CHAPTER 7

**Pencak Silat Seni in West Java, Indonesia**

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**Music for the Fight**

The Sundanese of West Java have developed a form of fight-dancing called *pencak silat seni*. Small orchestras comprising percussionists and a woodwind player accompany exhibitions of *pencak silat seni* with sounds and motifs that mimic the performer’s movement. Musical accompaniment is rare in training but common during rehearsals for an upcoming presentation. *Pencak silat seni* was developed through aristocratic modes of sponsorship during the colonial period. After independence, the genre became affiliated with nationalist ideologies and today is a regular feature at regional and national events.

In his research about Sundanese popular dance, Spiller describes the expectation that movement is animated by musicians as an aesthetic related to the “social relationship between dancer and drummer – an aristocrat and a hired servant, respectively” (2010:73). In the embodied practice of *pencak silat seni*, the relationship between music and movement is a historical artefact that has become formalised through competitions and reinforced through the economic relationships between movement artists and musicians. While Sundanese dancing is described as “a masculine pursuit in much the way that sports are in the Western world” (Spiller 2010:36), both men and women participate in contemporary *pencak silat seni*.

Fighting arts throughout Southeast Asia have travelled variously through Buddhist, Hindu and Islamic channels (Barendregt 1995; Gartenberg 2000; Pätzold 2000; Pätzold 2008; Wilson 2002). The nationalisation of *pencak silat* in Indonesia, however, has led to a downplaying of foreign influences (Wilson 2002:35), such as those from China, India, Mongolia, Persia, Turkey, Tibet, Japan, Korea and Europe (Gartenberg 2000:30). “Pencak Silat is a compound word” (Notosoejitno 1997:1) that refers to the authentic martial arts of the Indo-Malayan archipelago. *Pencak silat* practitioners consider it to be a sport, an art, a form of combat training, and a tool for mental and spiritual development. The artistic form is officially called “*pencak silat seni*” and is based on the fighting techniques of *pencak silat* and often accompanied by music. In conversation, the title “*pencak silat seni*” is often abbreviated to “*pencak silat*,” or sometimes just “*pencak*.” “Silat” is also a generic and widely encountered term.
for martial or fighting arts in post colonial Indonesia (Gartenberg 2000:18). As with much of the Indonesian language, the context drives the meaning.

Pencak Silat Panglipur is a Sundanese school of pencak silat seni that teaches and performs a style of pencak silat from the West Java regions of Cikalong, Cimande, and Wanayasa. The school is prestigious and attracts a large number of local students of all ages, both male and female. A prominent figure in this school is Haji Uho Holidin, a performance artist in his seventies who lives in Bandung, West Java (see Figure 7.1). He is a senior teacher in a branch called Pencak Silat Panglipur Pamager Sari. With an experienced eye, Haji Uho actively surveys and monitors the progress of students. Training usually takes place after Isha prayer on Tuesday nights at a performance space near his home. Devoted students also schedule their own training sessions in their respective suburbs. At training, Haji Uho teaches movements and explains their functions, urging students to understand the intent of each movement so that their performances are both meaningful and attractive. Younger students model their performances on Haji Uho’s moves, which are still graceful and powerful despite his age.