

**by Guru Scott McQuaid**

## Foreword

*I first came across the Kapak Kecil weapon while I was on my merantau traveling through Sumatra. This was back in 1996 when I was visiting Lake Toba in the North of Sumatra, this region is Batak tribe territory. I saw the small axe in a shanty type store on the remote island. I had seen images of pesilats holding this weapon in books about the art but never actually seen one up close. This weapon is unusual and even more rare to find a teacher that actually knows how to use it in combat. It would not be until 2009 when I immigrated to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia to train with Maha Guru Jak Othman in the weapon based pencak silat system known as Harimau Berantai Silat or Tiger Chained Silat, when I would come across this vicious looking weapon again. Maha Guru Jak was showcasing the various weapons the Berantai clan warriors used back in the day and it was then when he demonstrated the deadly applications of the kapak kecil. Since that time I have continued to train with Guru Jak in the various weapons in silat and continued to learn the traditional buahs and movements of kapak kecil.*



South East Asia has a vast array of tribal weapons used within their combative arts. The Indonesian styles of Pencak Silat have a long historical background with bladed warfare.

The Keris blade is perhaps the most associated weapon with the pencak silat systems but other such blades such as the karambit, kujang, parang and golok are also identified. However, there is a small brutal bladed weapon that is often overlooked and rarely seen - the weapon in question is the Kapak Kecil or small axe.

It is believed that this weaponized small axe version came from Java during the Majapahit empire sometime in the 15th century. This axe was originally a tool for farming and daily chores, used for cutting fruits and various other foods. During the migration of Javanese from Majapahit, four blacksmiths settled in the state of Pattani, working their trade for the Sultan. At the time Pattani was its own place, situated in the northern peninsular of Malaysia on the border of Southern Thailand. One of these blacksmiths was a lady named Pandai Minah and she is said to have introduced this small axe to the Pattani state. However it was her brother Pandai Jenal who is believed to have re-designed the small axe into the model seen and used today. The most notable difference was the handle which was fashioned with a curve design and sharp edges to be used as a weapon. Pandai Jenal lived in a village called Binjai Manis so he named the weapon after his village, Kapak Binjai Manis. This version of the small axe was used by Pattani gangs fighting against their Siamese neighbors. The axe was then introduced to Thailand, so the Siamese began to use this weapon in their fighting arts referring to it as Kapak Siam.

Like the karambit, the kapak kecil was considered a weapon of choice for the *Srikandi* or lady warrior. The
*pesilat*
(silat player) women would conceal the small axe either hidden in their
*bengkung*
(sash) or strap it to the side of their leg and sometimes even concealed the weapon in their hair, knotted into the bun. In ancient times the blade was made out of three layers of metals. The hammer part of the blades head is for striking and the side sharp axe edge is naturally for ripping, hacking and slashing. The opponent's face is the target area for this weapon; due to its small blade it would be less effective in body cuts. The Kapak Kecil measures less than 18cm in length from the tip of its blade to the handle and its wood handle is generally made from ‘
*kayu nibung’*
which is a type of wood found on most of South East Asia’s beaches.



The Batak tribe in Northern Sumatra are known for their bladed weapons. The Batak warriors possesses a low-threshold spirit for war. It is said that during old times the Batak tribe were instantly precipitated into combative action by the smallest provocation. Their life was described as being in a perpetual state of hostility.

The Batak warriors hardly ever engaged in hand to hand battle as there is no lineage or record of an unarmed combative system; there are no grappling or boxing techniques that come from their culture. It is believed that the Batak tribe may have employed the methods of Minangkabau tribe's *silek* (silat) styles of fighting, since both clans are mountain people and their terrain and surroundings would relate. However, very little form or technique is seen in their combat. The Batak tribe engaged in battle primarily using weapons, employing knife fighting concepts but

with a very raw approach. The Kapak Kecil became apart a favorite among the Bataks; they would carry the small axe inconspicuously on their back, high up on their back-neck regions or inside the forearm hidden by sleeves. The hatchet could instantly be gripped and thrown with remarkable accuracy.



The Batak skill with this deadly weapon rivals that of any other people with projectile weapons similar in fashion. The small axe was sometimes attached to a long string to enable the thrower to retrieve their weapon after an attack. It is said that a Batak can pin an enemy's foot to the ground at a distance of fifteen feet, or pin their opponent to a tree or wall through his arm or hand.

The Javanese style of Harimau Berantai Silat or chained tiger silat also adapted this weapon to

their existing weapon based techniques. Although the small hatchet can be used to throw, the Harimau Berantai clan would use it as a last resort. Due to the weapon's size it is utilized as a close-quarter weapon. There are various methods of holding the Kapak Kecil in Harimau Berantai Silat. There is the classic blade up position, the blade down and the punching and slashing methods between fingers.

As a defensive weapon the Kapak is acceptable but attacking with it is not recommended. The most effective but brutal approach to countering your enemies attack is by hacking the neck veins from behind or the side of their head. The Harimau Berantai clan’s focus on combat is to attack their opponent's weapon hand. The handle point of the Kapak Kecil is extremely sharp and it is often stabbed several times into the opponent's weapon arm weakening it, before following up with a straight frontal punch to the face holding the small axe and splitting the face apart.



Malaysia’s Pencak Silat Seni styles have also applied the Kapak Kecil, constructing Kelantanese versions of the axe from the area of Kota Baru. This weapon was once the choice for gangsters in Kelantan back in the old days. The Kapak Kecil made headlines in the mid-1960's when it was used in the murder of a Malaysian assembly man near the old Kota Baru Municipal market. There are stories about visitors to Kelantan being warned to behave or they would get a taste of the axe. If not killed, those who misbehave, were often marked on the forehead with the axe. The scar is regarded as a badge of shame that the victim would prefer to leave the state rather than face the humiliation.

This weapon does require perhaps more physical work in conflict when compared to a simple knife but it will certainly will do the job and leave a very blooded crime scene.

There are very few pesilat practitioners that poses the knowledge of how to apply this tool in

battle. Although the weapon's design is simple the techniques applied can be quite intricate and precession is vital. The Kapak Kecil remains a rich part of weaponry in pencak silat and will continue to be feared for its general appearance and unpredictable application in combat.



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