

by Guru Scott McQuaid

I was recently asked to perform a silat demonstration at a traditional Malay wedding in a village near Melaka. My exposure and focus in silat has always been grounded in the reality base of *be la diri*
(self defense) aspects of the art, I have had very little experience in the seni elements of the art.

The bride at this wedding was the daughter of a very well respected guru in Malaysia and I was told that there would be many groups of silat practitioners performing their arts version of silat pulut at the ceremony. I was to represent the *Harimau Berantai Silat* (chained tiger silat) tribe under my blade teacher Maha Guru Jak Othman.

Although I have been practicing silat for over two decades, I had only been practicing in the Javanese Harimau Berantai Silat system for three years and the basis of my training had been in blade combat. I now had to adapted my silat and soften the movements showing the art's grace while incorporating all the rituals and *adat* (cultural traditions) that is to be conducted during the wedding performance.

Amongst the many combative pencak silat systems from the Indonesian archipelago and the Malaysian peninsula, there is a unique style known as '*Silat Pulut*'. This system became famous for its public display during wedding ceremonies still seen today. Silat Pulut is synonymous to silat performances at weddings in Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei and Sumatra. Silat Pulut translates to 'sticky rice silat', the word 'pulut' means sticky rice much like the rice you see in Japanese sushi. Silat Pulut got its name through performing a stylized version of the preferred art of silat to the newlyweds.

In old times the performers were then given sticky rice as their payment and during the

performance a *pesilat* (silat player) would also give the bride a small package of glutinous rice.



Silat Pulut was not originally a style within itself. It was merely the generic term used for a silat art that is performed at a wedding ceremony. There are many regional names and versions of Silat Pulut throughout South East Aisa, such as the Pencak Silat Betawi display seen during the Betawi weddings in Northern Sumatra and then the Bersilat style which is frequently performed at weddings across Java and Malaysia. The Silat Pengantin from Malaysia was once performed for Sultans, only now it is reserved for the bride and groom. The Minangkabu tribe in west Sumatra call their wedding performances Silek Gelombang and these displays can last for many hours.

These pencak silat displays would showcase the grace, fluidity, skill and technique of the particularly style and its practitioner. However due to the *adat* (cultural traditions) each system of silat would have to follow a set of rules displaying certain movements and no combative techniques. By stripping each silat style down to only there basic movement and following the rules of what could be shown and what could not, these limitations eventually formalized a new silat style that is now Silat Pulut. This silat art has very little
bela diri

(self defense) aspects, if any. It is now a ritual dance-like display, performed solely for the groom to welcome his arrival at the bride's house or for the bridal couple when they arrived at the groom's house.

Each movement has its own meaning.

- Salam Hormat - Respect to the couple
- Merestui Mempelai - Blessing the couple
- Perlindungan Mempelai - Protection to the couple
- Mencabar Sekeliling - Pesilats showing their prowess and skill to the audience



Silat Pulut has to be performed with great respect and etiquette. All the movements must be graceful and non-violent. The pesilat performers should should never turn their back to the bridal couple as this is disrespectful. When displaying silat pulut the artists must not lift their feet too high and there should not be any aggressive movements directed towards the bridal couple, punches must be pointed down or sideways. The attacking moves should be demonstrated slowly and the pesilats should never move to the side of the bridal couple. It is traditional for

pesilats to perform in odd numbers such as one or a group three or five and so forth. Although today's practitioners are less strict to how many pesilats are performing at any given time.

Silat Pulut evolved from many original pencak silat systems and found its own style and place within the confines of a seni silat performance at Indonesian and Malay traditional weddings. The art has become a part of silat culture and now its history.

