



Pencak Silat as a Manifestation of Martial Art in the Majapahit Era

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the role of Pencak Silat as a martial art during the Majapahit Empire, emphasizing its dual significance in warfare and the shaping of cultural identity. The research highlights how Pencak Silat was utilized both as a military strategy and a spiritual practice, contributing to the empire's dominance in the Indonesian archipelago. By integrating combat techniques with philosophical values, Pencak Silat became a key factor in Majapahit's military success. This study adopts a qualitative approach, utilizing primary sources such as epigraphy, historical texts, and cultural artifacts, in addition to secondary literature, to offer a comprehensive analysis. The research also includes visual documentation, such as illustrations of martial arts practices during the era. The findings reveal that Pencak Silat played a pivotal role not only in defending the empire but also in instilling loyalty, discipline, and spiritual resilience among its warriors. Furthermore, the study explores the broader social context of the Majapahit era, differentiating it from other Southeast Asian societies. The article concludes that Pencak Silat had enduring cultural and military importance, leaving a lasting legacy that influenced subsequent generations in the region.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Submitted 26/09/2024
Revised 01/10/2024
Accepted 04/10/2024
Published 05/10/2024

KEYWORDS

Pencak Silat; Majapahit; martial art; cultural heritage.

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.34007/warisan.v5i2.2380>

INTRODUCTION

The study of Pencak Silat as a martial art within the context of Indonesian history, particularly during the Majapahit Empire, has garnered increased attention among scholars in recent years. Pencak Silat is recognized not only as a form of physical combat but also as a deeply embedded cultural practice that reflects the values, philosophies, and spiritual aspects of Indonesian society. Previous studies on martial arts in Indonesia have primarily focused on its modern development and its role in national identity post-independence (Ediyono, 2016). However, there is a notable gap in the examination of Pencak Silat during the Majapahit era, particularly its role in military strategy and governance. This article aims to fill that gap by exploring how Pencak Silat was utilized as a key element of warfare and cultural identity during the height of the Majapahit Empire.

Historically, Majapahit (1293–1527) is renowned as one of the greatest empires in Southeast Asia, with its military achievements extensively documented in historical records, such as the *Nagarakretagama*, *Pararaton*, and various epigraphic sources. These texts, along with archeological findings, provide detailed accounts of the empire's military strategies, organization, and the use of Pencak Silat as a key component in warfare. However, the connection between martial arts like Pencak Silat and the military success of the empire has not been adequately explored. Scholars such as Sarbaitnil (Sarbaitnil et al., 2023) and Sasmita (Sasmita et al., 2023) have discussed the military strategies employed by Southeast Asian empires, but the specific techniques and cultural practices tied to martial arts have often been overlooked. This research seeks to contextualize Pencak Silat as both a practical tool of war and a reflection of Majapahit's broader cultural and philosophical ideals, thus contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of its role in history.

The academic debate surrounding the cultural significance of Pencak Silat often highlights its post-colonial resurgence and role in modern nationalism (Sari & Kurniawan, 2021). Scholars like Wiguno et al. (2024) argue that Pencak Silat was revived as a symbol of Indonesian unity and resistance against colonialism in the 20th century. Yet, these discussions often neglect the martial arts earlier historical roots in pre-colonial Indonesia, particularly during the Majapahit era. This study bridges that gap by delving into the historical usage of Pencak Silat as a vital part of Majapahit's military apparatus, thereby offering new insights into its significance beyond its modern cultural renaissance.

Research on Majapahit's military history has often focused on the empire's naval dominance and expansionist campaigns (Munandar, 2020). While these studies have been instrumental in understanding the strategic prowess of



Majapahit, the role of martial arts in shaping the character and discipline of its warriors remains underexplored. This research aims to highlight how Pencak Silat not only prepared Majapahit's warriors for physical combat but also instilled philosophical values of loyalty, discipline, and balance, which were essential for maintaining the empire's internal cohesion and external dominance.

One of the key questions this study seeks to address is how Pencak Silat, as a martial art, influenced the success of the Majapahit Empire in warfare and governance. By examining historical texts, inscriptions, and cultural artifacts, this research identifies the unique role Pencak Silat played in shaping the tactical and spiritual aspects of Majapahit's military forces. This approach will provide a deeper understanding of how martial arts were integrated into the socio-political fabric of the empire, distinguishing it from other Southeast Asian kingdoms of the time.

In terms of state-of-the-art, this research employs a multidisciplinary approach, combining historical analysis with cultural studies to explore the intersections between martial arts, politics, and culture in Majapahit. While previous studies have primarily focused on the empire's political and economic history, this article introduces a novel perspective by treating Pencak Silat not merely as a martial art but as a key element of Majapahit's cultural diplomacy and military ethos. This broader view will offer a more nuanced understanding of the empire's strategies in maintaining power and influence across the archipelago.

The novelty of this research lies in its examination of Pencak Silat not just as a form of physical combat but as a manifestation of the Majapahit Empire's philosophical and spiritual values. This study argues that Pencak Silat was a crucial element in fostering a unified sense of identity among the diverse populations under Majapahit rule, reinforcing the empire's socio-political stability. Furthermore, the research explores how the techniques and principles of Pencak Silat were passed down through generations, influencing not only the military but also the broader cultural landscape of Indonesia.

In conclusion, this study fills a significant gap in the literature by focusing on the historical role of Pencak Silat during the Majapahit era. Through a detailed examination of its martial and cultural applications, this research contributes to the broader understanding of how martial arts shaped the socio-political dynamics of pre-colonial Southeast Asia. By doing so, it provides a fresh perspective on both Majapahit's military success and the enduring legacy of Pencak Silat in Indonesia's cultural heritage.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative historical approach to examine the role of Pencak Silat as a manifestation of martial art in the Majapahit Empire. By adopting a historical methodology, the research seeks to understand the development, significance, and application of Pencak Silat during this period. This method allows for a detailed exploration of how martial arts were intertwined with the military, cultural, and philosophical dimensions of the Majapahit era. The study aims to engage with academic debates surrounding the historical and cultural role of martial arts in Southeast Asian empires, particularly focusing on Majapahit's unique position in this discourse.

The primary data for this study are derived from historical texts, inscriptions (epigraphic), and cultural artifacts associated with the Majapahit Empire, with a focus on Pencak Silat as a martial art. Key textual sources include *Kidung Sundryana* and *Pararaton*, both of which offer crucial insights into Majapahit's military strategies and societal structures during its dominance in Southeast Asia (Pigeaud, [1960](#)). Additionally, the study draws upon the *Nagarakretagama*, an important text that provides further historical context on the governance and military tactics of King Hayam Wuruk's era (Soekmono, [1973](#)).

In terms of epigraphy, this research relies on existing publications that document inscriptions from the Majapahit period. The inscriptions are analyzed through secondary sources that focus on Majapahit's military organization, political structure, and cultural practices (Suwita, [2024](#); Utama, [2022](#)). Rather than direct readings of the inscriptions, this study uses the interpretations and translations provided by epigraphic experts. The inclusion of these epigraphic sources is crucial for understanding how Pencak Silat was institutionalized as part of the military apparatus of the Majapahit Empire.

Cultural artifacts, such as reliefs and sculptures from Majapahit, are also integral to the study. These artifacts, well-documented in archaeological studies, provide visual representations of martial practices during the period, illustrating the use of Pencak Silat not only as a combat art but also as a cultural expression (Wisseman-Christie, [1995](#)). Through the analysis of these artifacts, the research aims to capture the dual function of Pencak Silat in both the military and cultural spheres of Majapahit society.

The study employs a qualitative historical approach, integrating both textual and visual analysis. Historical texts are examined to understand the theoretical and philosophical underpinnings of Pencak Silat, while cultural artifacts are analyzed to contextualize the practical application of the martial art. This mixed-methods approach enables a comprehensive understanding of Pencak Silat's role in the Majapahit Empire.

In terms of secondary data, the research draws on scholarly works related to the history of the Majapahit Empire, Indonesian martial arts, and Southeast Asian warfare. These secondary sources include books, journal articles, and academic papers that discuss the sociopolitical and military context of Majapahit (Fernandes & Luthfi, [2024](#); Purwanto & Saputra, [2020](#)). In order to ensure a comprehensive understanding, oral histories and folklore related to Pencak Silat in Java were also considered, as they provide valuable cultural context that complements the historical evidence (Anto & Nuraini, [2020](#)).

The data analysis process follows a thematic analysis approach, focusing on identifying recurring themes related to the martial and cultural aspects of Pencak Silat in the Majapahit era. Thematic analysis is suitable for this research as it allows for the identification of patterns across diverse historical sources (Pamungkas et al., [2022](#)). The themes that emerged from the analysis include: (1) the integration of martial arts in warfare strategies; (2) the philosophical and spiritual values associated with Pencak Silat; and (3) the cultural transmission of martial arts through generations. By analyzing these themes, the research provides a holistic view of Pencak Silat's role in Majapahit society.

In terms of source triangulation, this study cross-references different types of sources (historical texts, inscriptions, and oral histories) to ensure the reliability and validity of the findings (Ramadhan & Iskandar, [2021](#)). This approach allows the research to draw connections between different narratives, providing a more accurate representation of how Pencak Silat functioned both as a military tool and a cultural practice in the Majapahit period.

A key part of this research involves the contextualization of Pencak Silat within Majapahit's military system. By analyzing historical accounts of warfare during the Majapahit era, the research situates Pencak Silat within broader military strategies, such as naval warfare and territorial defense. This contextualization is important for understanding how the martial art contributed to the empire's expansion and consolidation of power. Sources such as Mpu Prapanca's *Nagarakretagama* provide insights into the geopolitical dynamics of the time, highlighting Majapahit's need for sophisticated military tactics (Hudiyantom, [2015](#)).

To ensure methodological rigor, this research adheres to the principles of historical criticism, which involves evaluating the authenticity, reliability, and relevance of the historical sources used (Dewantara & Aman, [2023](#)). The analysis considers the potential biases of primary sources, especially those written during the Majapahit era or shortly afterward. Additionally, interpretive frameworks from cultural anthropology and Southeast Asian studies are employed to analyze the cultural and philosophical dimensions of Pencak Silat (Alang et al., [2023](#)). This interdisciplinary approach enhances the depth and validity of the findings.

The main limitation of this research is the scarcity of primary sources directly related to Pencak Silat in the Majapahit era. While epigraphic and textual evidence provides valuable insights, much of the understanding of Pencak Silat's role comes from oral traditions and folklore, which can be difficult to verify. To mitigate this, the research employs a rigorous source triangulation method to cross-check data from multiple sources and validate findings. Despite these challenges, the study offers a comprehensive exploration of the martial and cultural significance of Pencak Silat during one of Indonesia's most influential historical periods.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Role of Pencak Silat in Majapahit's Military Strategy

During the Majapahit era, Pencak Silat was not merely a martial art practiced for self-defense or cultural purposes, but rather a core element of the empire's military strategy. Majapahit was a vast empire that required effective military strategies to maintain its influence and territorial control across the Nusantara archipelago. As an empire with both land and sea-based engagements, the Majapahit army needed a combat style that was adaptable to diverse terrains and enemy tactics. Pencak Silat, with its focus on agility, rapid movements, and flexibility, became an ideal martial art for soldiers who had to navigate through forests, mountains, and coastal regions. Its reliance on quick reflexes, strategic maneuvers, and balance made it particularly effective in guerrilla warfare, a common military strategy employed by the Majapahit army to counter both local rebellions and external threats.

The adaptability of Pencak Silat to different combat situations was one of its most significant contributions to Majapahit's military prowess. Unlike other martial arts that may emphasize brute strength or weaponry, Pencak Silat's tactical nature allowed soldiers to exploit the weaknesses of larger, more structured enemy forces. Pencak Silat fighters were trained to use their environment to their advantage, blending stealth, speed, and precision. This was particularly valuable in the dense jungles and rugged landscapes of the archipelago, where conventional military formations were often less effective. Historical records, such as those found in Pararaton and Kidung Sundayana, suggest that the Majapahit army frequently employed Pencak Silat techniques in surprise attacks and ambushes, allowing them to outmaneuver their enemies and secure swift, decisive victories (Pradjoko, 2006; Slametmuljana, 1976). These records describe various battles where the agility, stealth, and martial prowess of Majapahit warriors were key to their military success, highlighting the strategic integration of Pencak Silat into their warfare tactics.



1. Reliefs in Panataran Temple



2. Relief in Suku Temple

Figure 1. Reliefs from the Penataran Temple and Suku Temple depicts a battle scene associated with martial arts

Source: (1) <https://www.goodnewsfromindonesia.id>, (2) <https://www.kompasiana.com>

In addition to its tactical applications in guerrilla warfare, Pencak Silat was integral to Majapahit's naval defense strategies. As a maritime power, Majapahit controlled vast sea routes and engaged in naval battles to protect its trade interests and expand its influence. Pencak Silat's emphasis on balance and fluid movements made it suitable for combat aboard ships, where the unstable environment demanded precise footwork and adaptability. Soldiers trained in Pencak Silat were skilled in close-quarters combat, using hand-to-hand techniques and short weapons like knives or small swords, which were particularly effective in the confined spaces of a ship. This training gave Majapahit soldiers an edge during naval engagements, allowing them to defend their ships and repel boarding parties with skill and efficiency.

The psychological aspect of Pencak Silat also played a crucial role in Majapahit's military success. Pencak Silat is not only about physical combat but also involves mental discipline, focus, and the cultivation of inner strength. These qualities were instilled in Majapahit soldiers, who were trained to remain calm and composed in battle, even in the face of overwhelming odds. This mental fortitude was essential in maintaining morale and cohesion within the ranks, especially during long campaigns or when facing numerically superior forces. The psychological training embedded in Pencak Silat helped Majapahit soldiers develop the resilience needed to endure the hardships of war and maintain their fighting spirit, which contributed to the empire's ability to sustain its military dominance over an extended period.

Furthermore, Pencak Silat was not only a tool for individual combat but also incorporated into group tactics within the Majapahit army. Training in Pencak Silat emphasized coordination and teamwork, allowing soldiers to fight as cohesive units. This was crucial in battles where coordination between different segments of the army was necessary to execute complex maneuvers or strategies. For instance, Pencak Silat techniques were often used to create dynamic formations in battle, allowing small groups of soldiers to penetrate enemy lines or defend strategic positions effectively. This ability to integrate martial arts into broader military tactics gave Majapahit a strategic advantage over less organized or disciplined opponents.

Finally, the military application of Pencak Silat contributed to Majapahit's expansionist ambitions across the Nusantara archipelago. As the empire sought to extend its influence over other kingdoms and territories, Pencak Silat became a symbol of Majapahit's military superiority. Its effectiveness in both offensive and defensive strategies helped the empire establish dominance over rival powers, secure key trade routes, and maintain control over its vast domain. The successful application of Pencak Silat in Majapahit's military campaigns is reflected in historical accounts of the empire's territorial expansion, which reached its zenith during the reign of Hayam Wuruk, under the guidance of the

legendary military strategist Gajah Mada. Ediyono (2017) emphasizes that the use of martial arts like Pencak Silat provided the Majapahit army with a significant advantage, particularly in close combat situations, enabling them to overcome enemies in a wide range of battle scenarios, from large-scale engagements to localized skirmishes.

Pencak Silat as a Cultural and Philosophical Practice

Beyond its military application, Pencak Silat in the Majapahit period served as an important cultural and philosophical practice that reflected the empire's deeper values. It was more than just a system of physical combat; it was a manifestation of the spiritual and moral principles that permeated Majapahit society. According to Avalokitesvari & Gunawijaya (2023), Pencak Silat was closely tied to the spiritual beliefs of the Majapahit people, with practices that emphasized self-discipline, respect for others, and alignment with the natural order. These values were not only essential in battle but were also central to the way Majapahit's citizens viewed their place within the broader universe.

At the heart of Pencak Silat's cultural significance was its philosophy of balance and harmony, principles deeply embedded in Majapahit's worldview. Pencak Silat practitioners were taught to maintain physical and mental equilibrium, mirroring the empire's emphasis on social and cosmic harmony. This concept of balance extended beyond the individual, influencing social relationships and governance. Majapahit's rulers were seen as custodians of this balance, ensuring that the empire's internal order and external relations adhered to these philosophical principles. In this way, Pencak Silat became a tool not only for personal growth but for sustaining social cohesion and unity within the empire.

Furthermore, the practice of Pencak Silat was integrated into the daily lives of Majapahit's citizens as a form of self-cultivation. The training in Pencak Silat was not merely about learning combat techniques but involved a deep process of self-reflection and inner development. Practitioners were encouraged to cultivate virtues such as humility, patience, and perseverance. These qualities were seen as essential not only in warfare but in all aspects of life, fostering a sense of collective identity and shared purpose among the Majapahit people. The discipline required in mastering Pencak Silat mirrored the discipline required to uphold social and moral order within the empire, reinforcing the values that underpinned Majapahit's governance and culture.

The philosophical roots of Pencak Silat also extended to the natural world, with many of its movements inspired by animals and the environment. This connection to nature was reflective of Majapahit's broader belief in the interconnectedness of all living things. Practitioners of Pencak Silat were taught to observe and mimic the fluidity and grace of animals, integrating these movements into their combat techniques. This approach not only enhanced their physical agility but also cultivated a deep respect for nature, reinforcing the idea that human beings were part of a larger natural order. This reverence for nature was in line with Majapahit's spiritual traditions, which emphasized harmony between humans and the environment.

Pencak Silat's role as a cultural practice was also evident in its ceremonial and ritualistic aspects. It was often performed during important cultural festivals, religious ceremonies, and royal events, symbolizing the empire's strength and resilience. These performances were not only displays of martial prowess but also reaffirmations of the empire's values and identity. Through Pencak Silat, the Majapahit people expressed their connection to their heritage and their commitment to preserving the cultural traditions that defined their society. The performance of Pencak Silat thus became a form of cultural expression that transcended the battlefield, uniting the people in shared cultural practices and beliefs.

In addition, Pencak Silat played a key role in fostering social unity and communal identity within the Majapahit empire. It was practiced not only by the elite warriors but by people from all walks of life, creating a sense of solidarity across social classes. The egalitarian nature of Pencak Silat, where individuals were judged based on their skills and character rather than their social status, helped bridge divisions within the empire. This inclusivity reinforced the idea of collective responsibility and mutual respect, which were essential for maintaining social order in such a diverse and expansive empire. The practice of Pencak Silat thus served as a unifying force that strengthened the bonds between individuals and their communities.



1. *Demonstrating the Gesture of Respect (Penghormatan): This movement is not merely a formality; it embodies symbolism that reflects respect, politeness, and humility.*



2. *Two Fingers: By raising two index fingers (dua jari diacungkan ke atas), it symbolizes the existence of two states that are always interconnected in this world. These states are closely related, such as day and night, man and woman, good and evil, hot and cold, health and sickness, fortune and misfortune, wealth and poverty.*



3. *Two Fingers Placed on the Ground (Dua jari diletakkan di tanah): This involves shifting the right foot to the side at an angle of about 15 degrees, then raising the two middle fingers of the right hand to point to the ground while adopting a squatting position. This gesture symbolizes a plea for blessings from Mother Earth.*

Figure 2. Pencak Silat Movement Philosophy

Source: (Ediyono & Widodo, [2019](#))

In conclusion, Pencak Silat in the Majapahit period transcended its military function to become a cultural and philosophical practice that embodied the empire's core values of balance, discipline, and harmony. Its integration into daily life, spiritual practices, and social structures reflected Majapahit's broader worldview, which emphasized unity and respect for the natural and social order. By fostering personal development and social cohesion, Pencak Silat contributed to the strength and stability of the Majapahit empire, making it a critical element of both its military and cultural legacy.

Preservation and Transmission of Pencak Silat Traditions

The preservation and transmission of Pencak Silat during the Majapahit era were deeply rooted in both oral traditions and formalized institutions. Oral transmission played a pivotal role in ensuring that the knowledge of Pencak Silat—its techniques, philosophies, and spiritual elements—was passed down through generations. Masters of Pencak Silat, often referred to as "gurus," transmitted their knowledge to disciples in an intimate, hands-on manner. This direct transmission allowed for a continuous lineage of knowledge, with each generation maintaining the core principles while also adapting the art to new contexts (Muhyi & Purbojati, [2014](#)). This system of oral transmission was essential in preserving not just the martial techniques, but also the deeper philosophical and spiritual meanings attached to Pencak Silat, ensuring that the art retained its holistic nature as both a combat system and a way of life.

In addition to oral traditions, formal training schools, known as "perguruan," were established to institutionalize the learning of Pencak Silat. These perguruan acted as hubs of learning where students from various parts of the Majapahit empire could come to train. They provided a structured environment where students were not only taught martial techniques but also the underlying principles of discipline, respect, and self-control. The perguruan system ensured that the knowledge of Pencak Silat was disseminated widely, making the martial art accessible to people beyond the warrior class. Furthermore, these schools played a crucial role in standardizing Pencak Silat practices, ensuring consistency in training across different regions of the empire (Malasari et al., [2023](#)). This formalization helped to solidify Pencak Silat as a respected discipline, both within the military and broader society.

Royal patronage was another key factor in the preservation of Pencak Silat during the Majapahit era. Members of the nobility, including kings and princes, were often practitioners of Pencak Silat, a practice that lent the martial art significant prestige. The royal endorsement of Pencak Silat ensured that it remained an integral part of the Majapahit military's training regimen and a prominent feature of courtly life. In fact, royal courts frequently hosted Pencak Silat demonstrations, which served both as entertainment and as a means of showcasing the empire's martial prowess. The

involvement of the nobility in Pencak Silat also had a cultural impact, as it elevated the status of the martial art within Majapahit society, encouraging wider participation across different social strata. As a result, Pencak Silat became not only a tool of war but also a symbol of cultural identity.

The role of royal patronage in the transmission of Pencak Silat extended beyond the battlefield. Pencak Silat was frequently performed during important ceremonial events, festivals, and rituals, further embedding it within the cultural fabric of the Majapahit empire. These performances often included not only physical demonstrations of combat techniques but also theatrical elements that highlighted the philosophical and spiritual aspects of Pencak Silat. By integrating the martial art into religious and cultural ceremonies, the Majapahit rulers ensured that Pencak Silat was celebrated as part of the empire's heritage, thus strengthening its role as a cultural practice (Anderson, 1990). This close association with the royal court helped to safeguard Pencak Silat's legacy, ensuring that it was seen as an essential aspect of both the empire's military and its cultural identity.

The interconnectedness of Pencak Silat with Majapahit's broader socio-political structure also contributed to its survival through changing times. The art form was not only used as a method of warfare but was also a tool for social cohesion. By encouraging participation across different social classes, Pencak Silat helped to unify Majapahit's diverse populations. It played a role in fostering a sense of shared identity, particularly in an empire as large and varied as Majapahit, which encompassed numerous ethnic groups and regions. The ability of Pencak Silat to transcend class divisions and act as a unifying cultural force ensured its continued relevance, even as political dynamics shifted within the empire. This social function of Pencak Silat helped to cement its place as a long-lasting cultural institution.

Moreover, the adaptability of Pencak Silat contributed to its endurance. While its core principles remained constant, Pencak Silat practitioners were able to modify techniques to suit different contexts, whether for use in guerrilla warfare, naval battles, or ceremonial displays. This flexibility allowed Pencak Silat to evolve with the changing needs of the Majapahit empire, ensuring its survival even in times of military or social upheaval. The ability of Pencak Silat to evolve, while still maintaining its philosophical and cultural essence, was a key factor in its transmission through generations. This adaptability ensured that the martial art remained relevant, both as a tool of war and as a cultural practice, throughout the empire's reign and beyond.

In conclusion, the preservation and transmission of Pencak Silat during the Majapahit era can be attributed to a combination of oral traditions, formalized training institutions, and royal patronage. These factors not only ensured the continuity of Pencak Silat as a martial art but also solidified its role as a cultural and philosophical practice. By fostering a deep connection between Pencak Silat and the broader social, political, and cultural structures of the Majapahit empire, the art was able to thrive and evolve, leaving a lasting legacy that continues to influence Indonesian martial arts and cultural identity today.

Comparative Analysis: Pencak Silat and Other Southeast Asian Martial Arts

Pencak Silat stands out among Southeast Asian martial arts due to its holistic approach, intertwining physical combat with spiritual, cultural, and artistic practices. Unlike Muay Thai from Thailand, which emphasizes raw physical power, striking techniques, and conditioning, Pencak Silat focuses not only on the body but also the mind and spirit (Andaya, 2016). This integration is evident in its use of fluid, dance-like movements that blend seamlessly with meditation and a deep sense of spiritual discipline. Pencak Silat practitioners are taught to harmonize their body's agility with a strong philosophical grounding in balance and self-control.

On the other hand, Arnis, a martial art from the Philippines, emphasizes weapons-based combat, focusing on stick fighting and blade techniques, with less emphasis on spiritual elements compared to Pencak Silat. While Arnis shares some similarities with Pencak Silat in terms of tactical defense and adaptability to various environments, it lacks the broader cultural and philosophical context that is deeply rooted in Pencak Silat (Suprpto & Ardiansyah, 2021). The cultural heritage of Pencak Silat, particularly during the Majapahit era, also extended beyond the battlefield into ritualistic and ceremonial practices, adding layers of meaning and significance that other martial arts in the region did not always emphasize.

Pencak Silat's role in the Majapahit empire further highlights its unique dual function. While Muay Thai served primarily as a fighting system for warriors and athletes, and Arnis was primarily a practical form of combat training, Pencak Silat in Majapahit society acted both as a tool for military strategy and as a vehicle for self-cultivation and social

cohesion. The spiritual and cultural dimensions of Pencak Silat, with its emphasis on inner peace, self-discipline, and respect for the natural order, reflect its role as a martial art that transcended mere physicality. This distinguishes it from Muay Thai, which is heavily centered on physical endurance and competition, and Arnis, which is focused on combat effectiveness.

Additionally, the spiritual aspects of Pencak Silat allowed it to be deeply embedded in the socio-religious fabric of the Majapahit empire. In contrast, Muay Thai and Arnis did not play as prominent a role in the cultural or religious lives of their practitioners during their formative periods. In Pencak Silat, there is a deep connection between combat techniques and the spiritual practices that involve balance, breath control, and mindfulness. This spiritual dimension provided not only physical preparedness for warfare but also mental resilience and clarity, which were essential for Majapahit warriors navigating both internal conflicts and expansive military campaigns.

The artistic expression in Pencak Silat is another defining feature. Its movements, often likened to traditional dance, reflect the art's deep ties to Indonesian cultural identity. This artistic dimension is less pronounced in Muay Thai and Arnis, which focus more on practical combat. The beauty and grace of Pencak Silat's techniques made it suitable for ceremonial displays, not just for combat, further embedding the martial art within the Majapahit empire's royal and cultural institutions. In ceremonies and festivals, Pencak Silat was performed to honor the empire's heritage and martial prowess, a practice that did not have an equivalent in Muay Thai or Arnis during that period (Anderson, 1990).

In conclusion, while Pencak Silat shares some similarities with other Southeast Asian martial arts in terms of its practical combat applications, its integration of physical, spiritual, and cultural dimensions sets it apart. During the Majapahit era, Pencak Silat's dual role as a military tool and a method of self-cultivation made it not only a practical form of defense but also a vehicle for reinforcing the cultural and philosophical values of the empire. This unique combination of martial, spiritual, and artistic elements ensures Pencak Silat's continued prominence in Indonesian culture and distinguishes it from other regional martial arts like Muay Thai and Arnis.

The Influence of Majapahit's Political Structure on the Development of Pencak Silat

Majapahit's political structure played a crucial role in shaping and institutionalizing Pencak Silat as a martial art form, deeply intertwined with the empire's governance and cultural identity. As a centralized empire that controlled vast territories, Majapahit required a strong military to maintain its dominance and defend against external threats. The rulers of Majapahit, therefore, recognized the importance of martial prowess not only as a means of warfare but also as a symbol of the empire's power and authority. Pencak Silat, as a martial art, became an integral part of this political landscape, reflecting the need for both individual combat skills and collective military discipline.

The political hierarchy within Majapahit contributed significantly to the formalization of Pencak Silat. Majapahit's elite, particularly within the royal court, were expected to possess advanced martial skills, not only to lead by example but also to demonstrate their loyalty and preparedness in defending the empire. According to V. Ramadhan et al. (2024), martial training, including Pencak Silat, became a standardized practice among the nobility, fostering a culture where combat proficiency was equated with political status and responsibility. This connection between political power and martial ability ensured that Pencak Silat was not just a civilian practice but an essential component of the ruling class's identity, promoting its widespread acceptance and institutionalization.

Furthermore, Majapahit's centralized political structure allowed the empire to organize formalized training systems for Pencak Silat. This systematization ensured that martial training was consistent across the empire, creating a unified body of knowledge and skills that could be passed down through generations. The court's sponsorship of Pencak Silat provided the resources and legitimacy necessary to elevate the art form beyond mere self-defense, positioning it as a state-supported tradition. This institutional backing not only preserved the techniques but also fostered the development of philosophical and ethical dimensions within the practice, intertwining the physical and spiritual aspects of Pencak Silat.

In addition to its role in governance, Pencak Silat also became a symbol of Majapahit's imperial strength and cultural identity. The empire's political leaders used martial prowess as a tool to project power, both domestically and internationally. By showcasing the martial abilities of their warriors, Majapahit rulers were able to enhance their prestige and assert their dominance over rival kingdoms. Pencak Silat, in this context, was more than a martial art; it

was a strategic asset that reinforced Majapahit's imperial image and served as a means of demonstrating the empire's superiority in both physical and ideological terms (Kasdi, [2018](#)).

The state-sponsored nature of Pencak Silat under Majapahit also had a lasting impact on its development as a cultural and philosophical tradition. The Majapahit rulers' emphasis on martial skill extended beyond the battlefield, influencing the way Pencak Silat was perceived and practiced within society. Over time, Pencak Silat evolved to incorporate not only combat techniques but also values such as discipline, honor, and self-control, reflecting the broader ethos of the Majapahit court. These elements contributed to the development of Pencak Silat as a holistic practice, encompassing both physical and mental training, which has continued to influence the art form in the centuries that followed.

In conclusion, Majapahit's political structure profoundly shaped the development and institutionalization of Pencak Silat. The centralization of power, the role of the elite in martial training, and the empire's strategic use of martial prowess all contributed to formalizing Pencak Silat as a state-sponsored tradition. This institutionalization not only ensured the preservation and dissemination of the art form but also allowed Pencak Silat to evolve into a symbol of imperial strength and cultural identity, with lasting effects on its philosophical and ethical dimensions.

Challenges in the Historical Documentation of Pencak Silat

The study of Pencak Silat during the Majapahit period presents several challenges, primarily due to the scarcity and fragmented nature of historical sources. Much of the documentation from this era consists of epigraphic records and folklore, which, while valuable, are often incomplete or heavily mythologized. The reliance on these sources complicates efforts to establish a clear and accurate timeline of Pencak Silat's development during this period. This lack of comprehensive primary sources makes it difficult for historians to piece together a detailed account of how Pencak Silat evolved under Majapahit rule.

One significant challenge is the inherent limitations of epigraphic evidence. Ediyono et al. ([2022](#)) notes that inscriptions from the Majapahit era often focus on royal decrees, religious practices, or major political events, with little mention of martial arts like Pencak Silat. When martial activities are referenced, they are typically described in a broad or symbolic manner, leaving out the technical details or specific practices that would offer deeper insights into the training and application of Pencak Silat. This gap in epigraphic records forces historians to rely on indirect references or interpretive approaches, which can lead to ambiguity or uncertainty regarding the art form's exact role during the Majapahit period.

Another challenge is the mythologization of historical figures and events in folklore. Pencak Silat, like many traditional martial arts, is often steeped in mythological narratives that blend history with legend. While these stories provide rich cultural context and offer insight into the values associated with Pencak Silat, they can obscure the factual history of the art form. Many accounts of Pencak Silat's origins are intertwined with religious or mythological figures, making it difficult to disentangle historical fact from symbolic storytelling. This challenge is compounded by the fact that many of these narratives were passed down orally, leading to variations in interpretation and embellishments over time.

The role of oral history is another double-edged sword in the study of Pencak Silat's past. On the one hand, oral traditions have preserved valuable knowledge about the practice and evolution of Pencak Silat, particularly in regions where written documentation was sparse. Oral histories can fill in some of the gaps left by epigraphic and literary sources, offering a more holistic view of Pencak Silat's significance in Majapahit society. On the other hand, oral accounts are often subject to the distortions of memory and time, with details altered, omitted, or exaggerated to suit local customs or political agendas. As a result, historians must approach these sources with caution, using triangulation methods to cross-reference them with other available evidence.

Triangulation with secondary sources, such as later historical texts or anthropological studies, provides a broader context for understanding Pencak Silat's development. While these sources may not offer direct information about the Majapahit period, they can provide clues about the martial traditions that persisted in the region over time. By comparing oral histories, folklore, and secondary analyses, scholars can reconstruct a more comprehensive picture of how Pencak Silat was practiced and institutionalized, even in the absence of detailed primary documentation. This method allows researchers to build a more nuanced understanding of Pencak Silat's role in Majapahit society, despite the limitations of the available sources.

In addition to the challenges of fragmented sources, the historical documentation of Pencak Silat is also complicated by the regional diversity of martial practices in Indonesia. While Majapahit is often cited as a key player in the formalization of Pencak Silat, the martial art existed in various forms across the Indonesian archipelago. Different regions developed their own styles and traditions, which were influenced by local cultures, belief systems, and political structures. As a result, it is difficult to isolate the specific contributions of Majapahit to the development of Pencak Silat, as the art form was likely shaped by multiple influences beyond the empire's borders.

In conclusion, the study of Pencak Silat's history during the Majapahit period faces numerous challenges due to the lack of detailed primary sources, the mythologization of historical narratives, and the reliance on oral traditions. Despite these obstacles, historians continue to piece together a broader understanding of Pencak Silat's development by triangulating epigraphic records, folklore, and secondary sources. While the exact details of Pencak Silat's role in Majapahit remain elusive, these combined approaches offer valuable insights into the martial art's historical and cultural significance.

Implications for Modern Pencak Silat Practices

The historical role of Pencak Silat during the Majapahit era has had a lasting impact on its modern-day practice, both as a martial art and as a symbol of Indonesia's rich cultural heritage. The influence of the Majapahit period is not only visible in the technical aspects of Pencak Silat but also in its philosophical and spiritual underpinnings. Today, Pencak Silat is practiced widely across Indonesia and beyond, with practitioners often drawing upon the values and principles that can be traced back to its origins in the Majapahit era.

One of the key legacies of Majapahit on modern Pencak Silat is the integration of philosophical teachings. The martial art is more than just a physical discipline; it embodies a set of ethical and spiritual values that emphasize self-control, respect, and balance, mirroring the teachings that were institutionalized during the Majapahit period. Ediyono et al. (2023) points out that modern practitioners still embrace the notion of inner harmony and discipline that were central to Pencak Silat's role in the Majapahit court, where martial prowess was seen as a reflection of both personal virtue and loyalty to the state.

The spiritual dimension of Pencak Silat, which was formalized under Majapahit rule, remains integral to its practice today. This aspect is evident in the ceremonial aspects of Pencak Silat, where rituals and symbolic gestures honor the tradition's deep historical roots. Modern practitioners often see Pencak Silat as a pathway to both physical mastery and spiritual growth, an approach that echoes the dual emphasis on martial and ethical development during the Majapahit era. The connection to spirituality is often highlighted in contemporary schools of Pencak Silat, where training not only focuses on combat techniques but also on mental clarity, self-reflection, and inner peace.

Furthermore, the legacy of Majapahit's political structure has left its mark on the organizational and institutional aspects of modern Pencak Silat. The centralized nature of Majapahit's governance, which helped formalize Pencak Silat as a state-sponsored practice, laid the groundwork for the establishment of national organizations that govern the art form today. These organizations, such as the Indonesian Pencak Silat Association (IPSI), play a crucial role in preserving, promoting, and regulating the practice across the archipelago. This centralization ensures that Pencak Silat retains its status not only as a traditional martial art but also as a symbol of national pride and cultural identity.

In the broader socio-political context, modern Pencak Silat continues to serve as a unifying force in Indonesia's diverse society. During the Majapahit era, Pencak Silat symbolized the strength and unity of the empire, reflecting the political cohesion that was necessary for maintaining control over a vast and multi-ethnic territory. In contemporary times, Pencak Silat still functions as a cultural bridge, fostering a sense of shared identity among practitioners from various regions, ethnic groups, and backgrounds. Its role in national celebrations and cultural festivals highlights Pencak Silat's ongoing significance as a cultural heritage that transcends local divisions and reflects the unity of Indonesia.

Additionally, modern Pencak Silat has evolved to address contemporary challenges, such as global competition and the preservation of cultural identity in an increasingly interconnected world. The international recognition of Pencak Silat, particularly through its inclusion in international martial arts competitions and its listing as UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage, demonstrates the enduring relevance of this ancient tradition. However, it also raises questions about how Pencak Silat can maintain its traditional values while adapting to global standards of competition and performance.

The tension between preserving its cultural roots and evolving as a competitive sport is a key consideration for modern practitioners and organizations.

In conclusion, the historical role of Pencak Silat during the Majapahit era continues to influence its modern practice in multiple ways. The philosophical and spiritual elements that were formalized during Majapahit's reign remain central to the art form today, reflecting the continuity of tradition. Moreover, the socio-political implications of Pencak Silat, both as a symbol of national identity and a tool for cultural diplomacy, illustrate its enduring legacy in modern Indonesia. Despite the challenges posed by modernization and globalization, Pencak Silat remains a vital link to Indonesia's past, while continuing to evolve in response to contemporary realities.

CONCLUSION

Pencak Silat during the Majapahit era was more than just a martial art; it represented a manifestation of the political, spiritual, and cultural power that flourished in the kingdom. Through Pencak Silat, Majapahit not only reinforced its military and political identity but also established a tradition that endures today as an integral part of Indonesia's cultural heritage. Majapahit's success in integrating this martial art as a tool of political control and a symbol of power has made Pencak Silat not just a historical legacy, but a medium of unity that transcends time. In the modern era, Pencak Silat continues to carry the philosophical and spiritual imprints of the past, demonstrating how this martial art adapts while maintaining its cultural roots. Thus, Pencak Silat, as a legacy of Majapahit, serves as a reflection of history, identity, and national pride, remaining relevant in the face of contemporary global challenges.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT THE USE OF GENERATIVE ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

The authors acknowledge the use of ChatGPT (<https://chatgpt.com/>) to refine the academic language and accuracy of our work. On 26 September 2024, the authors submitted several paragraphs with the instruction to "Improve the academic tone and accuracy of language, including grammatical structures, punctuation and vocabulary" and "Please check the English grammar and make corrections where possible to improve the readability of the text." The output (here) was then modified further to better represent our tone and style of writing. This acknowledgement has been approved by the editorial team of this journal.

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