

Outreach

Development of Indonesia's Outlying Areas



REVIVING AN ANCIENT MARTIAL ART

An archaic form of martial art traditionally known as *silek* or *silat Minangkabau* has been gaining quite a following outside West Sumatra, where it first originated. It is popular in other parts of Indonesia and countries of Southeast Asia, and silek associations can also be found in Hong Kong, in Ghana, Africa, the Scandinavian countries and the United States. Devotees come all the way to the small town of Talang Babungo in Solok regency, West Sumatra, to learn the intricate moves from two silek masters, who recently set up the Minangkabau Silek Training Camp to accommodate the increasing interest in this ancient martial art. *Tempo* correspondent Febrianti reports from Solok.

THE cool mountain air grew cold with the rain in Salimpek village, Solok regency, West Sumatra. But the weather did not keep residents from congregating around a small plot of land, about the size of a volleyball court, next to wet onion fields in late August. They were too curious to witness something they had never seen: a fight between a local *silek* master—*silek* is Minang for *silat*, which refers to the martial arts indigenous to Indonesia and Malaysia—and a tall, large European man.

Yes, on that day, Sasaran Kincia Tuo, a silat school at 1,455 meters above sea level, was visited by seven European guests who came to test their martial arts skills. In the Minang language, *sasaran* means ‘a place for martial arts training’, and *kincia tuo* ‘old mill’. The foreigners were participants in the 2014 Minangkabau Silek Camp, held from August 20-28. Beginning in Talang Babungo village, some 10 kilometers away from Salimpek, these masters from abroad set about learning some new moves and burnishing their old ones.

These were no ordinary travelers, but martial arts hobbyists in their respective countries. Some are even martial arts trainers. Johny Silmon, who came from London, England, is the editor of *Martial Arts Illustrated* magazine, published in England and Europe. He also works as a silat trainer in England and the European Union.

Since 1990, Silmon has studied with silat gurus from around Indonesia. Initially he practiced the Cimande and Cikalong silats in West Java. In 2000 he began to deepen his understanding of the Minangkabau version from West Sumatra. “Silat is my passion,” Silmon told *Tempo*. “Silat is unique, different from other martial arts. Everything is trained: your body, your attitude, and it creates a good character.”

Another participant was Mattias Persson, a 42-year-old Swede who teaches a variety of martial arts in Holland, Germany, Denmark, England and Thailand. He trains soldiers for the government as well as individual enthusiasts. His repertoire includes *kuntao* (Chinese martial arts), judo, karate, wrestling and taekwondo. “I learned silat in Norway, but I wanted to find a guru in its place of origin,” Persson said.

On that chilly day in Salimpek, Nasrullah Pituan, 42, the founder of Sasaran Kincia Tuo, stepped into the center of the arena. His rival was Mark Young, an orthopedist and acupuncturist from England.

Nasrullah opened with *langkah ampek*, Minang



silat’s basic move; Young countered with *sambuik jurus silek*. ‘*Sambuik*’ refers to a counterattack, whether in the form of an evasion, a block, a catch, and other moves.

Of the foreigners, Young appeared to have been the quickest study. In the three encounters since his first silek camp last year, he had mastered three *langkah ampek* moves.

Then there was Cormac Mac Cárthaigh from Ireland, who faced a disciple of Sasaran Kincia Tuo. Mac Cárthaigh, also a participant in last year’s camp, was able to deploy two *langkah ampek* moves.

The demonstration went on until late in the night. The *langkah ampek* moves exhibited by the Sasaran Kincia Tuo’s disciples made it all the more exciting. They even wielded weapons like knives, swords and sticks.

The local fighters praised their foreign guests for learning so quickly. “Here it takes at least two months for us to master one move, but they need only five days,” said Petir Gumanti, who at 17 is Sa-

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saran Kincia Tuo's most senior student. "Maybe because they have already mastered other forms of martial arts."



The Minangkabau Silek Camp was meant to introduce Minang silek to the world. The initiator was Jufrizal Rajo Malao, 58, a silat master from Talang Babungo, and Edwardo Guci, 41, a private silat trainer. They were concerned that silat instruction in foreign countries failed to incorporate the Minangkabau style and identity. "People should know where the place of origin of silek is and they have to learn it here. Like karate, they know it is from Japan. The terminologies and names of the moves are also in Japanese," said Jufrizal, who since 1983 has founded 10 silat associations in Talang Babungo.

The idea for the event came to Edwardo's mind from his own experience. The infant-garment entrepreneur has studied the martial arts since his childhood. Since 2000, he has often given trainings

PARTICIPANTS
OF THE
MINANGKABAU
SILEK CAMP 2014.

abroad. First he coached in a martial arts school in Malaysia. Living as a nomad, he gave private trainings from Jakarta and Bali to as far as Europe and the United States.

Many foreigners teach silek. There is an African who gives courses on Tiger silek—one type of the Minang silek—in the United States. There are Americans who teach *silek tuo*—old silek—as an extracurricular activity at the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA). Some of them have studied in West Sumatra. But others only learn from watching videos.

In 2012, Edwardo met Jufrizal in Talang Babungo and told him of his experiences teaching abroad. Those discussions gave them the idea for the silat camp. "We thought why don't we invite them to learn original silek?" Edwardo said. They chose Talang Babungo because the silat school there was still traditional, not commercial. The participants could learn directly from the *guru tuo* (old master). In addition, Talang Babungo lay in the middle of gorgeous nature, with beautiful views and water-

falls and hot springs in the forest, a perfect retreat spot.

Edwardo enlisted one of his silat students from abroad: Silmon, who had trained with him since 2000. Silmon promoted the Minangkabau Silek Camp to his friends. Twelve people signed up, most of them Edwardo's former students.

For lack of money, Edwardo and Jufrizal sold their cars. And the Minangkabau Silek Camp was held without the help of anybody. The participants were not charged. There were around 80 representatives from West Sumatran silat schools who participated along with the guests from the United States and Europe.

To help with funds, Edwardo and Jufrizal asked the government for help. Solok regency's Office of Tourism provided Rp25 million in January. But that money was only enough for writing proposals, traveling to Jakarta to look for sponsors and printing banners and billboards.

Private companies offered to lend a hand, but these turned out to be false promises. The would-be sponsors' money never appeared. The government, with an excuse that the event had not been approved in the regional budget, would not allocate a greater amount. Banners that had been printed could not be displayed.

Consequently, Jufrizal, chairman of the Silek Camp 2014, canceled his plan to invite representatives of silat schools from all over Indonesia. He also called off the arrival of 60 participants from The Netherlands. "We had to do it because we could not provide accommodations for them," he said.

But seven European participants already bought airplane tickets and had to be welcomed. They agreed to join hand in hand to share costs for food and transportation. The participants built tents around the Gelanggang Aluang arena in Talang Babungo. "We did not charge them for the trainings," added Jufrizal, who spent Rp75 million from his own pocket.



With all these conditions, Jufrizal remained adamant that the Minangkabau Silek Camp in Talang Babungo would be held annually. The main reason is that foreign martial arts hobbyists are highly interested in silek. After last year's camp, some participants returned to deepen their knowledge with more complicated moves.

Mark Young was one of them. This was his third time learning silek in West Sumatra. "Flexibili-

EUROPEAN MARTIAL ARTS ENTHUSIASTS IN THE MINANGKABAU SILEK CAMP 2014.



ty and breathing practice in silat is very good for health," said Young, a physician who has practiced judo for 24 years. "I came back here because the community is very nice."

During the camp's 10 days, the participants tried to comprehend the knowledge of silek tuo, which has been passed down for centuries in West Sumatra. Other than Mark Young, who had mastered the third move, there were foreigners who began to acquire skills of the first and the second moves of langkah ampek.

The wisdom of Minang's silek tuo is known as *langkah* or 'steps'. For physical skills, there are *langkah ampek* (four steps) and *langkah tigo* (three steps). A silat learner would begin with 19 moves of langkah ampek, and then shifts to more deadly moves of langkah tigo.

The next stage is *langkah duo* (two steps) which necessitates mental acuteness and a deep understanding of spiritual wisdom. The user would be invulnerable to weapons because of his ability to channel his inner strength. While the silek of *langkah satu* (one step) marks a total surrender to God. "Langkah satu only uses the inner strength with



a confidence that if the time of death has not come yet, I will not die,” Jufrizal explained.

It is this science of original silek that Jufrizal and his friends want to transfer to foreigners. Jufrizal and Edwardo have an ambition to open an academy dedicated to issue licenses for silat athletes. “If a foreigner wants to open a silek training center in his country, he has to get permission from us. If the athletes are to be promoted to a higher rank, they must come to Minangkabau,” said Jufrizal, who also works as a schoolmaster.

While waiting for further development, next year the Minangkabau Silek Camp will still be held as usual. Jufrizal and Edwardo expected they would not be less watchful in the future. The Solok government promised to include the Minangkabau Silek Camp agenda into its tourism calendar so the cost could be accommodated in the regional budget. Solok deputy regent Desra Ediwani Anantatur, who opened the event, approved. “The budget is Rp75 million per year from the regional budget of Solok regency,” he said. “We are confident after we saw their seriousness in these past two years.”

LESSONS FROM THE ANIMAL KINGDOM

Nobody knows for sure the origins of Minangkabau *silek*. The historical background of this martial art from West Sumatra is difficult to trace. The main source of information is the *tambo*—the oral traditions that have been passed down through word of mouth.

Jufrizal Rajo Malano, 58, a *silat* master from Talang Babungo, West Sumatra, once heard a story that silat was taught by Datuak Siri Bamego-Mego during the Hindu-Buddhist era. He was a member of the inner circle of the Pagaruyung Palace, the center of the Malay kingdom that covered the whole area of present-day West Sumatra. “It was from him that this martial art was inherited and circulated by the Minangkabau people when they opened a new settlement or went to faraway places as migrant workers,” he said. “This had caused silat to spread out widely to many places in Indonesia and Malaysia.”

Another theory presented by O’ong Maryono in his book *Sejarah Pencak Silat* (The History of Pencak Silat) contended that silat was likely the product of acculturation of the local martial arts and self-defense techniques brought by Indian and Chinese merchants and priests. This started in the 7th century in the Riau Archipelago and spread to other regions.

Today, the Minang or Padang silat goes under various names. People might think they are of different camps or schools, but in fact they all come from the *silek tuo*, or old silat. The difference has to do with locations, local cultures and popular moves or steps. For example, Silek Pangian comes from Pangian in Lintau, and Silek Kumango originates from Kumango in Tanah Datar.

Silat moves are learned from nature, especially from animals that are good at fighting, such as the tiger, cat, monkey, bird and snake. When one sees the *balam* (turtledove) fight by flapping its wings (*kalapuah*), they are reminded of the *kalapuah balam* move. In similar vein, a cat catching a mouse has rendered the move *kucing tikam tuo*. Tigers inspired the birth of *silek harimau*. These moves are usually performed in Talang Babungo.

In Sunur, Padang Pariaman regency, various silat moves such as *rumah Gadang tak badindiang* (the Gadang house without walls) and *catuak ula* (snake bite) have developed. “The move of rumah Gadang tak badindiang means, even if the house does not have walls, a mouse cannot sneak in. This signifies a strong defense that makes an attack cannot go through. While the move of catuak ula is taken from the movement of a biting snake,” said Razali, 60, a silat trainer from the Sasaran Harimau Lalok school in Limau Paruik village.

Although the moves are different, the prohibition is the same. “Silat is created not for fighting, or even worse for killing. Silat can only be used when you cannot evade attacks anymore,” said Mantari Alam, a silat master from Cupak. ●



INITIATION TO THE 'BLOOD CIRCLE'

From the way a slaughtered chicken dies, the *silek* trainer learns the nature of his would-be student.

Jufrizal Rajo Malano, a trainer of *silek*, the martial art of the Minangkabau people who are concentrated in West Sumatra, slaughtered a chicken with tiny, black-and-white spotted feathers. Nasrullah Pituan, 42, his nephew and trusted student, held the chicken and sprinkled its blood on the big toes of his three would-be pupils: Brandon Michael Paylor and Glen John Lloyd from England, and Mattias Persson from Sweden.

The blood streaming from the chicken's throat was also sprinkled around the *silek* arena. As soon

JUFRIZAL RAJO
MALANO

as the 'circle of blood' was made, Nasrullah tossed the chicken into its midst. While it was still fluttering around, no one was allowed to move. Only when it died did Nasrullah perform the first move of *langkah ampek* (four steps). The students imitated the moves.

Before it dies, the trainer watches the chicken closely. If it dies in the middle of the ring, it means the student has the strong will to learn. If it dies slowly, it is a sign the student will learn lazily. If it squirms for a long time before its death, the student will become arrogant. If it dies by thrusting its body forward, the student will be vengeful. And if it dies instantly, the pupil has no will to learn.

"In spite of this, every student will be accepted. From the signs, we'll find the solution," said Razali, 60.

The chicken ritual of acceptance was performed on August 20 for three of the seven foreign participants of the 2014 Minangkabau Silek Camp at the Aluang Bunian Arena in Talang Babungo, Solok regency. All three wore a special uniform they had purchased in nearby Bukittinggi. "This applies to anybody learning *silat* (martial art) at Talang Babungo," said Nasrullah, who is also a high school teacher. According to Nasrullah, the uniform symbolizes that the student will take the teacher's expertise.

Aluang Bunian is the oldest training gym in Talang Babungo. Established in 1983 by Jufrizal, it now has 129 students. It includes 10 small arenas in various hamlets, including the Kincia Tuo in Salimpek village, Talang Babungo's neighbor.

In each location, training sessions are held twice a week, after the sun goes down. The arena is usually situated in an open space or in the yard of the trainer's house. Each site is managed in a traditional manner, and the trainer is not paid.

In addition to the uniform, the pupil must also carry a knife and a piece of red cloth. The knife symbolizes the sanctity of the would-be student in his desire to learn, while the red cloth is a symbol of courage in the endeavor. Besides the chicken, all these things are delivered by the would-be student along with a senior person or *mamak* to the teacher.

The fulfillment of these conditions signifies the student's seriousness and indicates he will obey teacher's orders. "The main requirement for learning is not to disobey the parents and the teacher, the learner must not fight with a fellow student, and he must not abuse his gained skill," Nasrullah said. ●



THE DEADLIEST MOVES

Only three gurus of Talang Babungo have mastered *silek kurambik*, an old Minang fighting style employing a dangerous curved blade. Minang martial arts are banned from some competitions because of the resulting deaths in the arena.

The midnight air on Sago Hill in Solok regency, West Sumatra, was chilling to the bone. Most people in Talang Babungo village below were asleep. But several local masters of *silek*—the traditional martial art of the Minangkabau people, who are concentrated in West Sumatra—sat in a circle in the arena, paying no mind to the cold. An old tire burned, its flames illuminating the night.

While most participants of the 2014 Minangkabau Silek Camp were too exhausted to stay up, some lovers of *silek tuo* (old silek) had remained awake for a rare display of *silek kurambik*, a style whose name refers to the curved *kurambit* knife. Only three gurus in Talang Babungo still have a command of it.

On this night, two of them were present: Jufrizal Rajo Malano and Muslim. “I haven’t performed silek kurambik for 20 years. My partner has always

JUFRIZAL RAJO MALANO (RIGHT) AND MUSLIM PERFORMING THE DEADLY SILEK KURAMBIK.

been *Pak Muslim*,” said Jufrizal, 58, the founder of Sasaran Aluang Bunian silek school in Talang Babungo.

Jufrizal showed his *kurambit*, a sharp knife the size of the palm of one’s hand, and shaped like a small sickle. The *kurambit* is made from iron and is sharp on both sides, with a wooden handle whose tip contains a hole for a finger. When gripped and seen from the front, the knife does not look like a weapon, because the sharp end points directly back. That makes it a secret weapon. The finger in the handle makes it hard for an enemy to snatch away.

Silek kurambik was developed from the silek style of *langkah tigo* (three steps). *Silek kurambik* was promoted by masters from Talang Babungo and is now practiced at several silek clubs in West Sumatra. “I am a fourth generation silek kurambik practitioner. The art has been growing because the

first inheritor traveled to Payakumbuh,” Jufrizal said, referring to a city in West Sumatra.

Silek kurambik fighters wield the lethal weapon, and they swing for the neck, armpit, rib cage, abdomen, thigh and ankle. “Kurambik can also be used to *mencancang* (chop), *mencantuak* (thrust in a stabbing motion) at the head and other parts,” Jufrizal said.

Muslim, 60, Talang Babungo’s other master, was ready. He took off his sarong and thick jacket. He was already clad in a warrior’s black shirt and pants. He fastened his sarong around the waist, as did Jufrizal.

Muslim held a kurambit, putting his little finger into the hole in the handle. “Let’s play it slowly. I haven’t gripped a kurambit for a long time,” Muslim told Jufrizal. The two assumed their stances. Then they displayed the moves of *langkah tigo*, where one foot pivots and the other moves. Their movements formed a triangle.

Jufrizal dodged the slashing of Muslim’s kurambit. When the blade circled his neck, Jufrizal swiveled 180 degrees to and out of the way. He employed five dodging moves.

The masters sparred faster and faster. Jufrizal’s knife seemed to just barely miss Muslim’s neck, ribs, waist and ankle. But Muslim used circular moves evade the strikes. After the session, despite the cold, both men were sweating hot.

“Sparring with the kurambit is highly dangerous,” Jufrizal said. “That’s why one must turn 180 degrees. By making only 90-degree circular moves, half of the foot or neck will get cut.” The key skill is agility. After dodging a knife thrust, one can counter by kicking or punching. If applied directly, silek kurambik requires only a few steps.

The kurambit is still produced in a simple way by blacksmiths in Talang Babungo. Jufrizal is convinced that the knife used by members of the United States Navy is an imitation of Talang Babungo’s kurambit. “It resembles the original but it’s more modern and has been patented for the weapon of the US Navy,” Jufrizal said. “I’m sure it comes from the kurambit because in the 1980s many Canadian students joined exchange programs to visit Talang Babungo and they learned silek kurambik for some time.”

Apart from silek kurambik, Jufrizal said, Minang martial arts are generally quite dangerous. They use minimum power, but the effect is fatal. In addition to weapons, there are empty-hand strikes aimed at joints that can be debilitating. “The shoul-

JUFRIZAL
RAJO MALANO
HOLDING A
KURAMBIT



der joint can be dislodged as a result. The same is true of the leg, neck and arm,” he said.

Therefore, according to Jufrizal, Minang silek is the only martial art in Indonesia that cannot be included in competitions because of its dangerous consequences. The Minang martial arts contests between clubs only feature *bungo silek*, a reduced form. Pairs of competitors among club members spar against each other and their maneuvering art will be evaluated, like a display of moves.

Jufrizal indicated that in the first National Sports Festival of the 1960s, *silat* (martial art) was included in the program, including that of the Minangkabau. “But when the competition was underway, seven athletes died in the hands of Minang contestants,” he said. “The same occurred in the second festival. Finally, in the third event, Minang silat was banned from participating.” ●