

Scholarly evidence show that silat taught in its present form was found in West Sumatra, Indonesia. But the seni silat fighting arts in the [Malay Peninsula](#) and [Malay Archipelago](#) arose out of hunting methods and military training by the region's native inhabitants.

With the migration of the Minangkabau ethnic group (also known as *Minang* or *Padang*) throughout South East Asia, the Indonesian pencak silat styles were adapted in their new homes.

The state of Negeri Sembilan in Malaysia comprises a large population of the Minang tribes. The Minang of Malaysia have a distinct culture and their own royal line that dates back several centuries.

A noted and respected figure in both Indonesian and Malay cultures is the *harimau* (tiger). Its influence can be seen everywhere—on flags, in religions, advertising, and in silat.

The fighting art known as Harimau Berantai Pencak Silat is infamous for its deadly blade work. Originating from Java, its link to the tiger lies in its founder's name who was called *The Tiger* by the Dutch.

Although there are many practicing Harimau Berantai teachers today, few are genuine modern day warriors. I can only name one man that is worthy of carrying the title of a *pendekar* (teacher) in this system and that is Malaysia's own Guru Jak Othman.

This *pesilat* (silat player) has refined his family Berantai style to a deadly effective combative system fully functional in the modern world. His knowledge seems limitless and his techniques flawless. Guru Jak utilizes every part of the blade against the human body.

The following article by my senior silat brother and teacher documents his growth within Berantai silat and the origins of this fighting art.

Guru Jak Othman is amongst the rare few that can honestly be regarded as a Master of his craft.

—Pendekar Scott McQuaid



The Tiger is Loose!

By Guru Jak Othman

A figure stands in the shadows, her hands moving gracefully in slow, smooth dance-like gestures as her light footsteps bring her ever closer to you. Her state of subtle grace hides any trace of danger she might pose to you.

In your mind, you see nothing but beauty in her movements. That is until you realize your eyes are hurting and before you can recover you feel sharp pains all over your body.

You start to lose consciousness, before you could understand what actually caused you to be in the position you are now thrust into.

You will not know that the pain in your eyes was caused by the sand that she kicked in your face as she got closer to you, while you were preoccupied with her "performance". You will never realize that the sharp pain you felt all over your body was caused by the multiple

stabs and slashes she rained on you with a weapon you did not and will not see. There was no reason for you to defend yourself, though you were well armed, for you foresaw no danger at all.

This is one likely scenario that could've taken place during the occupation of the Melayu Archipelago (*which includes the most part of what is now the South East Asian countries*) by either the Portuguese, Dutch, English, Spanish, Japanese or American colonizing forces. The woman in the story could've been from any of the countries amongst the South East Asian countries. The soldier who met with misfortune could've been from any of the aforementioned colonizing forces. However, the art with which the woman so cleverly put to use to defeat her bigger enemy would most likely be none other than Silat.

Though relatively an exotic, if not obscure, art amongst the majority of the Western martial-arts community until just about a decade back, Silat has had the good fortune of being highlighted by the growing interest in the weapon arts of the South East Asian countries. However, the rarity of correct information and instructors outside its countries of origin have been the major setback to the wider spread of the art itself. This article has been written with the sincerest intentions to alleviate, if not remedy, this problem.

Silat is the indigenous martial art of the Melayu people who mainly populate the South East Asian countries of Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei, Singapura and the Philippines. In Malaysia, Singapura and Brunei it is known as Seni Silat. In Indonesia it is widely known as Pencak Silat or Pentjak Silat. However, in the Philippines it is more widely recognized as Kali Silat. By any name it may be called, Silat still is renowned not only for its highly practical and incredibly deadly approach and technique but also for its highly stylized and artistic movements, philosophy and spirituality.

The term "Silat" itself has many interpretations as to its origin. One interpretation states that the term "Silat" comes from the Melayu word "Si Kilat" which means "one who is as fast as lightning". Lightning is taken as an example because it signifies power, speed and elusiveness, not to mention brightness (*of the mind*). The fact that lightning always takes the least resistive path towards its point of destination makes it all the more compatible as an example for silat's combative approach and philosophy. These ideally are the traits of the pendekar (

Silat warrior)

in combat. The pendekar's

(Melayu silat warrior)

pro prowess, especially in the state of running amuk

(*"amok" in English*)

is legendary

(*not to mention, feared*)

amongst the many colonizing forces that have dared set foot in the Melayu Archipelago.

However, it has to be noted that the state of amuk should not be interpreted as that of *"temporary insanity"*, where all sense of thought and reasoning is non-existent. It is rather a state whereby the warrior has put aside all notions of self-preservation and is ready to give his life for the cause he is fighting for.



Guru Jak Othman and Pendekar Scott McQuaid

Silat, not unlike the other martial-arts of the East, comes in many different and unique styles. From the tiger-mimicking stances of the Harimau Sumatera-style (*no relation to Harimau Berantai*), the crowd-pleasing Silat Pulut antics (pe

formed at traditional Melayu weddings and ceremonies)

, the death-defying acrobatic feats of Silat Seni Gayung to the "no-nonsense"-straight-postured approach of Silat Cekak, the varieties of Silat styles, techniques and weaponry is limited only by the limitations of the human imagination, literally.

However, it is Silat's dance-like movements while in combat, the Bunga Silat, that usually catches the attention of the uninitiated observer. In essence, the Bunga Silat is actually a highly sophisticated and "devious", for lack of a better word, method of deceiving the opponent so as to gain the upper hand in combat. The exact details of how this is achieved is a highly guarded secret in Silat that is revealed to the student only when the Guru (*teacher*) has fully trusted the student with the responsibility of not misusing this knowledge.

Though aesthetically pleasing, to the untrained eye, the Bunga Silat unfortunately creates the illusion that Silat is a "soft"-style martial art. In actuality, unlike other martial-disciplines, Silat is rarely divided into any categories of "hard" or "soft" (*or internal and external*)

-styles as almost all Silat styles profess to practice both "hard" and "soft" techniques within their respective curriculums.

In Silat, the mind, body and spirit are seen as being in a state of togetherness (*which many would not argue otherwise*)

, thus the training is directed towards the cultivation of the "person" as a "whole" and not just towards perfecting his or her fighting ability.

Now, this author will humbly try to introduce one of those many Silat styles, one which for all intents and purposes should and would never claim itself to be the best amongst the rest. One which has at its roots the ultimate goal of martial practitioners the world over, that is the preservation of life in the face of injustice. One which professes the ideals of reason and mercy, yet the firm and swift execution of justice when absolutely necessary. And, one which is realistic and honest enough for the Guru to tell his students, "I can show you hundreds of ways to kill a man, but I cannot even show you one way to bring him back to life!". This is the Silat style known as Harimau Berantai.

Literally, Harimau Berantai Pencak Silat is translated as "the Chained Tiger" Pencak Silat and it has a history that spans generations. Originating from the island of Java, it has a

rather unique and interesting birth. It got its title from one of the many pendekars (*Silat warriors*) of its clan, a pious man named Kiyai Haji Asraf. In its traditions it is said that this style was taught to the founder by a woman in his dreams, the Puteri Mayang Mengurai. Together with the other members of his clan, he would go into battle against the Dutch who were colonizing Java at that period of time. His ferocity in battle so astounded and frightened his enemies that they bestowed upon him the infamous title of "the Tiger".

However, the title was quickly replaced by the Javanese people with "the Chained Tiger", whereby the "chain" signified the degree of self-control and religious faith Kiyai Haji Asraf had in himself owing to his piousness. Ever since then, Kiyai Haji Asraf's whole clan has been called the Harimau Berantai and subsequently, the Silat that they practiced was known by the same title. It has to be noted that until today, a high degree of self-control is still the main prerequisite for all those wishing to study this system of silat, even more so than athletic or fitness abilities (*as deficiencies in these areas are more easily rectified*).



Guru Jak Othman and Pendekar Eddie Chards

An interesting quality of Harimau Berantai Pencak Silat is the role in which women have played in it. In the olden days, the women, dubbed Srikandi, actually went to war together with their male counterparts. As a matter of fact, the current Grandmaster of the art is Mak Guru Ramentan Sameon (*"Mak Guru" being her title*), a lady who is now in her sixties. Not surprisingly, the main weapons of the art such as the pisau belati (*knife*), kerambit (*a small crooked knife popularly known as the "tiger claw"*) and ekor pari (*whip*) are essentially light and easily concealed (*the whip being wrapped around the waist under the garment or sarong*), perfect for use by both women and men.

This brings us to the main subject that this article wishes to address, that of Harimau Berantai Pencak Silat weaponry. We will begin with a general introduction of the major weapons followed by a more in-depth look at the applications, concepts and techniques used for those weapons in combat. As can be grasped from the information so far, this system was originally an art of war, hence the varied weapons employed in combat.

In preparation for battle that could occur at a moment's notice, the Harimau Berantai pendekar had to be able to fight using all manner of weapons that were commonly used in that time period. Weapons such as the keris (*traditional Melayu dagger*), knife, sword, spear and cane were part of the arsenal of all the pendekars (*and not just those from the Harimau Berantai clan*)

. However, there are a few weapons that are focused on in Harimau Berantai Pencak Silat . The first and foremost would be the pisau belati, which is none other than the knife.

The pisau belati (*literally, Belati Knife*) is an ancient weapon of the Melayu and as such has a glorious history of it's own as far as Silat is concerned. Interestingly enough, the belati (*as it is more comonly called*) was not a specifically designed weapon of war but was just the everyday common utility knife that was used for everything from cutting vegetables to cutting rope to slaughtering animals and of course, when needed to, protecting one's life. This made it seem the most logical weapon as it was readily available and in the right hands, downright deadly.

This thin bladed weapon was infamous during the Dutch occupation for its deadly sharpness and "venom" (*which will be elaborated on later*) especially in the hands of the Srikandi (*women warriors*) of Java.

According to Mak Guru Ramentan

(*or Mak Intan, as she is affectionately known*)

, the current grandmaster of Harimau Berantai Pencak Silat, the belati was one of the weapons that claimed the most number of Dutch lives when they were forced to fight at close range. With a few simple moves, the belati-fighter would stop the Dutch dead in his tracks, literally.

It is the belati-fighting applications, concepts and techniques that has become the very foundation of Harimau Berantai Pencak Silat's art to this very day. Its influence is so wide-reaching that its applications, concepts and techniques are used even for the empty-hand fighting aspect of the art. Just to touch on that, the empty-hand fighting in Harimau Berantai Pencak Silat is also directly influenced by all the other major weapon's concepts, applications and techniques in its arsenal. So, in order to get properly acquainted with Harimau Berantai Pencak Silat, you would have to be familiar with the belati as well as the other traditional weapons of the art. As such, the belati-fighting art deserves an in-depth study in its own right.

Firstly, we need to be familiar with the physical characteristics of the belati itself. In general, the length of the belati's blade is between 10 to 20 centimeters depending on the size of its user's hands. The belati, like any single-edged knife, can basically perform two basic techniques, slashing and stabbing (*a well-made belati is said to be able to slash all the way to the enemies' bones!*)

The Art of Belat Knife

The belati is forged from at least three different metals, so as to insure that the strength of the thin blade is sufficient when it has to endure the extreme rigors of combat. A weak blade might break on contact with the enemy's bone (*or article of clothing such as a belt-buckle*). According to the Grandmaster, Mak Intan, the belati owned by Puteri Mayang Mengurai (*who taught the founder of the art, Haji Asraf*) was made from 27 different types of metals.

Back in the olden days, the blacksmith responsible for the forging of the belati would fast for a day before starting the process. The blacksmith whose responsibility it was to forge the belati of Puteri Mayang Mengurai was said to have fasted for 90 days before beginning the task. After having done so, he forged the legendary weapon using nothing but his bare hands!

The blacksmith (*in Melayu, "pandai besi", literally meaning "iron-intelligent"!*) is believed to possess the skill to infuse the weapons he forges with certain "venoms". It is believed that there are two types of venom that can be infused into the belati by the experienced blacksmith. First, the venom or poison derived from organic sources such as plants and animals

(much like those used on poisoned darts or arrows although less potent)

. The second, believed to be a more potent venom, comes from charms that the blacksmith "infuses" by way of spells and incantations all throughout the forging process.

As mentioned, the belati is suitable for both slashing and stabbing but would prove less efficient if put to use as a chopping instrument due to the thinness and lightness of its blade. Anyhow, that in no way takes the edge off (*excuse the pun*) this excellent weapon as it's thin and light blade is its strength, so to speak, as these features makes the belati extremely easy to carry, deploy and then conceal. The thinness of its blade coupled with the skill of weapon-concealment of the Pendekar makes the belati virtually invisible in the eyes of the enemy. This by the way, is of the utmost importance as the element of surprise makes a huge difference in an all-out fight for survival. Also, due to this nature of the weapon

(its light weight),

it can be incorporated into the trapping and grappling range to augment techniques such as joint locks and manipulations.

As a general guideline, slashing can be done with both the point or the edge of the belati. The targets when doing so are the major muscle groups and arteries. However, slashing with the point of the belati can rarely be done all the way to the bones, as can be done when using its edge, just to the skin and the outer layers of muscle.

The internal organs, major target themselves, are more accessible through stabbing techniques as opposed to slashing because stabbing provides more depth of penetration as the length of the belati is greater than its width.

The blunt side of the blade (*opposite the edge*), the handle and even the wooden sheath of the

belati is used for hitting or knocking the enemy as a set up for other techniques. These parts of the belati are also invaluable when performing trapping or joint-locking techniques as they present the belati-fighter with several *(less damaging)*

alternative options other than the above mentioned slashing and stabbing techniques. These options further optimize the use of the whole of the belati as a weapon. Although seemingly violent, these techniques were designed with the aim of immobilizing the enemy as fast as possible. As such, the techniques rely on simple, quick, yet effective movements aimed at the vulnerable areas of the body. Anyhow, the Pendekar must always exercise the proper degree of physical and mental control based on reason, mercy and also the gravity of the situation so as not to cross "the point of no return", if you may *(unless of course, there are no other options)*.

Belati Fighting Concepts Attack

As can be expected of any discipline of the martial arts, especially one which is in essence an art of war, there are philosophies and concepts that are held as the foundations of the art. This is true in relation to Harimau Berantai Pencak Silat as well. For the purpose of this article however, we will examine briefly a couple of the belati knife-fighting concepts as there are, in reality, too many concepts that would necessitate the writing of not one but a few volumes of books to satisfy the complete explanation of each of them.

The first concept we will examine is that of attacking. Despite the prevalent attitude of many in the martial arts circle who hold true to the concept of defense and defense alone, Harimau Berantai Pencak Silat, while not opposing the merit of defensive techniques *(we practice many such techniques ourselves)*

, believes that in offense

(attacking) t

here is also an advantage to be gained. Technically speaking, the person who attacks is in actual fact controlling the tempo of the fight. This does not necessarily mean that the attacker would prevail in that conflict, just that the ensuing actions taken in that conflict will result directly from the attacker's initial attack. What does determine the outcome of the conflict however, amongst other things, is the skill level of both parties in the conflict

(the attacker and the defender).

Provided that the attacker has a higher degree of skill and understanding of knife-fighting, the fact that the attacker has taken the initiative

(by attacking)

will actually put the defender in the position of having to respond with an appropriate defensive *(or counter-attacking)* technique.

In the case of knife-fighting, where a simple touch or flick of the knife could prove to be fatal, the defender's response has to be exact as the margin of error in a knife-fight is next to nil. This type of response by the defender can only be made if he or she is trained in knife-fighting because it takes the proper instincts to react to a knife attack by a knife-fighter who is attacking with not one but a combination of stabs and slashes at blinding speed. Instinct, not thought, is the most important attribute because there practically is no time to think when someone is coming at you with a knife and all it takes for him (*or her*) to seriously injure you is just for one of those many slashes and stabs to touch you.

Even more importantly, the mental conditioning that it takes to stay perfectly calm during a knife fight, let alone facing a knife attack, can only be achieved through constant and correct training on the part of the knife-fighter. Even then, there are no guarantees that the trained man will win or even survive a knife-fight as there are too many variables in a knife-fight that are completely out of the knife-fighter's control (*such as the skill level of the enemy*). However, the complete absence of proper knife-fighting training is a sure-fire guarantee of defeat in a knife-fight, which practically translates into serious bodily injury or even death.

That, unfortunately, is the reality. So, it stands to reason that a belati-fighter, being the more experienced with the knife (*both mentally and physically*), has an incredibly higher chance of scoring when attacking as he only needs to touch his enemy in order to end the fight.

One issue that needs to be addressed is the fact that attacking is not against the code of honour of the pendekar as the attack is made when the "state-of-battle" has already commenced, when such "diplomatic" solutions as fleeing or backing down is no longer valid (*e.g. when one is protecting one's child from being kidnapped*). In the final analysis, attacking is a valid protection strategy as it sets the psychological-precedence or mind-set that the belati-fighter is no longer the "victim" but rather the "aggressor" and goes a long way when you're in a knife-fight, fighting for your life! To summarize, in a nutshell, the attacking-strategy of the Harimau Berantai Pencak Silat Pendekar can best be summed up by the famous saying "Sometimes the best defense is a good offense".

Another facet of Harimau Berantai Pencak Silat training that is directly related to its attacking-strategy is the study of the vulnerable parts of the human anatomy especially those directly related to the applications of the belati. Contrary to popular belief, the head, neck and torso are not the only parts of the human anatomy that are the targets in a knife-fight. Actually, these are secondary targets as the priority in a knife-fight is to neutralize the main threat which is the weapon-arm of the enemy (*even when the belati-fighter is the one attacking*). As a matter of fact, there are at least 8 different targets on the arm that if cut and left untreated, would make

the enemy succumb in 15 to 30 seconds

(which is still too long a time in a knife-fight).

The same goes for the legs as well, and the effect takes place even faster in a highly fit person compared to a person with a low level of fitness, paradoxically.

This type of knowledge is essential in the proper study of the belati and as such is given priority. However, the emphasis here is not so much on the damage that can be done as much as the repair that can be salvaged once an injury has occurred, whether it be on the enemy or one's self. This is due to the fact that in Harimau Berantai Pencak Silat philosophy, a life is something sacred and once taken, no one can bring it back. The fact that violent circumstances have to be neutralized *(by the same means, sometimes)* in order to protect the innocent does not justify the taking of a life if it could be avoided.

So in order for the Pendekar to be in complete control of his situation, he has to be able to administer quick and precise first aid measures as well as justice. Both traditional and contemporary techniques are given emphasis in the administration of first first aid in this respect. Only after a practitioner of Harimau Berantai Pencak Silat is able to effectively master both the "killing" and the "healing" aspects of the art is he or she a true practitioner.

In the end, it boils down to a question of responsibility, both on the part of the art and the practitioner. For the art would be a highly irresponsible one if it did not at the very least provide some alternatives to its potentially "killing" techniques. At the same time, that would be of no use whatsoever if the practitioner does not have the control and restraint it takes to be able to keep a balance between the administration of justice, the coldness of brutality and the virtue of mercy. After all, it is the preservation of life that is of the utmost concern when neutralizing a potential threat, and at the highest levels of Harimau Berantai Pencak Silat *(or any other martial art)*, that includes the enemy's.

This article was originally published in Silat Warrior magazine.