravity and inertia.<sup>8</sup> Evasive blocks (*tangkisan*) are employed against strikes, alongside stepping in, stepping aside or back.

The stances (*kuda kuda*) and footwork (*langkah*) are of special importance. They are the moving base from which a plethora of strikes (*pukul*), kicks (*sepak*), punches (*pukul*), sweeps (*sapu*), and slaps (*tampar*) can be unleashed. Malay styles favour locking the opponent (*kunci*) in submission holds by applying adverse pressure on joints, pressure points and arteries. Lethal holds (*kunci mati*) such as strangle holds and neck and spine snapping techniques are usually only taught to advanced practitioners. *Silat* was not developed primarily for the purposes of unarmed combat or for one-on-one self-defence. All *silat* styles assume encounters with multiple opponents and all engage in weapons training.

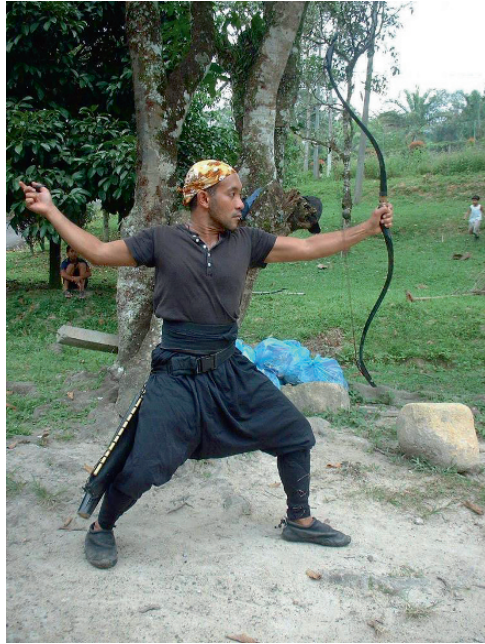
## Weapons of Silat

The range and diversity of Southeast Asian weapons and armoury is astonishing. Hundreds of predominantly bladed weapons appear across the Malay world. In Peninsular Malaysia it is possible to learn how to handle many different weapons including *badik* (Bugis dagger), bow and arrow (Fig. 3.1), chain, *golok* (a long heavy knife), *kapak kecil* (a small throwing axe from Kelantan), *kerambit* or *layi*

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<sup>8</sup> The same principles are operative in a number of Asian martial arts, but are especially developed in aikido, which is twentieth century derivative of jujitsu and (probably) *baguazhang* (Frantzis 1998: 118–119). According to Orlando (1996) in *kuntao* (a fusion of *silat* and Chinese kung fu) the main principles are said to be adhesion, whiplash, gyroscopic rotation, shearing (pincer movements) and seating (horse stance).

**Fig. 3.1** Pa' Din releases an arrow



*ayam* (a curved blade), *keris*, *lembing* (spear), *jembia* (Arab dagger), *parang* (machete), *pedang* (rapier), *pisau* (knife), *sanggul* (hair pin), *sarung* (male's one-piece cloth skirt), *sundang* (sword-kris), trident, and *tumbok lada* (pepper crusher dagger).<sup>9</sup>

The *kerambit* has a small curved blade shaped like a “tiger’s claw” and has a hole in the handle for the middle finger to pass through. The blade curves out from inside of the fist, jutting out to the side in a small yet sharp foreword facing hook. Although less easily concealed, the *parang* has proven killing efficacy, and provides the ideal means to decapitate someone as demonstrated in numerous “deadly ethnic riots” during the last century (Horowitz 2001), and more recently in inter-ethnic altercations in Kampong Medan in 2002.

Some *silat* experts may conceal several knives about their person, which could come in handy if they are unexpectedly held down or pinned in a lock. Pa' Ariffin tells a story of how he was stopped by the police in North London. They asked to search him. To save them the trouble Pa' Ariffin unloaded his knives onto the bonnet of the police car – one from his sleeve, one from his boot, one from the collar, and several from his many pockets and waist pouch. Although counting seven knives the police were so incredulous they let him go with just a verbal warning.

<sup>9</sup> Although some of the drawings are rather amateurish, Draeger (1972) provides a good indication of the enormous diversity of Indonesian weaponry.

## *The Keris*

The *keris* in Peninsular Malaysia *silat* training is practised solo and in two-person sets of movements. The most famous *keris* in Malaysia is the legendary *keris* of Hang Tuah, called the *Taming Sari*, which is now said to be in the possession of the Sultan of Perak.<sup>10</sup> Frey (1995: 17) points out it is only in the past forty to one hundred years that the *keris* is no longer worn for personal protection, though it has been retained for ceremonial purposes as a symbol of Malay heritage. The *keris* comes in many shapes and sizes and is associated with Malay manhood, wedding ceremonies, magic (*tuju*), mysticism and ritual.

In contrast to the sinuous blades preferred in Java, in Malaysia the straight *keris* was a symbolic marker of nobility or royalty. Previously, only the Malay aristocracy and royalty were allowed to possess a straight *keris* in Perak, known as the *keris sepuke*. The Malay *keris* would typically be sheathed in a wooden scabbard (*baju*), unless further encased in silver, another prerogative of the ruling elite. In Perak, if the *keris* possessed a long beaked bird handle (*pekaka*), and a straight blade, then the *keris* would be known as *keris sepuke pekaka*. The “bird” is supposed to represent the human soul or *semangat*, and although none of the Malay magic books specify exactly why, it may be symbolically connected with the “double,” the *kakak* (lit. elder sister, but here afterbirth) that is born with the baby and buried shortly thereafter.<sup>11</sup>

Formerly, *keris* were used for self-defence and sudden attack, for *amok*, assassination and execution. Some of the old *keris* were credited with an independent spirit and were believed to fly about at night, and to rattle in their sheath with the approach of danger. Magical *keris* could never be bought, but must be freely given. My “graduation” from *silat lima beradik* (discussed later) consisted of a *silat* performance on my part, followed by a *kenduri* whereupon I was given a 100 year-old Javanese *keris* said to possess three magical powers. The secret name of the blade comes from a *wayang kulit* character and the “face” of this character appears on the left of the illustration below (Fig. 3.2).

The *keris* I received was given with the proviso that it should not to be waved about or used in the performance of *silat*, but is supposed to be reserved for magical purposes. First, telepathic communication with the *guru* through dreams is achieved by holding the *keris* pointing upwards whilst thinking of the *guru silat*. I

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<sup>10</sup> Pa’ Ariffin displays a picture of the *Taming Sari* on his website <<http://www.silat.f9.co.uk/mainmenu3.htm>>.

<sup>11</sup> Upon noting the difficulty of finding definitive answers for matters of Malay mysticism, Cato (1996: 64), tentatively offers an explanation why the blade of the *keris* comes in two parts. He says that “those knowledgeable about such things believe that spirits are placed within *kerises* by powerful *empus* [blacksmiths], only after many hours of occult rituals and meditation. After the entity is magically inserted into the lower portion of the blade, the upper guardpiece is slid down over the tang until it mates with the lower blade, thereby confining the spirit within the *keris*” (Cato 1996: 64, italics added).

**Fig. 3.2** *Keris* detail, *wayang kulit* character (author's private collection)



tried this once when I first had the *keris* and Pa' Zaini called me up on my mobile phone the next day saying he had dreamed that I wanted to speak to him. Second, dipping the blade in drinking water supposedly renders the water good for healing: we tried it for flu with no obvious effects. When I was given this *keris* I was renting a mosquito infested concrete box in the posh ghetto of Singapore. There was often a strange unidentified whooping sound to be heard outside the window at night. The third and most important function of this *keris* was to drive away evil spirits (*jinn*), ghosts (*hantu*), and vampires (*pontianak*), and thankfully the creepy whooping sound soon ceased. Each *keris* has to find its rightful owner. Pa' Zaini had been given this *keris* by someone too frightened of the powerful spirit within to keep it. Pa' Zaini had then given it away twice only to have it returned to him due to nightmares and nocturnal disturbances experienced by the new owners. In giving it to me I suspect he was glad to have finally gotten rid of it.

## Martial Dance

The two basic components of Malay weddings are the *akad nikah* or the Islamic exchange of vows, and the *bersanding*, a set of ceremonies that hark back to Indic religions.<sup>12</sup> *Silat* is danced at Malay weddings across Southeast Asia, a few hours, days, or even six months after the *nikah*, but shortly before the feast forming part of a set of ceremonies known as the *bersanding*. In Peninsular Malaysia *silat pengantin* is performed at *bersanding* across the social spectrum, among the “nobility” and the “common” people. The performance of *silat* at weddings in Sumatra seems to have influenced Sheppard to offer *silat Medan* as a synonym for “wedding *silat*” (Sheppard 1972: 141, 1983: 104). However, *silat* also appears in weddings more widely across Indonesia and in the Sulu Archipelago (Fernando-Amilbangsa

<sup>12</sup> See also Mohtar (1979).

1983: 34). The elaborate flowing dance-like *silat* movements performed at weddings can be referred to as *bunga* (flower) or as *seni* (art). These stylised movements were also performed for rites of circumcision in Indonesia and for royal garden parties in Malaysia.

Due the depiction of the non-violent temperament of the *Senoi* people by Dentan (1979), I wondered if any of the Orang Asli groups had *silat*. I asked some of the top anthropologists in the field, but got no closer to the answer. However, Werner (1997: 40), with an excellent photograph, notes the practice of the “flower dance” for an Orang Asli couple at the bride’s *kampong*, the bride Mah Meri, and the groom Temiar.<sup>13</sup> In this photograph the bride and groom are seated upon the floor, and not sitting on chairs mounted on a ceremonial dais, as is customary for Malay couples. Meanwhile, with hands cupped, the *silat* performer crouches on one knee in a very low stance (*duduk harimau*), sharing the same eye level as the couple. This is significant because it shows that some Orang Asli groups do practice *silat*.<sup>14</sup> At first I thought that *silat* must be a syncretic adhesion to Temiar culture, however, Roseman (1991: 102) fleetingly mentions what the Temiar call *silat* in her study of music and mediumship (Benjamin 1996: 5). I would wager that further study of the “tiger shamans” reported among the Temiar by Jennings could reveal much about *silat*, albeit that *silat* is entirely absent from Jennings’s (1995) account of Temiar dance, theatre and ritual.

For Malay weddings *silat pengantin* (wedding *silat*) takes place directly in front of the splendidly dressed groom, who is considered king for the day (*Raja sehari*) and seated outside the bride’s residence, prior to being led in to unveil her. Drummers, facing inwards, form an oval in front of the groom, an enclosed space that occasionally parts slightly to allow *silat* performers to enter and exit at the end opposite the groom. Peering over the shoulders of the drummers, the guests surround this spectacle (Fig. 3.3).

Relatives of the bride or groom are invited to step into the space to play *silat* (*bermain silat*). The atmosphere is colourful and crowded, performers jostle for place, and the musicians whip their hands against their flat single-skinned drums (*kompang*). Suddenly a performer will step in to the oval, right hand dipped and

<sup>13</sup> Mah Meri and Temiar are different Orang Asli or indigenous Malay peoples (Benjamin 2003).

<sup>14</sup> Given the mix of Orang Asli and Malay cultures I feel that it should be a certainty that *silat* may be found among both groups. Historically “the *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, which brings together numerous Malay oral traditions, notes that after Melaka’s fall to the Portuguese in 1511, the queen flees for safety into the jungle. Here she becomes a member of one of the northern Orang Asli groups, the Batek. Meanwhile, Hang Tuah himself retreats upriver to Perak where he is accepted as ruler by another Orang Asli people, the Orang Binduanda (literally palace servants). Although the latter are now referred to as the Orang Temuan, the older terminology suggests the close relationship between the Melaka court and the Orang Asli. A Malay text, the *Hikayat Deli*, originating from east coast Sumatra, describing how Melaka people flee to the jungle after an attack to become Jakun, or forest dwellers, similarly suggests the ease of movement in and out of Malayness” (Andaya and Andaya 2001: 49). If an Orang Asli group genuinely doesn’t possess *silat* then the move is perhaps out of Malayness, and away from violence, a move away from the state and into the backcountry (Scott 2003).



**Fig. 3.3** Wedding *silat* in Singapore 2004 (*rimau santai*)



pointing to the floor, whilst the “dirty” left hand is politely concealed behind the back. After a stylised bow (*sembah*) the dance begins, with the *silat* player (*pesilat*) slowly zigzagging his way up to the groom, whereupon he will proffer his *salaam* (handclasp).

The dancer’s movements should be graceful and responsive to the beat of the drums. Like the *silat* de Zoete and Spies (1952: 256) described in Bali, the performer’s arms, wrists, hands, and fingers carve intricate mysterious circling patterns through the air in gestures of adjuration or exorcism, as if weaving charms. The body position and footwork alternate from high fully extended postures, to low, crouched, folded positions requiring great dexterity, balance and flexibility. Wedding *silat* emphasizes the artistic, aesthetic elements of *silat*. The performers play free-style within a known set of rules (*adat pengantin*) concerning their appropriate behaviour. Hence the combative functions of the art are concealed, a knee is raised instead of a kick, an open palm replaces a fist, and the performer must not turn his back on the couple (to do so would risk violent intervention from the audience).

Seni Silat Haqq Melayu performed special sets for royal entertainment, such as *silat pedang* (sword) and the *belebat* (the four corners set). Pa’ Ariffin’s mother, originally from Perak, but residing in Kuala Lumpur and Pahang, surprised me one day by asking me wistfully what wedding *silat* was like, saying that she had never seen it.<sup>15</sup> This was a mystery to me, as wedding *silat* occurs across the Malay

<sup>15</sup> Dato Penggawa Tua (Mrs. Mahidin).

Peninsula, and practically every weekend at weddings in Singapore except during *Ramadan* (the Islamic fasting month). However, *silat* is not performed at Haqqani weddings solemnized by a Shaykh. Haqqani weddings emphasize the *nikah* (the Islamic, hence, legal exchange of vows), and may omit the *bersanding*. Nor was *silat* performed at the wedding of Shaykh Raja Ashman, as his wife Jane told me herself. “Royal *silat*” is more highly choreographed than wedding *silat*. There is a difference between wedding *silat* and what Sheppard (1983: 104) called “garden party *silat*” or *silat Medan*, the difference being that garden party *silat* is performed for the entertainment of the *Raja* (and not his imitation for the day), and that it is more highly choreographed and less spontaneous than wedding *silat* (see Chapter 8).

In western culture “The Arts” indicate painting, sculpture, music, dance, literature, the theatre, and even the occult. The discussion of martial arts as dance raises questions pertaining to the status of dance as art.<sup>16</sup> The term “art” is problematic due to its association with high culture, as opposed to modern forms of pop art that are associated with mass culture. When *silat* is termed “folk-dance” it is implicitly regarded as low village culture. Furthermore, the performance of *silat* for royal garden parties places it as a higher art form within an indigenous context. However, a distinction between “high art” and “low art” is problematic for *silat*, as sometimes the performance of so-called peasant *silat* is of a much higher quality than so-called royal *silat*. The quality of *silat* is gauged by the ability of the performer to execute moves demanding a mastery of difficult low stances, performed with dexterity, balance, rhythm and individual style.

*Silat* sets have ritual and magical functions that may be coextensive or exclusive of their public performance. Wedding *silat* and garden party *silat* have necromantic as well as social functions (see Chapters 4 and 8). The *silat* dances performed at weddings and at garden parties may be considered as a form of performance art. Like John Coltrane’s *A Love Supreme*, at their best *silat* dances are executed freestyle according to their specific genre or animal influence.

## Hexis as Embodied Aesthetics

In *silat* the dance postures and gestures have symbolic meanings that can be interpreted on practical, mystical and aesthetic levels. *Silat* aesthetics derive partly from discourses of power: from *adat* (customary law) governing the traditional ritualised formal interactions between the Melaka Sultans and their subjects, and partly from Islamic, ancient Hindu, Buddhist, and animist religions.<sup>17</sup> Wedding *silat* shares

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<sup>16</sup> *Silat* is considered to be a “magickal martial art” by Sanders (1999: 186). Sanders freely intermingles indigenous beliefs with western “magickal doctrine.” Although he does not mention the source of his occult beliefs, Sanders uses Crowley’s spelling of “magick,” and his ideas closely resemble those of the Order of the Golden Dawn.

<sup>17</sup> *Adat* can be defined as custom, manner, tradition, and habitual practice (Sheppard 1956; see also Nagata 1984: 135). *Adab* may be said to be the embodiment of *adat*.

aesthetics with Southeast Asian architecture, weaponry, dance, and theatre, including “shadow theatre” such as *wayang kulit* (shadow puppetry), *wayang golek* (with three-dimensional wooden puppets) and *wayang wong* (where humans are literally the leather puppets), alongside traditional Malay theatre, dance drama, and performing arts (Sedyawati 1998).

Theories of embodiment, such as Bourdieu’s notion of hexis, provide an alternative to symbolic accounts of aesthetics (Bourdieu 1977: 87; 2002: 209; Jenkins 1992: 75). Building upon Gell’s [1985] (1999: 136–158) discussion of walking in relation to Umeda dance, I argue that hexis may embody aesthetics. Gell theorises that Umeda dances are all transformations of their walk. In an article on Umeda dance, from fieldwork conducted in the late 1960s in New Guinea, Gell (1975; [1985] 1999) notes the difference in the way the unshod cautiously tread compared to the booted. *Pesilat* also walk softly with the foot placed flat and skimming across the floor, rather than heel first like booted westerners walking on the pavement. Malay *pesilat* tread cautiously when shod in traditional leather sandals (*capal*), or when walking with their shoes off on the sprung floor of a wooden house.

Townfolk who have never acquired the skill of walking softly appear foolish in a wooden Malay house as they bounce up and down with a horrendous thumping noise. When outdoors, the shuffling flat-footed step with the knee slightly flexed is characteristic of the Malay walking style.<sup>18</sup> Through his own complex system of notation, Gell [1985] (1999: 144–145) indicates the position of the knee, and shows how the unshod’s style of flatfooted walking with the knee bent forms the basis of six different dance styles including *ida* or ceremonial walking, namely the women’s dance, the cassowary dance, the fish dance, the termite dance, the ogress dance, and the dance of the bowmen.<sup>19</sup> Hence, Gell derives Umeda dance “as members of a transformation set” from walking [1985] (1999: 156). However, after viewing *The Red Bowmen* film it seems more likely that the Umeda dance derives as a transformation set from copulation, a prospect which escaped Gell’s talent for ethnographic doodling.

Many of the positions exemplified in *silat* indicate that martial dance in Southeast Asia is based upon an intimate knowledge of what Mauss (1979: 107) called “techniques of the body.” My point is that walking is just one aspect of an understanding of the body in relation to the ground (*bumi*). What also needs to be taken into account is the many ways of standing up, squatting, and sitting down.<sup>20</sup> Foreshadowing Bourdieu’s notion of *hexis*, Mauss (1979: 101) used *habitus* to refer to acquired ability and faculty; that is not to the soul, or memory, and its

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<sup>18</sup> This skill is highly developed in the Chinese martial art *baguazhang*. Recently I noticed that some Chinese girls in Singapore who wear flip-flops do not make the flip-flop sound as they walk. The only way this is possible is to adopt the style of walking discussed above.

<sup>19</sup> See the film *The Red Bowmen* (1983) based on Gell’s *Metamorphosis of the Cassowaries* to view the *ida* dance, the women’s dance and the fish dance.

<sup>20</sup> See *sepok* and *depok* in Draeger (1972: 46). *Sepok* is when someone adopts a low “sitting” stance by placing one leg behind the other, *depok* the same but by placing one leg in front of the other. These stances are typically used to drop down low, only to spring up with a hand movement or a kick.

repetitive faculties, habits, and customs (*habitude*), but rather to “practical reason,” which is manifested in individual and collective techniques and works, and is distributed unevenly across a population. An example is the ability to squat. When Mauss (1979: 107) speaks of the white Australian soldiers at rest squatting in the mud, he says their heels are dry, whereas those in the absurd and inferior position such as himself, who no longer knew how to squat, had to stand in the mud. Mauss (1979: 112) provides other autobiographical examples of practical reason – he slept whilst standing up in the mountains, and whilst riding a horse.

Rather than being a residue, an excess squatting outside of Malay culture, *silat* permeates it to the core, is revealed within, and is revealing of the aesthetics of embodied cultural practice, including prayer, dance and the physical display of *adat*. I contend that aesthetics are fundamental to the Malay habitus, and are manifested in quotidian bodily hexis. From the perspective of *silat* it is possible to see the Malay conceptions of Islam and *adat* enacted, performed, and embodied in the way Malays walk, talk, sit, stand, eat, step past a seated person, lie down and sleep. For example, Malays sometimes sleep on their back with the arms folded over the chest, with one knee raised. In *silat* this sleeping position is deliberately adopted in case one should need to suddenly awake, and turn, kick, or strike with a backfist from a defensive position after someone has broken into the house (Mohammad Din Mohammad). But it is also a *technique du corps* that may be assumed by Malays with no training in martial arts whatsoever as they lounge around in their now concrete houses with no fear of being stabbed through gaps in the wooden flooring.

## Silat Kinesthetics

Every physical technique, even simply kicking or punching, involves bodily movement. *Silat*'s sophisticated techniques encompass strategy, tactics, attack, defence, timing, and the generation of power. Turning, twisting, ducking, dropping, spinning, stepping, leaping, jumping, diving, rolling, falling, evading, slipping, seizing, jamming, bumping, butting, and feinting are some of the skills to be acquired. These skills are honed through sparring. A *pesilat* must know how to move each part of the body in conjunction with the whole. Speed comes with repetition and practice, and is accompanied by strength, balance, poise, flexibility, self-confidence, and an enhanced sense of kinesthetic awareness. Each technique in a string of moves usually has several combat applications, some of which may be far from obvious. Most open hand techniques in *silat* are easily adapted if not originally designed for weapons use. The techniques are taught through fixed patterns or sets of movements known as *juros*, through *bunga* (flower), the flowery dancelike moves, and *buah* (fruit), the combat applications. The body must be tough enough to withstand the impact from delivering or receiving forceful blows. I discuss power development under *amalan* (daily practice) and *prana* (spiritual breath). Before one can step, the basic stances need to be mastered.

## *Langkah and Kuda Kuda*

*Langkah* must be discussed alongside the stances (*kuda kuda*). *Langkah* refers to footwork, or changing stances through stepping. The magic of the body is unleashed through the development of the low stance, as it leads to tremendous abilities to jump and kick, as well as to control the ground so as to fight from below an opponent's waist. The stances generate different feelings in the practitioner, for example, *helang berlegar* describes a circling eagle, a feeling generated from moving off the initial stance, and is where a young eagle learns to search for its prey. It is difficult to adequately describe the stances in writing as in practice one must take into account the angle they are pointing (*segi*), the way they are turning, twirling, or swinging (*seludang putar*), the sharp points (*seludang*), and whether they involve striking from above (*tinggi*) or from below (*rendah*, a very low stance where the head is below the navel). *Sampeng* is a *silat* concept that goes with the stances and means going to the side, for example, *siku sampeng* (elbow strike to the side), *langkah sampeng* (step to the side) and so forth.

*Silat* stances include: (a) the horse stance (*kuda*) with both legs in a straddle position about two shoulder widths apart; (b) the archer stance (*duduk laksamana*), with the weight on the bent back leg (or front) and the other nearly straight, one hand up palm out, the other left on the thigh; (c) the docking dragon stance (*naga berlaboh*), which looks like the horse stance twisted through 180 degrees, but with the *naga's* tail "docking," i.e. the back foot resting with the instep on the ground, and both firmly grounded legs taking equal weight; (d) the sitting tiger stance (*duduk harimau*) where the back leg is kneeling on the floor; (e) *rimau menanti* (waiting tiger) a low stance with the back leg carrying the body weight in a squatting position, with the front leg extended into a straddle; (f) *rimau santai*, which is low and almost sitting, with one knee on the ground, crouching, and the weight or rather a buttock resting on heel of either foot or both feet; (g) *sendeng tapi*, a low stance at a forty-five degree angle, which is *menanti* reversed with the body weight placed over the front squatting leg, the rear leg providing the straddle; (h) *berdiri kaki tunggal* (standing on one leg), and; (i) *duduk lipat*, sitting cross-legged.

The names of the stances above derive mainly from Seni Silat Haqq Melayu, but similar stances are found in Sumatran and Javanese styles of *silat*. The basic stance of Seni Silat Haqq Melayu is the ready stance (*pasang sikap/sikap rimau*) where the rear hand is held palm up in front, and the other rests on the front thigh, whilst the legs look as if one were sitting on a horse but twisting to the side. Basically it is a slightly twisted horse stance (*kuda kuda segi*), which is achieved by placing one leg just over a shoulder's width in front of the other. The same stance looking behind gives *libas*.

Apart from in *juros* (sets) and *sembah* (salutation) *silat* footwork is practised through the repetition of individual movements, such as leaping (*loncat*) backwards or forwards, or adopting any given stance according to compass points with the *pesilat* standing in the middle, or by practising a long series of *juros* connected together. The *pesilat* will be expected to hold low stances for hours on end to

develop strong legs, the spine, and “character,” requiring patience, daily practice, and an ability to withstand pain and tedium.<sup>21</sup> The low centre of gravity makes the *pesilat* difficult to throw. In kung fu it is commonly said that because boat people needed to fight from a stable base they developed the horse stance. This argument could easily be applied to the maritime Malays, especially the *Orang Laut* or the Sea Nomads (Sopher 1977). However, I think a better explanation is that the horse stance develops from the ability to squat, a *technique du corps* Mauss says is taken for granted in Asia and the Middle East, yet is forgotten in adult western cultures (Mauss 1979: 107). Similarly, the lion stance of *kalarippayattu* (and *silat cimande*) is closely linked to the squat, only with the feet placed slightly wider, and slightly straighter, with one leg in front of the other. The lion stance is similar to the basic position of Seni Silat Haqq Melayu (*pasang*), only in *kalarippayattu* the body is bent forward right over the leading leg, whereas in *silat*, the spine remains upright.<sup>22</sup>

The stance-work achieves great finesse in *silat*, because the secrets of the stance have been revealed. In traditional Chinese styles of kung fu the basic practice is to sit in a “squat” with the legs twice shoulder width apart as if sitting on a horse with the thighs parallel to the floor – for up to 3 h. In Okinawan karate, itself probably a derivative of Southern Chinese white crane kung fu, horse stance results in a lumbering plodding step from one position to the next in the classical stepping patterns (*kata*) such as *sanchin*. It seems obvious to the *silat* practitioner that in *sanchin* the secret of the footwork has been withheld (for *sanchin* see Normandeau 2003a).<sup>23</sup> In *silat* however, the horse stance may be transformed to become *libas*, where the performer twists the torso around, and looks behind (often preceding a jumping spinning kick, which utilizes the power generated from the torqued position), or it may become *naga berlaboh* by twisting and folding the legs. Second, through differential weighting, although both feet are on the ground, the *pesilat*’s entire weight may be placed upon one foot or the other, which can prove tricky for the opponent as they will not be able to gauge where the *pesilat* will step next, or where they are vulnerable or strong. Third, through hyperextension of one knee, with one leg in a

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<sup>21</sup> Before training the legs may be warmed up with oils such as Bee Brand or *gamat*. Malays are renowned for their medicinal oils (*minyak*), which treat a multitude of ailments including rheumatism, back pains, trapped wind, stomach-ache, flu, colds and headache. There are hundreds, perhaps thousands of oils, for all kinds of things including to strengthen the body, improve sexual vitality, and enhance sexual pleasure. The 130 million year old virgin rain forest changes from one mile to the next (along with the weather), and supports unique ecosystems supplying an enormous variety of medicinal and poisonous plants (Gimlette 1915; Kathirithamby-Wells 2005).

<sup>22</sup> With the exception of *duduk lipat* the low stances of *silat* are similar to those used in modern freestyle wrestling (Thompson 1999).

<sup>23</sup> In kung fu low stances typify so-called Northern styles, whereas high stances with the feet shoulder width apart (a high horse stance) typify later Southern innovations including Chow Gar, Pak Mei, and Wing Chun. Practitioners of these arts say high stances are an evolutionary adaptation giving greater speed and mobility. High stances may arise when there is insufficient time to master the low stancework. Of course, ideally it is better to master both high and low footwork. However, the negative side of extremely low stances, especially for westerners, is that prolonged hyperextension may damage the knees.

deep squat and the other straight, the horse stance becomes lower still to become *dudok menanti* or *sendeng tapi* allowing the *pesilat* to control the low ground; and fourth, by placing the weight upon the balls of the feet, given strong legs even very low stances become dexterous, fast and mobile.

## ***Bunga***

The predominant Malay aesthetic seen in all their art from carving to calligraphy is one of spinning, turning, and twisting, like ivy encircling a post.<sup>24</sup> The movements of *bunga*, often danced at Malay weddings, are graceful, stylised, smooth and circular. *Bunga* may involve one or several participants in synchronized stylised movement. *Bunga* teaches the finer points of technique, balance, positioning, footwork and gaze. The “moves” of *bunga* are multivalent in that they operate across practical and magical realms. It may be difficult to assess or even see the practical implications of any given move, unless it is also shown with an application, for example performed as part of a *buah*, or with a weapon in hand. Hence only an experienced eye may overcome the captivation inherent in the *bunga*. Sometimes the performance of *bunga* looks somewhat like *taijiquan*: indeed Pa’ Zaini referred to his style as “Malay tai chi.”

*Bunga* strategically disguises the lethal arsenal of *silat*. Beautiful, yet deadly, it is the flowery, graceful, aesthetically pleasing dance of *silat* that differentiates *silat* from other martial arts. *Bunga* serves as visible proof to Malays who would say that *silat* was originally created by a woman. The continuous twisting, and curling over of the hands is similar to Indian, Javanese, and Sumatran dance, and exemplifies the “feminine” beauty of *silat*. Initially, I could not see how *bunga* could possibly be deadly, until Pa’ Zaini, a wedding *silat* expert showed me the same elegant steps whilst holding a razor.

Sometimes, young “modern” Malays deride Peninsular Malay *silat* as “rubbish” and “pathetic.” The “effeminate” aspect of *silat*, exemplified by *bunga*, is possibly one reason why urban Malays spurn it in favour of other more “masculine” (non-Chinese) martial arts such as karate or taekwondo, which are perceived as being more realistic for combat. This is ironic, as both karate and taekwondo are twentieth century inventions; national “sports” that de-emphasize weapons in their training.<sup>25</sup> Thus, the martial arts of other Asians are perceived as real and effective,

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<sup>24</sup> *Bunga* stands in stark comparison to the modern militarist aesthetic of machinelike exact movement so typical of the so-called “hard” combative styles. The commonplace distinction between “hard” and “soft” martial arts is clearly seen in Japanese examples. Some Japanese martial styles are predominantly “soft,” such as aikido which emphasizes flowing, defensive movements; others, such as Gojo Ryu karate, are predominantly “hard,” emphasizing aggressive strikes to smash an opponent’s limbs, torso, throat or skull.

<sup>25</sup> For example, Funakoshi Gichin changed the name of karate *jitsu* (Chinese hand techniques) to karate-*dō* (empty-hand ways) in 1935 (Nakayama 1966: preface). The focus of the art shifted to

whereas Malay martial arts are devalued as feminine, ineffective, outdated, anachronistic and overly traditional. With the advent of the late twentieth century “development” the feminine or “effeminate” aspects of Malay culture have become associated with weakness, and are marginalized if not sloughed off, a process Khoo (2000) notes in Malaysian films as the rise of “hypermasculinity.” Hence in Kuala Lumpur, Japanese or Korean martial arts are preferred, with Japan especially operating as a model of Asian prosperity, achievement and modernity.

## *Juros*

*Juros* are strings of techniques practised in sets of movements, which contain important combat moves and footwork. *Pesilat* practicing *juros* appear to fight an imaginary opponent. However, the continuous repetition of the same techniques in a series prevents *juros* from looking exactly like western shadowboxing, which anyhow is less structured. *Juros* are multi-purpose training tools designed to teach the *pesilat* the art of bodily movement, through the practice of combinations of postures and techniques.

## *Buah*

In the language of performance, *buah* are “combat strategies” that rehearse a series of “strips” of combative techniques and their premeditated responses (Goffman 1974: 10).<sup>26</sup> The strips are found in *juros* and *bunga*, and *buah* teaches some of their applications; it is the fruit of the flower in the garden of *silat* (*silat sekebung*). To execute a takedown, or lock an opponent, an “entry” against a preconfigured attack (armed or unarmed) is required in the form of a technique that puts the opponent in a position in relation to the *pesilat* where a limb, the head, or torso (or combination of these) can be struck and manipulated into a compromising position to give the *pesilat* the advantage (Fig. 3.4). Malay *silat* practitioners may aim to strike the vital points (*nadi*) with the fore-knuckles gripped in a leopard fist (*selegi*), but overall they favour placing the opponent in locks or submission holds.

*Buah* is less graceful than *bunga*, but the moves are executed without brute force, appearing effortless. Some Indonesian styles of *silat* refer to *buah* as *pukulan*, and emphasize the strike (*pukul*) rather than the takedown; however, the striking of vulnerable points is implicit in *buah*, a word that also means “testicles.” Not all *buah* end in locking the opponent. The practice of *buah* against different opponents where

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moral education and the development of the self. For pre-war Japan this entailed a shift away from the recognition of Chinese martial ancestry.

<sup>26</sup>Rashid (1990: 63) defines *buah* as a method to teach the practical application of “combat strategies” to take down and lock an opponent.



**Fig. 3.4** Jas and Solleh perform *buah wanita*



one individual acts as the attacker, and the other as the defender, gives the *pesilat* skills of distance, timing, footwork, posture, and body mechanics. *Buah* is a form of rehearsal in a theatre of combat, and provides the *pesilat* an array of responses to any given attack.

Some *buah* simply knock the opponent down with a sweep (*sapu*), others may end up locking them, and then enacting a strike or kill. Some *buah* are just a few moves, others may consist of more than a dozen individual movements. In Peninsular Malaysia, the *buah* are given names like *amok* (amok), *cinabuta* (blind Chinese) and *kuda gila* (crazy horse). Repetitive practice leads to the ability to smoothly execute complex manoeuvres against a pre-configured attack, however, in actual combat the *pesilat* is meant to improvise, and respond to any given situation, and not blindly execute a series of movements. Hence the rehearsal is not designed to achieve a stimulus/response pattern through continuous repetition, but to ground the *pesilat* in the skills of combat.

### *Amalan*

Pa' Ariffin has developed what may be termed "iron shins," a common attribute among Thai boxers. Pa' Ariffin explains that to develop the iron shin the lower leg and calf should be beaten with a hot towel that is folded and tightly twisted

along its length. The beating with this heavy cloth cudgel must continue for about 15 min everyday for around three months. The towel must be wetted, preferably with scalding hot water. Subsequently a specially prepared liniment (*minyak gosok*) is massaged into the leg, with long downward strokes using the edge of the thumbs and the fingertips. This improves the blood circulation and along with tedious and painful stance training helps to develop the strong legs needed to hold low stances and deliver forceful kicks. Once the area is conditioned, over a period of three to six months, oil needs to be pressed into the region two or three times daily to maintain and improve the condition of the leg. According to Pa' Ariffin, the improved circulation enhances male libido because the veins in the leg connect directly to the penis. To improve the sex drive (size and stamina) the inner thigh area and not solely the inner calf receive massage. Pa' Ariffin said that this *amalan* derives from his father, but then he would always say that, especially when he didn't want to reveal the source of his knowledge.<sup>27</sup>

## Styles of Silat

Now that I have examined an “ideal type” of *silat* from the point of view of similarities, it is useful to examine *silat* styles from the point of view of their differences. This section is not exhaustive but paints a broad outline of some of the styles that Seni Silat Haqq Melayu is composed from, or against. As Seni Silat Haqq Melayu aims to epitomize the essence of *silat Melayu*, it is necessary to ask what *silat Melayu* consists of. The straightforward answer to this question is typically *silat Minangkabau*, *silat sendeng*, *silat Patani*, *silat Kelantan*, *silat Kedah*, and *silat Jawa*. Therefore, *silat Melayu* is not only the antecedent of other *silat* styles, but the result of their amalgamation.

### *Silat Melayu*

There is no absolute consensus as to which *silat* styles should be included in a discussion of *silat Melayu*. Ku and Wong (1978: 7–12) refer to “the main styles” of *silat Melayu* under the predominantly regional classifications of *silat Minangkabau*, *silat sendeng*, *silat Patani*, *silat Kelantan*, *silat Kedah*, and *silat Jawa*. *Silat sendeng* is the exception, as *sendeng* (slanting) refers to techniques entering via an angle, or from one side. The regional classification tends to lump together the diverse elements of *silat*, and simplifies the complex attributes in an interlacing network of component parts. Each of the *silat* types mentioned above has a more or less developed art (*seni*) element, particular strategies and tactics, a spiritual dimension, and a

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<sup>27</sup> *Amalan* also translates as “good deed.” These are taken into account on one’s deathbed and may be detected by the *kadi* who washes the corpse of the deceased.

host of technical manoeuvres including all or most of the following: *sepak* (kick or slap) *pukul*, *langkah*, *juros*, *bunga*, *sembah*, *buah*, *kunci* and *belebat*. The regional approach has the merits of simplifying a complex field, and it does to some extent represent the common-sense understanding of the Malay *guru silat* of the composition of *silat Melayu*.<sup>28</sup>

When I asked Pa' Ariffin about the Minangkabau styles he had learned, and where from, he said he had learned *silat Minang* from a teacher in Negri Sembilan, which is the main Minangkabau settlement in Malaysia. I pressed on saying: "Well which one? After all there are almost a hundred styles of Minangkabau *silat*." Pa' Ariffin looked mystified and said that "for us, it's just *silat Minang*." This conglomeration could suggest that the Malaysian *silat* lies in the shadow of Sumatra, and that it is merely a blurred, attenuated, and fragmented version of the original. On the other hand, to Malays it may suggest that the Malaysian form (from the nobility) is closer to the "original" Sumatran style that arrived in Singapore in 1160 when the Malays migrated from Minangkabau in Sumatra (Ku and Wong 1978: 7), a notion that fits with the idea that immigrants cling more tightly to their traditions, and may reject change to a greater degree than indigenes.

As far as I was able to piece together, Pa' Ariffin learned *silat Melayu* from his father Yeop Mahidin M.B.E., who learned from Datuk Pawang Noh. Yeop Mahidin is also said to have learned *silat Melayu* from Zainal Alatas (the grandfather of Datuk Meor Abdul Rahman), and *silat cekak* from Pa' Samat of Kampong Ulu (but Kg. Ulu *what*? Pa' Ariffin did not specify; *ulu* just means "remote" – the "head" of a river, headwaters, or upstream – and is merely a prefix to a river's name). Pa' Ariffin also says that he was taught by Tok Ki Anjang, another student of Datuk Pawang Noh, and that he was taught *silat seni gayong* by Datuk Meor Abdul Rahman, who "cut his lime" in 1967 (see Chapter 7). He says he also learned *silat Melayu* from Pa' Daraman, *Pendekar Tuah* from Cikgu Mazlan (whose father Cikgu Hashim, learned from Yeop Mahidin); *silat sterlak* from Pa' Hamid (from Ipoh) in Kuala Lumpur, *silat lintau* from Pa' Dearman (Ampangan, Negri Sembilan); and *gerak suci sejati*, and *silat sekebung* (the origin of *silat Melayu*) from Cikgu Amin. This list proved impossible to verify as Pa' Ariffin said most of these people are now deceased or he has lost contact with them. However, his brother, Tutak, and their sister Judd, did remember their father instructing them as children.

## ***Silat Minangkabau***

Following Cordes (1990: 92–95) Pauka (1998: 27) says there are seventy-eight styles of *silek* in West Sumatra, although this figure does not include the many "schools" of *silek* that may only be practised in a localized region down to a single

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<sup>28</sup> Rashid (1990: 66) provides a useful classificatory table of the types of *silat* to be found in Peninsular Malaysia.

village.<sup>29</sup> Draeger (1972: 133) notes that *silek* forms a great influence on all *silat* styles, as from Sumatra *silek* spread to Java, and then to the rest of Indonesia and Peninsular Malaysia. Sumatran influence over Malay *silat* has technical, philosophical, and spiritual dimensions, affecting the techniques, music (*gendang*), training times and attire.

*Silat harimau* (tiger style) is a Minangkabau style that exerts an important influence upon Malay *silat*, and its authority may be seen in palm and claw techniques, stances, footwork, kicks, sweeps, *juros*, *buah* and weapons training. *Silat harimau* bears only superficial resemblance to Chinese fighting styles named after tigers, except that a few of the dynamic tension exercises are similar to those practised in Hung Gar kung fu (Kong and Ho 1973: 14, 22, 53). *Silat harimau* practitioners develop massively strong legs for leaping and kicking (Draeger 1972: 136). This is partly obtained by holding the ultra-low stances characteristic of the style. A high degree of flexibility in the spine, waist and legs must also be attained. The techniques of *silat harimau* (or *rimau* for short) require the performer to drop to the ground on all fours assuming very low positions and this develops a strong back, broad shoulders, and powerful forearms and wrists. These and other signs the *silat* expert gives off, such as oversized calf muscles, or the immaculate way they rise from kneeling in prayers without the aid of their hands using only a single smooth flex of the knees, make them relatively easy to spot to the trained observer.

*Silat harimau* is well-adapted to fighting in wet slippery muddy conditions, and for people who develop strong legs as part of their everyday activities of squatting, walking, climbing and maneuvering boats in shallow waters (Draeger 1972: 131). I have already mentioned the ploy of the *pesilat harimau* of dropping to the floor into a seemingly sacrificial position to deceive the opponent. There are other formidable motives for dropping to the ground. To the surprise of the unsuspecting opponent the *pesilat harimau* may seem to temporarily vanish, only to drop into a posture that directly engages the opponent from below, beside, or behind them. The vanishing effect (*ilmu ghaib*) is greatly enhanced at night. For example, *pesilat* may drop on all fours whilst pressing forward with their shoulder against the opponent's forward shin, simultaneously seizing the ankle with their hand, and potentially snapping the leg at the knee if sufficient force is applied. Quickly standing up from this position and yanking the opponent's ankle upwards will throw them backwards. The influence of *silat harimau* is apparent in many styles of Malay *silat* and may be seen where the *pesilat* drops their entire weight onto the floor whilst locking a part of the opponent's anatomy. Aside from the application of pins to immobilize an opponent, this body dropping method can result in arm and wrist breaks, shoulder dislocation, leg breaks, spine and neck breaks. With a tripping technique the full body weight of the *pesilat* may forcibly smash the opponent's face or the back of their head into the

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<sup>29</sup> According to Cordes there are ten major styles of *silek* in West Sumatra and these are *kumango*, *lintau*, *silak tuo*, *sitaralak*, *harimau*, *puah*, *sungai patai*, *luncua*, *gulo-gulo tareh*, and *silek baru* to which Pauka (1998: 27) adds an eleventh called *ulu ambek*.

ground. These techniques all feature in *Seni Silat Haqq Melayu*, *Seni Silat Al-Haqq*, and *Silat Seni Gayong Malaysia*, styles I discuss later in this chapter.

Some *guru silat* say that *silat harimau* is not designed to fight people, but to fight tigers (see also Skeat [1900] 1984: 169–170). According to *guru silat* Mohammad Din Mohammad, the *silat* master Pa' Hanifi Harimau of Kampung Bereh could jump twenty-five feet into the air, and push trees down after merely cutting them with his knife. He would complete his student's training by making them train with the tiger on the final day. As Mohammad Din Mohammad put it:

The tiger will go through the swamp and then through the water, then rest. They will go and fight it – bare hand. Until they *kebal taring*, i.e. the tiger bite you or strike you and you are not harmed. And you can change your mouth and teeth using the tongue to look like the tiger (Mohammad Din Mohammad, from fieldnotes).<sup>30</sup>

There are spiritual aspects of *silat harimau* that Malays regard as *haram* (taboo). For example a *silat gayong* master in Singapore (name withheld) was reputed to keep a spiritual *harimau* with him and learn from it. Linking or merging with a spiritual being, or keeping “a familiar” by one's side is known as *dampingan*, and is considered to be a type of black magic.

## *Silat Sterlak*

Draeger says that *silat sterlak*, another Minangkabau style, was designed as a countermeasure to *silat harimau* imitating “the fury of a herd of stampeding elephants, combining that with the wariness of the stalking tiger” (1972: 136). Draeger continues that “trainees are concerned with applying the whole body force behind the fist, foot, or head in making their attacks” and that “tradition tells of *sterlak* experts who have fought and defeated tigers in the Sumatran jungles” (ibid). Draeger also suggests that *silat sterlak* appears to have Chinese antecedents of the *xingyiquan* variety. *Xingyiquan* is a Chinese Taoist style of kung fu which roughly translates as “mind/body fist.”<sup>31</sup> It is based upon twelve animals and five elements. The animals are dragon, snake, tiger, monkey, bear, eagle, fish, falcon, horse, mystical bird (like a phoenix), swallow, and chicken. A short “form” or set pattern of movements (much like a *juros*) is based upon the characteristic movements of each animal (for example, leaping and swooping down for the swallow; twisting and turning for the snake). The five elements are earth, water, fire, air, and metal, and concern ways of hitting and moving, for example, water is soft and fluid and relates to “splashing” palm

<sup>30</sup> The latter part of this quote brings to mind the Kerinci people of Jambi in Sumatra who are believed by Peninsular Malays to be able to literally turn into tigers after dark (Skeat [1900] 1984: 161–163). Mohammad Din Mohammad says that when the Kerinci came to Malaysia to trade, they settled, intermarried, and their forbears lost the ability to turn into were-tigers.

<sup>31</sup> I first learned *xingyiquan* in London during 1994–1996, and *baguazhang* in Singapore 2005–2007.

techniques. *Xingyiquan* develops tremendous power, partly through stamping and transmitting the resultant energy through the fist or other weapon. *Xingyiquan* is the first of the three classical Taoist arts, namely *xingyiquan*, *taijiquan*, and *baguazhang*.

### *Silat Cekak*

*Silat cekak* was originally developed in the Kedah Court to counter the Thai fighting style known as the *tomoi*. Now one of the most popular *silat* styles in Malaysia, it was first registered as an association in Kedah in 1904, and for Malaysia generally in 1965 (Rashid 1990: 93). *Cekak*, means to “claw” or seize the opponent. It is renowned for its series of *buah* which have been influential in the development of more recent *silat* styles in Peninsular Malaysia, including *silat gayong*.

According to Rashid (1990: 66) *silat cekak*, also known as *papan sekeping* (a piece of wood), is an Islamic martial art that originates in Peninsular Malaysia.<sup>32</sup> Himself a former practitioner of *silat cekak* Rashid explains that *silat cekak*'s

genealogy of *guru*'s (*ranting sala silah*) began with the famous Panglima Ismail of Kedah who invented the *silat* and taught the technique to another warrior of the Kedah court, Panglima Tok Rashid. The latter then taught the art to a certain Yahya Said from Perak, on the condition that he agreed to return the *silat* to the Kedah Malays. Yahya Said himself never made it to Kedah but kept the knowledge of the art for forty years until it was finally taught to a Kedah Malay from the district of Sik, Tok Guru Hanafi (Halimah Ahmad 1977; Rashid 1990: 67).

The above quote clarifies why *silat cekak* is now commonly referred to as *silat cekak hanafi*. This distinguishes the art from *cekak serantau* (found in Singapore), which is a product of the prolific innovator Pa' Hosni, and as such bears no direct relation to the *silat* of the Kedah Court.

### *Silat Sendeng*

According to Rashid (1990: 66) *silat sendeng* is an Islamic style that originates in Peninsular Malaysia. However, *guru silat* of Javanese origin assure me that *silat*

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<sup>32</sup> Rashid continues that “*Silat cekak* ... can be traced to the history of Kedah in the seventeenth century, during the tussle between the Kedah Malays and the Minangkabau for the throne of Kedah (Shahrom Ahmat 1971). During these wars Kedah was overrun by the Thais, and the Kedah Malays attempted to consolidate their strength by developing a technique of self-defence (eventually known as *cekak*) with the full support of the Kedah royal family and within the Kedah court. It combined different *silat* forms from Aceh and the Minangkabau area of Sumatra in order to specifically counter the Thai martial art form, the *tomoi*” (Rashid 1990: 67).

*sendeng* is from Java. *Sendeng* is an adjective meaning “askew; crooked; awry; twisted to one side; amiss” (Hawkins 2001: 216). *Sendeng* is possibly a covert reference to Chinese aspects of *silat*. Whatever the case, *sendeng* refers to the tactic of “slanting,” a style of *silat* movement that turns the body sideways on to the opponent, and serves to simultaneously extend the reach of the *pesilat*, and to minimize the exposed area available for the opponent to strike. Slanting also refers to the slanting entry into and through the opponent’s “spatial envelope,” traversing “personal distance” into the “intimate zone,” for example, entering at a forty-five degree angle from where the opponent is facing (Hall 1990: 46, 128). Techniques from *silat sendeng*, or techniques related to the concept of slanting, are found in many styles of *silat* from Malaysia and Indonesia. The corollary of *sendeng* is *sumbang* where the body rotates from a sidelong position to a position facing the opponent. When these two movements are performed consecutively, with a twist of the waist, a snap of the hips, and a turning of the feet, considerable amounts of kinetic energy can be unleashed, and may be directed into the opponent through a strike.

### ***Silat Gayong***

One of the most important styles of *silat* in relation to Seni Silat Haqq Melayu is *silat seni gayong* (Chapter 7 discusses *gayong*’s ritual practice), which is numerically the most popular style of *silat* in Malaysia, and the crucible of Seni Silat Haqq Melayu. *Silat seni gayong* and Seni Silat Haqq Melayu share some, though by no means all, ritual procedures and derive their *techniques du corps* from a common ancestry, especially the *buah*. Pa’ Ariffin is a relative of Datuk Meor Abdul Rahman, the founder of *silat seni gayong* (on his mother’s side). As a child, and when he was a teenager, he learned *silat gayong* from the founder. Pa’ Ariffin also claims to have learnt *ibu gayong*, the “mother” or root of *gayong* from his father *Tuan* (Sir) Yeop Mahidin M.B.E., whom he says was one of the teachers of Datuk Meor Abdul Rahman.

In 2001 Pa’ Ariffin became the official representative for Silat Seni Gayong U.K., and subsequently attempted to transform the students of his established style, Seni Silat Haqq Melayu, into students of Silat Gayong U.K. This change was fiercely resisted by his students in London, who amongst other things, disliked the *gayong* hats (*tanjat*), which to them symbolized not just a shift in fashion, but a downgrade in status from the *silat* of the “nobility” to that of the “commoners.” It is difficult to assess exactly why Pa’ Ariffin chose to teach them a different style, but one reason may be that Seni Silat Haqq Melayu is basically an aestheticised version of *silat seni gayong* anyway (there are also political reasons, see Chapter 5).

According to Sheppard (1972: 148) *silat gayong* was the first attempt to systematize *silat*, and to provide it with syllabus, gradings, and a belt system, a move that was clearly modelled on earlier Japanese innovations in their martial arts. Sheppard writes that:

Until the Japanese invasion of Malaya, there was no uniform syllabus for the teacher of the Malay art of self defence. This defect was recognized during the lawless years of the Japanese occupation (Sheppard 1972: 145).

One of the founders of *silat gayong* was Mahaguru Datuk Meor Abdul Rahman, who was a policeman in the CID under the British colonial administration of Malaya. He established *silat gayong* in the early 1940s on Pulau Sudong (Sudong Island) seven kilometres south of Singapore, now an oil refinery. Sheppard states that:

The fundamental change from a parochial pastime to a regimented and highly organized form of self-defence took place during the troubled years of the Japanese occupation. It was then that a number of Malay leaders, including Dato Onn bin Jafaar of Johore and Dato Meor Abdul Rahman of Taiping in Perak evolved a unique system of teaching *silat* as a means of promoting godliness, loyalty, and self-defence (Sheppard 1983: 103).

Cheah documents various accounts of how Datuk Onn bin Jaafar, at the bidding of Sultan Ibrahim of Johor, managed to prevent Kiyai Salleh, the leader of the 1,600 Sabilillah (Holy War) Army of the Red Bands, from attacking Batu Pahat town. Hence *silat* can be defined as the art of stopping war, and not just as the art of self-defence or killing. Kiyai Salleh was later given the title of *penghulu* (chief) of Simpang Kiri, and recruited by Datuk Onn as president of the Simpang Kiri branch of Datuk Onn's Pergerakan Melayu Semananjung (Peninsular Malay Movement), continuing as president when Datuk Onn became president of UMNO in June 1946.

After the Japanese occupation Datuk Meor Abdul Rahman and his followers spread the new system of *silat seni gayong* from Singapore to Johore, and then all the way up the Malaysian Peninsula to Kedah "where it received substantial patronage from Tengku Kassim, an uncle of Tengku Abdul Rahman" (Sheppard 1983: 104). *Silat seni gayong* was introduced to the Royal Malaysian Police in 1973. An intensive training course was held for forty-eight police personnel from the lower ranks. Upon graduation, they were ordered to spread *silat seni gayong* to all the Police Training schools in Malaysia. Today, as Rashid attests, "*gayong* remains the most popular of all *silat* forms and is still sponsored by Malay political groups such as the United Malays National Organization (UNMO) and youth organizations" (1990: 67).

A product of World War Two, *silat seni gayong* was designed primarily to train the police, who were thrown into disarray during the post-war interregnum. As such it concentrates on combat efficacy, powerful incapacitating strikes, controlling locks, and weapons, and neglects *bunga*. In 2008, from my highrise condominium balcony in Kuala Lumpur, I watched four policemen tackle a rowdy hooligan who resisted arrest. Two policemen pinned the man's arms behind his body from both sides, and one stood in front and another behind. The policeman in the rear then kicked the man's legs out from under him in a classic *silat gayong* manoeuvre facilitating a pin face-first to the ground to apply the handcuffs. Next they forced him into the back of a police car. Five minutes later a man in plain



clothes drove up on a moped. Dismounting, he yanked open the police car door and slapped the suspect hard across the face as the police stood by idly. The slap was met with derisive whoops of laughter from the people watching in the surrounding tower blocks.

*Silat gayong* has a rough unpolished “masculine” look, and it lacks the flowing aesthetic “feminine” grace of *silat Melayu*. *Silat gayong* does not use music for the purposes of training: the *seni* aspects are crude and under-developed. However, this rough quality seems to well suit many of the men and women who practice *silat gayong*, who in Kuala Lumpur, except for the middle-class higher echelons, are mainly drawn from the urban working-class and from the outlying *kampongs*. Class aside, for the purposes of training they are all prepared to rough it out.

Datuk Meor was a pragmatist who amassed martial techniques from other martial artists via his confidantes and senior students all across Malaya. Travelling from place to place he would watch the *pesilat* perform the applications to a series of techniques, for example, *buah pisau* (knife fighting), and then if the techniques were good enough, have them written down, recorded, and “authorized” as part of the *silat seni gayong* syllabus, with his signature, seal and blessing (Cikgu Ezhar). Significantly, Datuk Meor failed to get permission from his grandfather, Zainal Alatas, to teach the style, but was instead sent by him to find a “higher authority” (see Chapter 4).

In Sumatra *silek* is also known as *gayung*. *Silat seni gayong* is a composite style that incorporates elements of Sumatran *silat*, especially *silat harimau*. It also includes Bugis elements passed down from the founder’s ancestors. Like most Malay styles of *silat*, *silat gayong* shares many of its *buah* with *silat cekak*. Used as a noun, *gayong* commonly refers to the small bucket that Malays use to scoop water in the toilet and bathing area. *Gayong* instructors took pains to assure me that their *gayong* is not a toilet bucket. *Gayong* also means “single-stick,” a weapon that is associated with magical powers in Malay literature (Sheppard 1983: 104). For the Malay martial artist, *gayong* is a verb that describes the action of dipping into the well of the unseen, to draw out mystical power for use in this world. Chthonian power is drawn through prayer, dreams, visions, and the specific ritual practices of *silat gayong* (see Chapters 7 and 8).

Aside from its curious ritual initiation through the boiling oil ordeal, *silat gayong* is visually distinctive from other Malay styles of *silat* due to its emphasis upon performance acrobatics, including flips, diving rolls, somersaults, and handsprings (see also Shamsuddin 2005: 65). The student learns to competently handle several weapons, notably the *parang*, *lembing* (spear), *sarung* and the *keris* (Fig. 3.5). Except for the *parang*, upon completion of each weapon the *pesilat* undergoes a test or *khatam* (a term which normally refers to a test upon completing a study of the Holy Quran). To pass the *khatam lembing* (spear test) the student must catch a spear thrown down a waterfall whilst standing in the pounding rush of cold water. For the *khatam keris*, late at night they wade out into the sea off Melaka in a group, and wait until the snakes (*naga*) arrive in a seething mass, to twist and turn between their legs, an ordeal said to be especially terrifying for women.



Fig. 3.5 A Malay girl learning *silat seni gayong keris* at night (*Nirwana gelanggang*)

These *khatam* are part of the grading procedure, and belt ranking system, through which the student moves from white, to green, red, yellow, and ultimately black. Each belt (*benkung*) has several sub-stages: red, one, two, and three; yellow, one to five; and the black belt has seven stages marked by bars affixed to the ends of the belt. Unlike Singapore, the seventh degree black belt and the title of *mahaguru* is reserved for Datuk Meor in Malaysia. Malaysian *silat gayong* has several more belts than the Singaporean version taught by Mahaguru Hussin Kasslan, which is closer to the original style of Datuk Meor. The fattening of the syllabus occurred due to the accretion of techniques in Malaysia, whereas this tendency was checked in Singapore. This does not mean the Singapore version is quicker to learn, as Mahaguru Hussin Kasslan says he prefers to teach slowly.

Over the years *silat seni gayong* has splintered and fractured, and many different groups have originated, including Silat Gayong Pusaka, Silat Gayong Pasat, Silat Gayong Ghaib, Silat Gayong Fatani and Silat Gayong Marifat. Seni Silat Al-Haq is another splinter group from the arable soil of *silat gayong*. Formed by Pa' Hosni, and based in Singapore, Seni Silat Al-Haq eschews the ritual elements of *silat seni gayong*, and rejects as unIslamic the lime-cutting divination (*mandi limau*), and the ordeal by boiling oil (*mandi minyak*).<sup>33</sup> Seni Silat Al-Haq bears marked similarities to Seni Silat Haqq Melayu as taught by Pa' Ariffin, especially in terms of the *buah*, which for both styles derives from *silat gayong* and *silat cekak*. Both styles look

<sup>33</sup> Pa' Ariffin's brother, Pa' Din learned Seni Silat Al-Haq from Pa' Hosni in the 1980s.

more aesthetically polished (*halus*) than *silat seni gayong*. However, the training atmosphere of Seni Silat Haqq Melayu was completely different from its Singaporean cousins; the former was deadly serious, whilst the latter flopped around like limp socks in the intense heat and humidity of Singapore (although Pa' Hosni's son, the current teacher, is certainly no lame duck).

Silat Seni Harimau, founded by Cikgu Kahar, was a short-lived spin-off from *silat seni gayong* (Fig. 3.6). Cikgu Kahar lived with his wife and two sons in his *gelanggang* in Ampang, Kuala Lumpur, eking out a precarious existence doing hand massage (*urut*) in the local market and teaching Silat Seni Gayong Malaysia. Years ago, after an amorous liaison with the founder's late daughter, Cikgu Khal-som (who until recently led the Perak contingent) was discovered, Datuk Meor violently ejected his "chauffeur" Cikgu Kahar from the *silat gayong* organization, only to reaccept him later on, with the rejection of the suit. The *mahaguru* threw yellow rice at Kahar, which meant that whatever powers given were rescinded, and that "whatever I have taught you I will take it back." *Silat seni gayong* thus exhibits in microcosm all the elements that characterize Malay culture, and demonstrates how ill feeling from amorous affairs can echo down the years, threatening to tear the organization apart, not least because it lacks the strong charismatic leadership of the late founder. This conflict re-emerges in Chapter 7 alongside accusations of sorcery.

In Weberian terms, despite the rationalization of *silat gayong*, disenchantment did not seem to take place: if anything the opposite occurred, and practitioners of *silat gayong* became notorious for their mystical knowledge and black magic (*ilmu*)



Fig. 3.6 Cikgu Kahar in London, 2002

*hitam*).<sup>34</sup> For example, *guru silat* Mohammad Din Mohammad told me that he ate some curry puffs (*kueh epok-epok*) at a *guru silat gayong*'s house – Malay etiquette (*adat*) demands that one must sample food and drink when visiting – and subsequently found that he could not urinate.

In terrible pain, his abdomen began to swell, to the point where he felt that he would burst. Hours later, his own *guru silat* arrived, and gave him some blessed water (*air doa*) to drink to counter the black magic, and relieve the agony. He says that shortly after drinking the blessed water he went to the toilet, and whilst urinating felt a painful sensation at the tip of his penis. He then saw a black speck sticking out of the external meatus (*hujung zakar*), which his *guru silat* pulled upon, finger over thumb, slowly working out a long black thread believed to have been concealed in the food in an attempt on his life. My doctor, Saiful Nazim, himself a Malay practitioner of *silat gayong* and doctor for the Singapore national *silat* team, received this tale with a raucous laugh and said: "In western medical terms these are the classical symptoms of urinary infection, and the thread could be dried blood." However, this does not explain how the "thread" came to have seven knots in it.<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, the point is well established that *guru silat* fear the war magic of *silat gayong*, showing that one of the functions of war magic is to intimidate others, and not just to alleviate uncertainty and "master the elements of luck and chance" (Malinowski 1948: 14).

### *Silat Sekebung*

Silat Sekebung is the *silat* style of the Malay *guru silat*, and is well documented by Tuan Ismail's (1991) excellent account. The garden of *silat* (*silat sekebung*) is a metaphor that operates on practical and mystical levels. Of course, one cannot help but think of the Garden of Eden, and there is also a resonance here with Temiar Orang Asli beliefs of "the flower garden of the afterlife where the head-souls of dead Temiar reside" (Jennings 1995: 142). The garden of *silat* is occupied by spirits – of dead warriors, animals, birds, trees, shrubs, flowers, and vines, and each one of these exists in a different style of movement. Therefore the garden of *silat* is a

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<sup>34</sup> By rationalization I am referring to institutionalization, systematization and "the knowledge or belief . . . that principally there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation" (Weber 1958: 139). For Weber, "the fate of our times is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization and [following Schiller], above all, by the 'disenchantment of the world'" (1958: 155). Disenchantment involves the stripping of magical elements from thought. As Gerth and Mills point out: "The extent and direction of 'rationalization' is thus measured negatively in terms of the degree to which magical elements of thought are displaced, or positively by the extent to which ideas gain in systematic coherence and naturalistic consistency" (1958: 51). On re-enchantment see also Benjamin 1996.

<sup>35</sup> See also "The Dawn" (*Al-Falaq*): "Say I seek refuge with the Lord of the Dawn, From the mischief of created things; From the mischief of darkness as it overspreads; *From the mischief of those of those who blow on knots*; And from the mischief of the mischief of the envious one as he practises envy (Holy Quran 30: 113, italics added).

garden of movement, a garden (*kebun*) which may be practically explored with a *guru silat* through tuition, and mystically explored through spontaneous movement or *gerak* (see Chapter 5). Either way, in *silat* one needs a “guide,” and this is reminiscent of the spirit guide of the Temiar who lead them in the dreaming (Jennings 1995: 18).

Malay *pesilat* and *guru silat* may spend a lifetime on a quest to explore the garden of *silat*, collecting technical, religious, magical, and mystical knowledge so as to discover as many aspects of *silat* as possible. However, those on the quest are selective, and hunt the particular aspects that they consider important. Pa’ Ariffin says that:

When you walk through a beautiful garden you enjoy the scenery, look at the pretty girls, take a bathe in the water, and then move on to the next garden. When you leave, you don’t try and take the whole garden with you (Pa’ Ariffin, from fieldnotes).

Some individuals will go to great lengths to gain the trust of a *guru silat* and “go through” an entire style simply to acquire a single *juros*, or a single coveted technique and *jampi*. Ultimately, these fragments may be recombined with dozens of others, and when renamed and passed down (bestowed with the permission to teach or *ijazah*), may subsequently harden into tradition, or conversely, disappear, leaving only traces such as names, reputations and associated kin. Eventually these traces may in turn inspire fresh generations to discover what was “lost” by investigating a plethora of styles to find the elements required to reconstitute “the original.”

According to Cikgu Jamal there are seventeen types of *silat* passed down from his master, Pa’ Hosni, all of which Cikgu Jamal put under the heading of *innovasi* (innovation or creativity). A third of the *silat* styles currently found in Singapore result from Pa’ Hosni’s adaptations and innovations. For example, where there was Silat Macan Pa’ Hosni created Silat Harimau, in the place of *cekak* he created Cekak Serantau, for Silat Kuntao Melaka he replied with Silat Kuntao Asli, and for the banned Nasrul Haq he countered with Seni Silat Al-Haq (see Chapter 4). In the manner of a virus, Pa’ Hosni created versions of the styles he saw performed around him, *doppelgängers* that arose to replicate and displace the original.

The garden of *silat* is not free of weeds, parasites and serpents. Weeds live by removing the nutrients from the soil needed by other plants, or by growing along their stems to eventually strangle the host. The masters of the styles that Pa’ Hosni copied (names withheld) say that his versions are fake. They laugh at the heaviness of the performer’s steps, and they revel in their knowledge of the secrets not revealed by looking, but only through hard training and long tuition. Although horrified and outraged that their styles were replicated, they recognize the replica to be faulty; flawed techniques lead to injury in the practitioner, and develop a false sense of security in formule that are ineffective or easily countered in actual combat. Only the authentic *guru silat* can provide the key (*kunci*) to unlock these secrets. The secret training does not take place in the *gelanggang* in public, but takes place in private, at night, when you stay in the same room as the *guru silat*, perhaps for many days at a time without venturing out of the house.

## *Sport Silat*

Sport *silat* has become the style of *silat* to replace all the others. Sport *silat* presses against the limits of the technology of enchantment, and the performance of enchantment, and leads me to develop the idea of the “performance of re-enchantment.” Here I move from thinking about enchantment through agency, to enchantment on a structural level.

Enchantment is the important thing to salvage from the “for or against” aesthetics debate. Gell and Ritzer, though from different angles, attempt to resuscitate the concept of enchantment. Ritzer, applying Weberian notions to consumption, examines the workings of enchantment, disenchantment, and re-enchantment in the supermall, or what he calls the “cathedrals of consumption” which are “magical, fantastic and enchanted settings in which to consume” and may have an enchanted “sometimes even sacred, religious character” (Ritzer 1999: 7). Both theorists are self-avowed postmodernists, with the essential difference being that Gell maintains agency, whereas Ritzer eschews agency for the environment. However, for all its postmodern packaging this debate is as old as the hills: Gell’s agency surfaces as the freed slave; Ritzer’s cathedral is the cave of Plato’s analogy.

I define a martial art as a reservoir of skill, a stock of reserved knowledge and embodied practice transmitted across generations, concerning strategy and tactics of individual and group attack and defence, whether armed or unarmed, for the purposes of application in combat situations. This definition is preliminary, as it does not take into account the connection of dance to martial arts. However, a distinction should be made between martial arts and martial sports. Martial sports are modern routinised, rationalised, and disenchanting martial arts that are re-enchanted via the media as Olympic or proto-Olympic spectacles (MacAloon 1984).

Martial arts and martial sports are both martial ways; the question is whether the emphasis is placed upon competition, or upon combat and killing, and this will vary with different schools and practitioners. Even within supposedly tame martial arts there is a surfeit of banned lethal techniques. Nevertheless, in former days historians have shown that *silat* had a more agonistic function than nowadays is the case. For example, a century ago *silat* bouts were fought for royal entertainment and took the form of challenge matches between armed *silat* experts from different regions. Fights were to the death, unless broken up by members of the party (Sheppard 1983: 108–111). Challenge matches were still popular until the 1930s, and Sheppard recounts the tale of how the young (Lieutenant) Adnan used the style of the “mousedeer” to defeat the “tiger” of Haji Yunus.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup>Lieutenant Adnan, leader of the Malay Regiment during the Second World War, has become a Singaporean national hero. The museum at Bukit Chandu graphically recounts his noble death. Sheppard says Adnan was killed in hand-to-hand fighting after ordering “his platoon to fight on to the last man. When the position was overrun, the Japanese bayoneted him and then hung him upside down from a nearby rubber tree while it is believed he was still alive” (Sheppard 1947: 18).

As globalisation takes place *silat* appears to undergo a process of rationalization and disenchantment. In Malaysia rationalization must be viewed within the broader context of Islamic revivalism occurring since the 1970s. It would seem paradoxical that despite its rationalization into a sport, *silat* remains enchanted. Is this due to cultural lag, or to the liminal nature of *silat*? Perhaps the market of *silat* – the students, mass media, and audience – re-enchant the art by the attribution of charismatic powers to the *guru silat*. More fundamentally “traditional” *guru silat* resist the cooption of *silat* into a sport.

Older generations of *guru silat* typically comment that *silat* becomes watered down with its “development” into a sport. The bastard offspring is said to lose not only its magic, but also its combat efficacy. The disenchantment of *silat* occurs contiguously with its transmission to the west. Other *guru silat* and observers disagree with this “traditionalist” view, and say that by systematizing *silat* and sharing it with “all races” the art is elevated from an amateur to a professional status (Sheppard 1972: 148). The rationalizing language of race and nation is invoked to advocate sharing, but only through professional competition. The rationalization of martial arts is a necessary step towards their recognition and acceptance as sports. However, martial arts, including *silat*, are also referred to as forms of self-defence. Martial arts are deceptively complex social phenomena composed of multiple overlapping layers of practical, religious, medical, magical, musical, and ethical knowledge and embodied practice. They are invented, preserved, and reinvigorated as “tradition” within and across a broad spectrum of social organizations including sports associations, kinship lineages, village communities, religious orders, cults, secret societies, and the police, secret service and the military.

Many Asian martial arts have become internationally recognized national sports since the 1940s, including judo, karate, taekwondo and wushu. These all form part of the televised “imagined community” of modern secondary nation states, and project the collective myth of the indomitable hero, a hero vanquished though not exterminated by colonisation (Anderson 1991). Crucially, the modern martial arts are sanitized, unarmed, or armed with blunt replica weapons, and the brutal applications of the moves begin to be lost.

The streamlining and systematisation of martial arts involves the formation and adoption of a limited number of fixed patterns. For *pencak silat* the official moves are derived from committees of *guru silat* representing Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei. Committees also dictate styles of performance, the division into sporting categories, written rules and safety regulations, and complicated aesthetic and other standards whereby competitive performances may be judged. Gone are the simple moves designed to break necks, snap spines, gouge eyes, and cause irreparable neurological damage, which are now considered “illegal.” The nation state’s panoptic regulation lurks above the collegial structure of committee management.

The rationalization of *silat* can be said to occur piecemeal across the span of centuries. For instance, it is claimed that *silat Melayu* had a “formal syllabus” by the eleventh century (Pa’ Ariffin). Paradoxically it is precisely the disenchantment

of martial arts that leads to their re-enchantment, but this time as a consumable spectacle. The rationalization, disenchantment, and re-enchantment of *silat* can be clearly seen to operate in the realm of sport *silat*. The question remains whether this logic applies to *seni silat* as a whole. One way to answer this is to examine *silat*'s ritual life (see Chapters 7 and 8).

The Second World War intensified the global exploration and systematisation of martial arts. The occupying Japanese forces in Indonesia collected *juros silat* and forged them into a composite system for the purpose of training troops. The same thing occurred in Malaya under the British. In *silat gayong* the use of coloured belts followed a Japanese precedent for judo and karate. Indeed, the founder of *silat gayong*, despite his pro-British sentiments, was forced to train the Japanese forces during the Japanese occupation of Singapore. The Malay Regiment (under the British) used *silat* to train for combat, and the Japanese led paramilitary forces such as the Giyu Gun (Malays) also trained in *silat*, but then so too did the communists in the subsequent Malayan civil war (1948–1960). For example, a photograph in Heniker (1955: 48, facing plate) shows a “Bandit” using the stance *rimau menanti* as a crouching position from which to brace a machine gun. The use of *silat* techniques by the communist Malays is not surprising given that C.D. Abdullah, the leader of the Pahang communists, was Pa' Ariffin's uncle, as was comrade Abdul Rashid Mydin (see Chapter 5).

In *silat gayong*, a wide red cloth sash is wrapped several times around the waist and ribs of the practitioner as a type of supple armour to protect the body against spear thrusts. In the Japanese system it appears that the original purpose of the belt is lost as it atrophies to a thin strip possessing merely symbolic attributes. The process of the rationalization of *silat* in the provision of a syllabus, allocating ranks according to belt, systematizing instruction, and developing clubs and organizations is greatly accelerated in the twentieth century. The transition from the feudal Royal elite, to village clique, to club status, mirrors the shift from feudal patterns of living to modern life based upon the discrete segregation of the domains of work, play and leisure. Most people who now learn *silat* do so as a pastime, as a sport or leisure pursuit in hours outside of work. The *guru silat*, from their pivotal role in the feudal political structure, now perform the roles of actor, coach, or choreographer, reflecting the shift from the liminal to the liminoid, accompanied by a shift to the performance of re-enchantment.

## Pre-Systematized Silat

The question of the rationalization of *silat* is now fairly well-worn and has been attempted by several authors. It involves examining the construction of *silat* as an Olympic or national sport (Cordes 1990; de Grave 2001; Maryono 2002). But what was *silat* like before it was systematized? In Southeast Asia, despite the presence of state run authorities such as PERSILAT, styles of *silat* that remain outside of the



recognition of the state agencies can be found that have little in the way of formal structures, fixed procedures, or established agreed upon set patterns of movements.<sup>37</sup>

### *Silat Lima Beradik*

In Singapore, in a style known as *silat lima beradik*, the movements are performed to a rough scheme, in sets or patterns. According to the *guru silat*, Pa' Zaini, *silat lima beradik* (five brothers) originated from Banyuwangi in East Java, and was taught to five brothers by a *wali* (saint) who was living in a tree (Fig. 3.7). In this style the hands continuously turn and circle, weaving smooth twisting patterns in the air, and the stances and footwork resemble classical Javanese dance, especially the *wayang wong*.



**Fig. 3.7** Pa' Zaini, Singapore 1999

<sup>37</sup> PERSILAT (The International Pencak Silat Federation, Persekutuan Pencak Silat Antarabangsa), was established on 11 March 1980. The four founding members of PERSILAT are IPSI (Ikatan Pencak Silat Indonesia), PESAKA (Persekutuan Silat Kebangsaan Malaysia), PERSISI (Persekutuan Silat Singapura), and PERSIB (Persekutuan Silat Kebangsaan Brunei Darussalam). The Affiliated Members of PERSILAT are from countries “with a national level *silat* organisation, that has been recognised by the relevant Government Agency of that country” <<http://www.pencak-silat.co.uk/psfPersilat.htm>>.

*Silat lima beradik* is not recognized by PERSISI and is mainly performed for weddings, although old photographs of the teacher and his father spinning pairs of *golok* (a long heavy knife) indicate other uses. *Silat lima beradik* harbours two secrets: the first concerns its origin, the second its utility.

In terms of the first secret (contrary to the information provided by the *guru silat*) this style is probably Baweanese rather than Javanese, as is the *guru silat* himself. This disguise – where the name hides something else beneath it – is typical of *silat*, and masking the location of origin is unsurprising given the prejudice that Baweanese face from Malays, who believe them to practise powerful black magic. Among Malays the Baweanese are notorious for their love magic, especially the *nasi kangkang*, where a woman is said to stand with her legs astride a bowl of steaming rice so her vaginal juices will drip into it. The rice is fed to an unsuspecting suitor as a love charm. Baweanese in Singapore exaggerate that Bawean Island, which lies 75 miles off the north-east coast of Java, is not a safe place for strangers and say that unless the visitor is a Muslim they would not survive the night.

Every time Pa' Zaini taught the sets of movements (*juros*) the “set” would subtly change: sometimes it would be abbreviated with the omission of moves, and sometimes it would be expanded with the inclusion of new moves: he never taught the same set of movements twice. At first when Dr. Philip Davies and I studied this style in my home, we were perturbed that we were failing to learn or remember the sets correctly. However, once I reviewed my notes I soon realized that it was the instructor who did not “remember” the exact pattern from the sessions before, and this made me begin to wonder if he was forgetful or incompetent, especially as the lessons took place two or three times per week. Later, I was to discover that it is not the set that is important, but the individual moves, such as the lady looking in the mirror (*bayang dalam cermin*), sewing (*jahit*), or combing her hair with both hands (*sikat rambut*), or dropping down low to pick up sand to fling into the opponent's eyes (*melempar pasir*).

The seventh set of this style was called *wayang*, and consisted of a short series of steps and movements including a rear elbow strike and guard positions. The essential didactic feature of this form was that the hands and feet were to move together as if the hands were attached to the feet with strings, exactly like a *wayang golek* puppet. This provides evidence that, as would be expected, Indonesian styles of *silat* also regard the *pesilat* in training as a shadow, a human shadow in place of the shadow puppet (see Chapter 4). Furthermore, on a comparative note, in *taijiquan* you are told to keep your posture upright, as if you are a puppet suspended from a piece of string, and Pa' Zaini, as noted previously, referred to his *silat* as “Malay tai chi.”

As few *pukulan* were taught, and the hand movements of the *juros* looked so soft and gentle, at first it was difficult to imagine how this style could possibly be useful in combat. Nevertheless, I persevered with the lessons, and shortly after I had completed eleven “sets” and could perform them to the satisfaction of the teacher, I was taught the twelfth and final set, called *juros keris*, which was performed in training with a knife. With this *juros* the teacher finally explained the secret of the training: it was not about learning how to perform specific sets of movements to be

constantly replicated, but about learning how to wield a razor-sharp knife: moreover all of these sets should be practised with a knife or two in hand. The hand movements didn't need to be particularly strong or powerful, as neither is required to inflict massive damage with a razor.

The above example is instructive and relevant to my understanding of Seni Silat Haqq Melayu in several ways. First, it is clear that *silat* styles are often less than comprehensive in their approach to combat: instead they specialize in one aspect and attempt to perfect it; for example, *silat lima beradik* specializes in the “soft” hand movements of the knife. The disguise is inherent in the name and origin of the style. This provides a clue to Seni Silat Haqq Melayu, which is a quest, an attempt to discover, and then reunite, diasporic elements in a comprehensive system of *silat*. Just as Baweanese origin is sometimes disguised in Singapore by people who claim to be of “Malay” or “Javanese” descent, so Indian or Chinese surnames may be disguised in Malaysia. This shows that those who would employ the weapons of the warrior are no strangers to the weapons of the weak.<sup>38</sup>

## Lok 9

In Kuala Lumpur, Silat Lok 9 specialise in teaching the *keris*. Lok 9 is taught in Kuala Lumpur by *guru silat* Azlan Ghanie, the editor of a monthly *silat* magazine called Silat Beladiri. Instead of following fixed recipes Lok 9 practitioners engage one another and attempt to find the correct way to place their opponent into a submission hold (*kunci*). Whereas formal sets of routinised movements are taught as part of the Lok 9 syllabus, which includes sets of armed and unarmed movements (*juros*), the *buah* taught in this *perguruan* are less systematic (Fig. 3.8).

They learn by application, or through a gradual process of trial and error. Despite what might be called an unorthodox learning method, the *buah* of Lok 9 strongly resemble *buah* from other *silat* styles including *silat seni gayong*, *silat seni cekak* and *silat terlak*. Pa' Ariffin was so impressed with Lok 9 that he adopted it as one of the missing elements of Seni Silat Haqq Melayu. Pa' Ariffin said that although many people teach the *keris*, it is not “the real authentic *keris*” of *silat Melayu*, and that he has been searching for years to find this system. The *keris* is not much used for slicing actions, but for very rapid stabs like an *épée* in fencing. Although the blade for the *keris* is much shorter than the epee, the practitioner's range of movement is greater due to the extra mobility granted by the Malay footwork, including sidesteps into the *naga* stance, and quick turns of the body, to stab a passing opponent from behind. Pa' Ariffin believes that western fencing is a modern derivative of the *keris* art of *silat Melayu*, as practiced in fifteenth century Melaka. Indeed the symbolic connection between *juros keris* and fencing is immediate – both open with the same

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<sup>38</sup>The “weapons of the weak” are calculated conformity, dissimulation, false compliance, feigned ignorance and slander (Scott 1985: 29–34).



Fig. 3.8 Lok 9 buah

salute by raising the sword to the forehead and then slicing down across the body.<sup>39</sup> In *silat* the *keris* form starts with the performer kissing the *keris* to say this is mine, then offering it to Allah, then slicing down to cut the ego in half (Chief).

### Distinctive Features of Seni Silat Haqq Melayu

I conclude this section with an appraisal of some of the distinctive features of Seni Silat Haqq Melayu, including the dress code and uniform, the stancework, blocking, “spiritual breath,” and introduce a set known as the *belebat*. Seni Silat Haqq Melayu is an eclectic mix of bits and pieces from all across the garden of *silat*, choreographed by Pa’ Ariffin, for export to England and America.

Pa’ Ariffin’s appearance is quite distinctive: he has a shaven head, moustache, and goatee beard, and almost invariably dresses in black. In the U.K. he would wear black leather socks indoors, and the same under leather boots if going out, but in Malaysia he wore black Malay sandals (*capal*). Pa’ Ariffin invariably wears the “traditional” black fifteenth century Malay costume, which is the trademark of his *hulubalang* and *panglima* (warrior) status. His attire consists of a baggy long-sleeved black shirt or *baju Melayu*, black waistcoat, black drop-crotch trousers, and a black cape, which is topped with black *songkok* (fez hat). He also wears a

<sup>39</sup>Regarding the fencing salute see Normandeu (2003b).

large black *haji* style belt-kit equipped with all sorts of paraphernalia and gadgets including torches, pliers, a phone, knives and medicinal oils. Several of his students aped his style. Seni Silat Haqq Melayu is a reflection of Pa' Ariffin; it is the personification of his alter ego.

### *Silat Uniform*

The uniform for Seni Silat Haqq Melayu consisted of baggy black trousers and a V-neck black long-sleeved shirt or *baju Melayu* made from tough material. As Tuan Ismail (1991: 6–12) points out every part of the uniform has a special function for *silat*, for example, the headscarf doubles as a bandage, and the sash may be used as a weapon or body armour. The logo of the style must be stitched directly over the heart of the student – formerly this was a yellow badge decorated with the *haqq* insignia. Headdress was optional, as were belts, but students sometimes donned a black bandana. In Malaysia male students wear a *baju Melayu* and a black fez hat (*songkok*) for formal visiting or for trips to places of worship: otherwise they were free to wear whatever they liked, provided it met with the approval of Pa' Ariffin.

Similarly, for *silat seni gayong* the uniform was black, but with trousers and sleeves cut to three-quarter length, and with the addition of a floppy black open topped headscarf (*tanjat*).<sup>40</sup> Women or girls who trained often wore a bandana, or an Islamic veil (*hijab*), or left their hair uncovered except when uttering prayers at the beginning and end of the training sessions in Malaysia. As is usual in *silat* practitioners of both styles trained with bare feet.

Seni Silat Haqq Melayu was mainly taught in England. There are four distinctive features of this style – the gymnastic warm up, *kuda kuda*, *belebat* and *prana*. The style was eclectic, with practical moves that were simultaneously nimble and graceful. Seni Silat Haqq Melayu also taught a plethora of flashy moves that are well suited for the cinema, and it challenged students to achieve levels of competence in performance acrobatics that they would have deemed beyond their reach.

### *Gymnastic Warm Up*

Classes proceed with a line-up in front of the instructor where everyone stands bolt upright whilst folding the left forearm under the right arm – the posture used to wrap

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<sup>40</sup> Not all *silat* exponents wear black for training. In the Philippines they wear brightly coloured striped shirts and trousers, as they did previously for *silat* in parts of Malaysia and Singapore, and some Javanese stylists, for example, Silat Setia Hati (true heart) wear *batik* trousers and headdress, with large brightly coloured sashes, and red or orange shirts. A distinction should be made between the *silat* uniform worn during practice, and formal dress attire that is more elaborate and includes the *kain sampung* (an ornate cloth to wrap around the trousers).

a corpse for burial – and then place the palms together at chest level followed by a slight bow (*hormat*) to the instructor. Students next perform the opening salutation (*sembah*) commencing with a demanding technique that requires they stand up from a cross-legged position using only one leg and a stylised slap to the ground, which is followed by a series of simple ward-off techniques and steps, polished off with another *hormat*. While standing on one leg the students move as if drawing an arrow into a bow, followed by a smooth palm strike to the side symbolising the arrow unleashed. This indicates another distinctive feature of Seni Silat Haqq Melayu: the moves are redolent of archery.

Simple stretching was performed standing or kneeling – pushing the chin back with the fingertips, then pulling the head down, pulling the crown down to either side to stretch the neck, rolling the shoulders together, then separately forward and back, pulling the elbow in from underneath to stretch the shoulder, clasping the hands in front to raise overhead and then place behind.

Next came callisthenics including jumping up and down, star jumps, stepping in place, cross-stepping, bouncing, and twisting the body from side to side before landing. This last exercise was prominent before a game of *sepak takraw* (Malay football). *Sepak takraw* would replace the jumping if we trained outdoors and helped to develop the ability to perform spectacular jumping kicks. Callisthenics was followed by more stretching including solo stretching of the legs, spine, chest, and arms using yoga-like gymnastic exercises. These included the shoulder stand moving smoothly into the arch; arch back to the wall and climb down to the floor and up to standing; and from standing lie down backwards to flip up.

The stretching methods were strenuous and sophisticated. One way to describe them is to say they look like kung fu stretching methods, but put into motion like *hatha yoga*, where one stretch slithers smoothly into another (*suludang jatuh sembah*). The most distinctive thing about the warm-up is the serpentine nature of the movements. The stretching was followed by rolling from a standing position, forward and back, then jumping and flying over six to eight kneeling crouching bodies packed together – to roll out to land.<sup>41</sup> One by one each student performed the flying jump and was able to assess the form, technique, and progress of the others. The same format was then used to execute jumping kicks to the front and side, and jumping scissors kicks performed over an obstacle. Handspring practice completed the warm-up, and preceded an hour spent practising the seventy-two steps of the *kuda kuda*.

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<sup>41</sup> From a standing position Seni Silat Haqq Melayu practitioners roll forward taking the force on the shoulder and hip (like judo, aikido, kung fu, and taekwondo) and not on the head and back of the neck as in gymnastics, wushu, and Silat Seni Gayong (see also Shamsuddin 2005: 65). In Seni Silat Haqq Melayu the gymnastic roll is done from a kneeling position, for safety reasons it is not done from standing or when landing after flying headfirst through the air.

## *Kuda Kuda*

Pa' Ariffin teaches seventy-two basic techniques (*kuda kuda*) for Seni Silat Haqq Melayu. It is unnecessary to document all of these steps here, as I merely want to unpack some of the distinctive features of the style. The steps are performed in the whirling manner of the whirling dervishes. This is a good defensive practice reminiscent of *baguazhang*. Each one of the seventy-two basic techniques leads to a string of other techniques in a series of combinations, including strikes, kicks, throws, sweeps and locks. The other techniques come from *silat cekak*, *silat gayong*, *silat harimau*, *seni silat Melayu*, *silat Minang*, *silat sendeng*, *silat sterlak*, and from further afield. Each one of the techniques has three, five, or seven combinations. No doubt there is a numerological formula that helps the martial arts expert take a set of favoured movements and grow them into a system, a formula that rests on a sequence of magic numbers. If I was certain of the formula it would appear in the next chapter under the “enchantment of performance,” however, I’m not, so I must venture to say “unexplored beyond this point.”

A good example of the extension of the basic *kuda kuda* is provided by one of the seventy-two techniques called *sendeng*. *Sendeng* abbreviates *masak langkah sendeng* and can be used as a counter against an opponent who tries to punch the face by dropping down into *menanti* and striking sidelong with *selegi* (leopard paw, a fist with extended fore knuckles), to hit the opponent’s testicles. The testicles (*buah*) are a favourite target of the *silat* exponent. As part of the seventy-two basic movements Pa' Ariffin only teaches the first technique. However, *masak langkah sendeng* follows the first part with a leaping knee raise with the rear leg (to the opponent’s now descending jaw) with tight double uppercut punches thrown close in to the body (*sumbang*). Dropping low the first technique comes in aslant, springing up the next technique turns to face the opponent. This technique illustrates the switch from a position side-on to the opponent, to a position facing them, a switch from *sendeng* to *sumbang*.

Another example is *sau*, which initially appears to be a light hook punch executed from a deep archer stance, with the rear leg fully extended, and the front leg in a deep squatting position with the knee hyperextended over the foot. This technique is effective as a hooking technique, used from in front with a turning leap to seize an opponent’s throat from behind (or other body part) prior to pulling them in down to the ground. Weapon in hand, *sau* can drop under an opponent’s guard, punch and slash open the stomach in a sideways unzipping motion using a small, easily concealed razor-sharp blade, where the edge juts out from the ulna side of the fist-grip (possibly a *kerambit*). Conversely, if a knife is held in the radial-grip as the opponent is dragged to the ground from behind, *sau* can be used to pierce the neck and slash the throat, with the added advantage that the carotid artery bursts away from the direction of the *pesilat*.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> During the U.S. occupation of the Philippines so many U.S. marines had their throats cut that they had to be issued with leather collars, and became known as the “leathernecks.”

## *Tangkisan*

*Tangkisan* in Seni Silat Haqq Melayu are used to slightly redirect or offset the approaching energy of an opponent's attack at the last moment, when the opponent's limb is approaching its greatest point of extension. *Tangkisan* (from *tangkis*, lit. to defend, especially by warding off an attack) are not blocks or destruction techniques to strike an oncoming limb, but glancing taps that are performed close to the practitioner's body and at the last instant when the opponent is fully extended.

The extension is important because where the opponent's kinetic energy is concentrated in a point such as the fist the power is not met head on, but the arm is redirected by tapping it from the side, above or below the extended arm. This evasive action gives the *pesilat* an opportunity to move into a better position vis-à-vis the opponent, who is now potentially over-extended, and off-balance, or at a transitional point in their balance recovering from one movement before they execute another. Especially important in this regard are an upward *tampar* (slap), *tepis* ("parry," a slight block or elbow strike to the side of the head), *kilas* ("push-parry" a glancing vertical forearm block), and *kais* ("hook/pull in," a downward outer forearm hook). These smooth techniques are performed in quick succession as the body turns and steps (*elak*).

## *Prana*

Muslim *guru silat* say that all *silat* styles practice spiritual breath (*nafas batin*).<sup>43</sup> The exact origin of the practice of *nafas batin* is obscure, and although there may be several points of invention, Indian *yoga* seem the most likely candidate for primogeniture. In Javanese styles of *silat* the *guru silat* refer to the practice of *nafas batin* as *yoga*, and indeed the postures and concepts closely resemble those of *hatha yoga*. Practitioners of Seni Silat Haqq Melayu refer to *nafas batin* as *prana*, and besides the linguistic echo the actual practice of *prana* resembles the *pranayama* of *kalaripayattu*. *Pranayama* refers to special yogic breathing methods that repeat the following pattern: inhalation, retention, exhalation, and retention/pause (Zarrilli 2002: 305).<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup>Through physical and psychological training martial arts train the "mind" via the "body," and the "body" via the "mind." Holding a posture for prolonged periods of time is one way martial artists condition the mind through the body, to develop endurance and override pain. The process is two-way as training the mind through meditation (the precursor of visualization for the modern sports psychologist) enhances performance. Blacking's (1977: 18) concept of the "bodymind" disrupts the dualism inherent in mind/body formulations and neatly captures the holistic dialectical process involved in training the "mind" and the "body" simultaneously as one entity.

<sup>44</sup>All Asian martial arts practice some form of yoga-like breathing, stretching and balancing methods. The "power of breath" has corollaries in most cultures of the world: in Ancient Greece they



*Prana* refers to “spiritual breath” and is done to access “divine power.” Experiencing divine power enhances health, strengthens the body, and clears the mind. Doing *prana* heals the injuries acquired during training. The exercise bears some similarities to the *prana* of Indian *hatha yoga* and to Chinese *qigong*. However, *prana* exhibits the characteristic serpentine twisting and turning movements of *silat Melayu* and the Sumatran plate dance (*tari piring*), and the long version is performed kneeling and sitting cross-legged. According to Pa’ Ariffin *prana* is a method to open the *chakras*. He says *prana* is a very old Malay secret passed down from his father and that it is the highest art of *silat*.<sup>45</sup> *Prana* is a four-part exercise that is best practised at the “magic hour” just before dawn, and takes about 30 min to complete. *Prana* should be done for a minimum of forty days. *Prana* involves holding the breath whilst maintaining a variety of postures (Fig. 3.9). The tongue is placed upon the roof of the mouth, in the same position as that of a newborn.

Twisting the hands above, in front, and to the side gives a shortened version of the full 30-min sequence of postures. From a standing position the hands stretch out to either side to weave something like a figure-of-eight, a posture the group refer to as *lam alif*. The *lam alif* is also done with the hands extended overhead. Returning to the outstretched hands at either side the weaving continues in front of the chest with the arms gradually closing in until they are in front. *Prana* develops strength in the shoulders, back, chest and forearms, and increases the ability to push the arm out. It has a combat function that is hard to explain. Basically, when the practitioner is grabbed they twist the arm into the figure of eight movement, and if this is done with the appropriate steps the would-be locker will end up locked. Pa’ Ariffin would twist his arms overhead as he awoke from sleep in the morning, and perform *prana* whilst lying down in bed. Pa’ Ariffin and several other *guru silat* say that one of the best places to perform this type of exercise is within a waterfall.

Later, one morning at the break of dawn, I performed a similar type of *nafas batin* in the powerful waterfall at Frazer’s Hill, a place in the mountains said to be full of *jinn*. On the first day I went down in the late afternoon to try out the waterfall. Because I had gone in the rainy season the cascade was so powerful that it was awkward to find my footing. I had to raise my hands overhead to protect

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called it *pneuma*, breath (*πνευμα*), or *daimon*, vital breath (*δαίμων*); in India, *prana*; in China, *qigong*; and in Botswana among the !Kung it is called *n/um* (Lee 1993: 115).

<sup>45</sup> Pa’ Ariffin says he that learned *prana* from his father, Yeop Mahidin. Yeop Mahidin spent several years in India, where he may have picked up this knowledge. However, perhaps *prana* derives from his forbears, who as the name “Mahidin” suggests were of Indian origin. However, Pa’ Ariffin asserts that the name “Mahidin” derives from *muhyidin*, meaning “reviver of the way” (of Islam), and fiercely disavows any Indian origins, claiming that the British changed the name. The genealogy I collected shows that Yeop Mahidin was the son of Tun. Mohd. Sharif, himself a descendent of Kulop Kurap, a Bugis nobleman (see Chapter 5). Whatever the case, rumour has it among some of Pa’ Ariffin’s former students that he learnt “prana” from a video cassette recording; others say he picked it up from a magazine and a manual.

**Fig. 3.9** Chief performing *prana* whilst breathing *hu*



my skull from the deluge. The great torrents of water thundered down, and my feet become rooted in the black sand as I silently repeated a mantra given to me by a *guru silat*. After about 20 min it felt as if the entire course of the river poured through and not just around my body, and the boundaries of my body and my self seemed to dissolve into the cascade. This sensation, which can best be described as a feeling of becoming one with the river, was accompanied by a sudden rush of expanded awareness, as if the river had become sentient, or that I had become suddenly aware of the sentience of the river, perceiving the environment through an entirely different sensory apparatus. It is a strange sensation to feel encapsulated in a medium other than the skin and this type of training is undergone to demonstrate to the *silat* practitioner that the soul or spirit may exist outside of and beyond the body. Later I was informed that this type of seductive experience can be dangerous because “some people fail to come back,” meaning that they lose their mind in the process.

For the long version of Pa’ Ariffin’s *prana* exercise the moves require too much technical detail to describe here, so I will just mention a couple. One posture involves clasping the hands behind the head whilst in an erect kneeling position and then squeezing the inner forearms hard against the temples. Another posture leans forward from a cross-legged “lotus” position to bang the head on the floor nine or

ten times. Pa' Ariffin says this knocking puts blood into a vein in the middle of the upper forehead, a vein that is usually not full, and that is very important to good health.

Before the performance the main intention of *prana* should be internally stated before God and creation, and this intention (*niat*) should be to cleanse the blood and lymphatic system to stimulate, and to increase the flow of blood and *prana* around the body, and to open up all the channels between the *chakras*. The intention may also focus upon a specific problem or pain. In the fourth stage of the exercise the performer utters a long drawn out *hu* sound (see also Chapter 4). *Hu* is repeated fifty times. The reverberations of *hu* are said to have healing effects upon the body and open the way to access divine strength which is manifested in incredibly powerful strikes, and the ability to absorb blows. Chief, one of Pa' Ariffin's students, seemed to benefit considerably from *prana*. Chief was a weedy teenager when we first met and had problems with a sunken chest. He became powerfully built after doing *silat* for four years, although he suffered from back problems, apparently due to a *jinn* in his back (which Chief later claimed was put there by Pa' Ariffin in the first place).

## ***Belebat***

The *belebat* form, sometimes referred to as “the four corners,” is designed to teach the *seni* or artistic elements of Seni Silat Haqq Melayu. It is practiced in class as well as performed in public demonstrations by two pairs of players making up a quatrain, with each player exactly mirroring or shadowing his or her counterpart. Gripping the muscles of the body whilst holding the various “warrior-poses” develops kinesesthetic power. I derive the term “warrior-poses” from Chia (1989), and the term well describes the postures of *silat*, postures that are adopted with the stances already discussed (including *kuda kuda*, *lebas*, *naga*) and involve the entire body, including the arms and legs.<sup>46</sup>

The footwork at the end of the *belebat* dance is similar to basic steps of *baguazhang*. *Baguazhang* is known for its hourglass and circling footwork patterns where one foot steps across the other, accompanied by palm techniques that operate according to the geomantic principles of the *I Ching*. *Baguazhang* is famous for its dramatic “changes,” sudden changes in the direction of stepping accompanied by the application of different techniques.

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<sup>46</sup> Chia (1989) outlines “warrior-poses” from a western anatomical perspective read through Chinese Taoism. Although Chia's excellent *Iron Shirt Chi Gung* (in three volumes) could feasibly be applied in the context of *silat*, and be used to explain many of the psycho-somatic and anatomical effects of the postures, his approach exists outside of the interpretations of the *guru silat*, which are based upon a different cosmology, discussed in the following chapters.

## Gaze

In the *belebat* set students are taught to look out of the corner of their eyes and develop their peripheral vision. The eyes always appear to gaze towards the floor, and never stare directly at the opponent. This is an aesthetic hallmark of *silat Melayu* that differentiates it from other styles of *silat*, and from other martial arts, which may glare directly into the opponent's eyes, or fix the gaze at their shoulder. A brief comparative note may be interesting here.<sup>47</sup> Street-fighters and predatory animals threaten their victims by staring directly into their eyes, a display which is known to stimulate the fight or flight response. In Southern Chinese kung fu the fierce gaze known as *ying an* (eagle eyes) is done to fixate the "prey," focusing on them as a whole, through a kind of tunnel vision. This mad-looking stare causes the pupils to dilate, said to indicate the *qi* or internal energy rising. Staring directly at the opponent's eyes is also found in *kalarippayattu*.<sup>48</sup> Japanese *karateka* fix their gaze at an opponent's shoulder to detect a forthcoming punch or other offensive movement. These looks all contrast strongly with the characteristic downward gaze of *silat Melayu*, which therefore requires explanation.

I return to the *belebat* in Chapter 8 as it provides a clue to fighting in the shadow realm. The pragmatic idea behind the downward gaze is to be able to see simultaneously in front, to the side, and behind: in *silat Melayu* this is the stance recommended for combat with three or more assailants (*pukulan tiga serentak*). Gazing downwards also dehumanises the opponent as it denies them any opportunity for mutual gaze or recognition. There is an Indian saying that "you never look in the eyes of someone you want to kill."

In this chapter I have outlined how *seni* refers to art, aesthetics, and skill, and shown that some of the *techniques du corps* of *silat* are to be found in the quotidian bodily hexis of the larger Malay population, whether or not they have embarked upon a course of *silat* training. The performance of enchantment, the real magic of *silat*, where practitioners gain incredible speed, power, strength, and endurance is the result of arduous endeavour in a sophisticated martial art that exists in a symbiotic relationship with everyday life. The account I give is not smooth and seamless, but reflects the contradictions and ambiguities that necessarily arise when the cosmic debris of Naqshbandi Sufism, Gnosticism, Hinduism, Taoism, Buddhism,

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<sup>47</sup> Lowell Lewis says in relation to eye contact in the Brazilian martial art, capoeira, that: "A central principle of capoeira play, drilled into students over and over, is never to lose sight of one's adversary in the ring . . . . Players are told to practice this in every variety of acrobatic position. However, many master players avoid looking one directly in the eye; in fact, they almost always use peripheral vision so they can appear not to be watching! This is indirectness in action as a form of feigning. Masters will sometimes turn their heads away or even turn their backs, as if to assert that they have eyes in the back of their heads. That they constantly tell their students not to do this, and then proceed to do it themselves, is a further illustration of perhaps the most basic lesson of *malícia*: rules are made to be broken" (1992: 102).

<sup>48</sup> Zarrilli: personal communication, 17/09/2004.

shamanism, and animism strewn across Southeast Asia are repackaged by the *guru silat*, New Age style, into a martial art designed for export to the west.

Pa' Ariffin said to me that in the martial arts "it is better to be a good all-rounder than a specialist." This philosophy is reflected in his style of *silat* which is an eclectic mix of a wide variety of other *silat* styles from within the garden of *silat*, although it may be said to be fundamentally of Sumatran origin and influence, especially through *silat harimau* and *silat gayong*. *Gayong* also has Bugis ancestry, but unfortunately I gathered insufficient data concerning Bugis *silat* to say much about it. In any case, technique, alongside cosmology, is not something written in stone, fixed and immutable, but something learned, inherited, lived, practiced and performed.

The *hulubalang* did not restrict themselves to local martial arts, but feasted upon any proficient martial arts they encountered. Previously Pa' Ariffin taught Shaolin kung fu, and he claims to have held a black belt in Shotokan karate, as well as having been the first accredited Malay instructor of eagle claw kung fu (in Malaysia this would be via the Chin Woo Martial Arts Association). Some of the moves of Seni Silat Haqq Melayu clearly demonstrate a Chinese influence. There are also Japanese influences from kendo, judo, and jujitsu, Korean knife fighting techniques from *hapkido*, and many similarities to the circular movements, locks and kicks of *hwarangdo*.<sup>49</sup> Ultimately, Pa' Ariffin adopted a bricolage approach similar to that of Bruce Lee, who abandoned rigid forms and styles in favour of amassing a series of techniques based upon practical applications. However, whereas for Lee the bricolage approach was a radical innovation and departure from Chinese norms, in the Malay world Pa' Ariffin was simply following a tradition of inventing tradition as my subsequent chapters demonstrate.

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<sup>49</sup> See, for example, Hyung-Min Jung (2001: 86).