



by Guru Scott McQuaid

Many scholars consider Indonesia to be the cradle of Pencak Silat, the word silat is believed to have come from the word *sekilat* meaning “as fast as lightning”. This is a common theory used to describe the motions of combat before eventually shortening the word to silat. Some believe that the origin of the word *pencak* comes from the Sanskrit word “pancha” meaning five, or it may have come from the Chinese phrase “pencha” meaning avert or deflect.

The term *pencak* is used in central and east Java which translates to the performance aspects of the fighting art, while the word *silat* was used in Sumatra which refers to the essence of combat and self-defense.

In the 5th century on the island now known as Indonesia, the Buddhist Sumatran Srivijaya empire was formed. This happened as a result of the migration of the Buddhist tribes of India traveling into Sumatra and Java. The Srivijaya empire spread across South East Asia.

The earliest evidence of silat being taught as a structured manner comes from the Sumatra based empire of Srivijaya where folklore legends tells that it was created by a woman named Rama Sukana who witnessed a fight between a tiger and a large bird. After seeing the two animals fight she utilized movements from both the tiger and the large bird. There are several variations of this story depending on the region where it is told. The Sundanese, for example, believe that she created the Cimande silat style after seeing a monkey battle a tiger.

The Sumatran Srivijaya kingdom dominated the coastal areas, Srivijaya warriors invaded neighboring islands from their coastline such as the island of Cebu in the Philippines and introduced the locals to an early brutal but basic version of stick fighting that later the Filipinos

would develop into Kali silat.

Palembang was the base for the great Srivijaya empire which commanded the sea routes between China and India. Scholars believe that the first Indonesian structured style of combative arts began in Riau on the island of Sumatra, although these were very crude and raw forms of combat that eventually spread into the ancient city of Priangan which was the name of the capital of the Minangkabau kingdom. It was here that the Minangkabau tribe started to evolve the Srivijaya warrior fighting style. It is said they created various systems from the basic principals such as the infamous tiger style, Silek Harimau and Silek Tuo. The masters of these arts were referred to as a *pendekar* which comes from the Minangkabau expression 'pandai akal' that means clever mind.

The Minangkabau kingdom stretched across Indonesian islands ruling from around the 13th century to the mid-16th century. These regions included areas in West Sumatra, Riau, North Sumatra, Jakarta, West Java and Jambi. The fighting arts flourished as they reached the island of Java, from the West came the Cimande style of silat that many regard as the first pencak silat style of Java.



In the 13th century the Hindu Javanese kingdom known as Majapahit spread across South East Asia eclipsing the previous Srivijaya empire. By 1377 the Majapahit soldiers had taken control of the last stronghold in Sumatra, the Minangkabau capital Palembang. They fought off the rebellion and could now control the gold trade route which gave so much power to the Minangkabau kingdom. It was during this time that the various styles of pencak silat as we know today began to form and evolve.

Javanese pencak silat reached its peak under the Majapahit empire. During the 16th century the style of Harimau Berantai Silat was created and their clan became known as great assassins against the Dutch during their occupation of Indonesia.

There are believed to be more than 800 styles of pencak silat in Indonesia, with many of the newer systems coming from the 20th century such as Setia Hati from central Java, Serak, Kuntao, Perisai Diri, Mande Muda and the Bakti Negara style from the eastern island of Bali.

The rise of these arts from around Indonesia as well as its many neighboring islands shows the power of the empire of Majapahit. Although the origin of the name Majapahit is not officially known, some historians have suggested that the word 'maja' comes from a Javanese name of an Indonesian tree and the name Majapahit represents the branches of the tree showing how vast the empire spread across South East Asia. The Majapahit kingdom included areas that are known today as Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Cambodia, Brunei, East Timor and the Philippines. From Majapahit and its connected kingdoms the origins of these martial arts known today were eventually created:

- Pencak Silat - Indonesia
- Seni Silat - Malaysia
- Kali - Philippines
- Tomoi - Malaysia
- Muay Boren - Thailand
- Myanma Yuya Louvi - Myanmar
- Krabi Krabong - Thailand
- Bokador - Cambodia



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