Introduction

Tales of the lives and deeds of legendary exponents abound in the myths and folklore surrounding Pencak Silat, and are common currency in the oral histories of the art passed on from teacher to student. Si Pitung, the folk hero of Jakarta and the scourge of the Dutch colonial oppressors, was said to be able to thwart his enemies and evade capture with the aid of magical abilities (van Till 1996). Mas Djakaria, a renowned champion in Banten in West Java in the nineteenth century, was widely held to be invulnerable (Kartodirdjo 1984: 4–5). Accounts of Pencak Silat champions and the incredible feats attributed to them are retold in the literary genre of ‘Silat stories’. The heroes of these novels – characters of great martial prowess – make use of their supernatural abilities as they engage each other in combat (Gartenberg 2000; see also Suryadinata 1997). More recently, in productions for Indonesian television, heroic characters do battle with the forces of evil, employing their martial skills in combat and their magical abilities to fly through the air, shooting great bolts of energy form their fingertips in a contest that inevitably results in the maleficent villains of the tale soundly defeated by the morally upstanding heroes.

A salient feature of the public discourse on Pencak Silat is the possession of knowledge, or ilmu, through which these supernatural abilities manifest in these powerful individuals. In Java the search for knowledge and wisdom through attachment to a guru was seen as part of a young man’s progression to adulthood. This often involved apprenticeship to a ‘local djago – a practitioner of the magical arts, an expert in pentjak (the Javanese art of self-defence), and an adept of the esoteric ngèlmu kedotan (science of invulnerability)’ (Anderson 1972a: 5). These practices, of which the ‘science of invulnerability’ is part, are commonly referred to as ‘inner knowledge’ or ilmu batin, and encompass a corpus of ascetic techniques which are said to engender in the adept extraordinary abilities, or kesaktian. While ilmu may be glossed as ‘knowledge’, and indeed gained through the study of texts, it may also be acquired through asceticism, revelation, the learning of mantra, passages from the Qur’an, or transmitted via spiritual agency (Wessing 1978; Woodward 1985). Other terms¹

¹ For the sake of consistency here, I use ilmu batin throughout as a term that encompasses these other forms of knowledge.
used in reference to mystical or esoteric knowledge include *ilmu ghaib* (knowledge of the invisible realm), *ilmu klenik* (occult knowledge), and *ilmu dalam* (inner knowledge).

*Kesaktian* is formed from the root *sakti*, and, as I explained in Chapter 3, has been commonly glossed as ‘potency’, or construed as some form of cosmic or supernatural power concentrated in an individual or place. As I argued looking at the role of the elders in Cimande village, and following Hildred Geertz (1995), *kesaktian* might also be glossed as ‘efficacious’. Further, drawing on Holbraad (2008), I suggested that actions and events that might be construed as *kesaktian* are better understood as ontological operations rather than epistemic claims about the world. In this regard, translating the root word *sakti* as ‘efficacy’ is not necessarily at odds with glossing the term as ‘potency’ – both imply, in English, a capacity to affect the world in some way. The issue is however that thinking of *sakti* as power – in the sense of concentrated energy, cosmic or otherwise – is suggestive of individual or bounded agency. As evident in Cimande, the elders, through their actions and communication with the ancestors, actualize the locality as a spiritually effective or efficacious place, and operationalize the agency of the ancestors. Agency is thus complex, overlapping and extended, and cannot be reduced to the individual. Focusing only on the substantive aspects of power, on power equated with potency, there is a danger of missing a very obvious strategic transformation in the body’s relationship to power in more modernistic Pencak Silat schools, and the broader insight this grants into the workings of power in Indonesia.

This being said, *sakti* has long been associated with aspects of masculine spiritual power, and can be used to denote male sexual potency. The term is implicitly gendered (Brenner 1998: 147–149; Hatley 1990: 180–182), and especially so in martial art spheres where those held to be *sakti*, often on account of their invulnerability, are predominantly male. However, while *sakti* is linked to conceptions of masculinity, it can also be the site of the contestation of gender hierarchies, as Bianca Smith (2012) shows in her account of members of female militia groups in Lombok. As she puts it, it is through the ‘potent embodiment’ of *ilmu* that these women are considered *sakti* (2012: 256), and held to be great ‘warriors’, or *pepadu*, the protectors of the physical and spiritual wellbeing of the community ‘because of the bravery, aggression and vigour they signify and for their skill in spiritual warfare’ (2012: 261). In line with local conceptions of female bodies, female *pepadu* are held to be more potent than their male counterparts, and thus transcend power relations in which they are

---

2 See however Wessing (1997) for an account of the female as the locus of power in mythological accounts of *sakti*. 