Adaptation of *Silek* and *Randai* for Performer Training in the USA: A Case Study of the Asian Theater Program at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa

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In the last two decades cross-cultural exchanges between Asian and US theatre artists, multicultural productions, and workshops have become commonplace in the US and abroad. Along with this proliferation, questions about cross-cultural learning, about cross-cultural understandings and misunderstandings are continuously being raised and refined. How can one shape and guide the complex process of learning a foreign theatre genre? How do we translate language, customs, cultural values, musical conventions, martial arts philosophies, and theatrical expression so that the process is mutually beneficial for participants and audiences, and also creates performances with high production standards? The *Asian Theatre Program* at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa (UHM) has a long history of hosting distinguished Asian performing artists for lengthy residencies during which theatre, dance, and music students learn a specific Asian dance-drama genre in intensive 6–12 month training programmes. In the years 2001 and 2005 the chosen genre was Indonesian *randai* theatre, which was taught by master teachers from West Sumatra to students in the Department of Theatre and Dance.¹ Another such programme was completed in 2012. I will provide a brief background on *randai*, *silek*, and the Asian Theatre Program at UHM, and outline the teaching process.

Background: *Randai* and *silek* in West Sumatra

*Randai*² is the traditional folk dance-drama of the Minangkabau people of West Sumatra, Indonesia, based on well-known local folk tales and epics, local

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¹ In this chapter foreign words are given in *Basa Minang* (= BMin) unless otherwise stated.
² See Kartomi (1981), Nor (1992), and Pauka (1998) for detailed background information on *randai*. 
musical traditions, and martial arts. Randai in its current form emerged in the early 20th century, evolving out of three pre-existing local performance traditions: storytelling (bakaba), folk singing (dendang), and indigenous martial arts (silek). One particular feature of silek training, the circle, is of particular importance and became the structural foundation of randai. Many local silek schools employ a circular formation called dampeang⁢³ in their training process. The teacher in such a circular silek training session demonstrates silek steps and moves as part of the circle while students observe and copy his movements directly or indirectly, depending on where in the circle they are positioned in relationship to the teacher. Often they will follow other students who have a direct line of vision to the teacher, or, on a higher level of skill, they will intuitively move “with the circle” as a whole. Developing this ability to sustain a ‘wide focus’ in the circle is an intentional and important aspect of the training. It furthers competence in detailed observation, correct imitation, and quick anticipation. Practitioners are training their ability to see ‘out of the corners of their eyes’ and in the long run develop a reliable sixth sense, a vital skill for any martial artist – and performer. Leading the circular martial dances in randai performances is a tukang goreh (“master of shouts”) who leads the other dancers; he/she also uses vocal cues to guide the flow of the synchronised movements. Besides the circle formation, the basic building blocks of the movement repertoire of silek have been integrated into randai dances and acting technique, and typically reflect the locally prevalent silek style of the area in which the randai group is resident. Another, easily visible and prominent element influenced by silek is the clothing. Traditional silek pants have been adapted for randai theatre by making them wider and lengthening the loose fabric between the legs all the way down to the level of the ankles. These pants, called galembong, can be stretched by kicking up a leg, thus providing a taut surface. When the performers slap this surface with their hands they produce a drum-like, booming sound. This unique and exciting type of pants-slapping is called tapuak galembong (tapuak for short) and constitutes the signature feature of randai theatre.⁴ The tapuak is performed along with the silek moves, which are accompanied by songs. Tapuak also mark transitions between dances and acted scenes. Dances and scenes alternate, often over many hours of the night. In the scenes actors speak in rhymed verse, frequently improvised

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³ The term dampeang in randai should not be confused with the same term as it appears in the luambek, another movement art closely related to Minangkabau silek. For the discussion of the dampeang in luambek, see Pätzold (2008:96–102), and the chapter by Kamal & Mahjoeddin in the present book.