CHAPTER 4

Gendang Silat: Observations from Stong (Kelantan) and from Kuala Penyu (Sabah)

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First Case: Kampung Stong

The tradition of silat in the small village of Stong, where it is performed as a wedding performance, is not as strong as in some other places, where certain silat schools dominate. Strong silat schools usually have an indicative repertoire of special movements, music and an individual ideological mindset, which are often added to the general interpretation of silat as an art of attack and self defence.

Kampung Stong is a village that has only existed since 1966, so musicians who live here gained their skills and knowledge before they migrated to the interior. They learnt from different teachers, and their skills in accompanying silat were developed through contact with various silat schools which performed in the coastal area of Kelantan. In Stong, these musicians have been able to re-define their role in village life and develop their own musical style. While some of the young men and women¹ perform silat to develop skills and techniques to compete with groups from the east coast, the musicians do not have competitive aims. Musicians strongly prefer “Seni Silat Cantik,”² – silat as “Beaux Arts.” To them, qualities other than athleticism, effectiveness, and competitive strength are important. The musicians are concerned with the creation of a pleasant, holistic performance, and the satisfaction of a well educated audience.

My chapter will focus on some selected observations of the musicians regarding their musical communication and their apparent understanding of gendang silat. One of the most remarkable elements is the rhythmic application of various patterns and the relatedness between melodic articulation and movements.

¹ In Stong, some young women learn to perform silat, before they get married. They follow the same rules as men. They can drum as well, but they do not perform as musicians.
² In this chapter foreign words are given in Bahasa Melayu (= BM) or Bahasa Melayu Brunei (BMB) unless otherwise stated.
Short History of Kampung Stong

Kampung Stong is named after Gunung Stong, where the Jelawang waterfall is situated. At 305 metres in height, Jelawang is the highest waterfall in Southeast Asia. The story of Kampung Stong is not yet written, but Mohammad Daut bin Awangah, one of the first inhabitants and the former village head, together with five other families from Pasir Mas, could frame the key milestones. Population growth near Kota Bharu in the 1970s made life very uncomfortable especially in Pasir Mas as farmland was insufficient and already depleted. During that time, a former logging company led by Chinese businessmen from Gua Musang offered land to those settlers who wanted to farm the land around the lumbered areas. The settlers built houses and streets along the riverbanks, and the area became connected with the railway route from Kota Bharu to the South.

In the past, the closest station was Dabong – seven hours’ walking distance over jungle trails. In the early 1970s, a gravel street was built but bridges followed only in the late 1980s. These bridges served the new D29-road to Gua Musang and Raub crossing the Gunung Stong State Park.

Until 1974 the area was dominated by communist forces, which were composed of Malay and Chinese soldiers. Their absolute control over the new settlers was demanded with daily headcounts of workers, guests and family members. Since 1976, the national Government forces has taken over and re-organised administration and the communists were caught, chased out of the country, or killed.

In the second wave of settlement after 1970, Hassan bin Mat arrived – a multitalented musician from Kampung Mengketil Machang near Pasir Mas. Besides gendang silat, he plays rebab as well as all kinds of drums used for main puteri, wayang kulit and makyong. Furthermore, he is a well-known instrument maker in Kelantan. In 1984, the family of Yusoh arrived with his three sons Demaran, Ismail and Ramli, who all became musicians taught by Hassan and co-educated by musicians who crossed the area from Pahang to Kelantan and back. Ramli, the youngest, is a good serunai player and the serunai maker of the whole district. Many people consider him to have magic skills as he is able to catch fish with his bare hands. Hassan, Demaran, Ismail, and Ramli are the four main musicians who form the core unit of most of the traditional events in Kampung Stong. They are teaching their sons and other relatives. Other than in the urban areas, they use very little audio-visual equipment. Today, more than 20 practising musicians live in Kampung Stong, all of them farmers by profession.