

BOOK REVIEW

Martial Arts and the Body Politic in Indonesia

Lee Wilson

Leiden and Boston, 2015

258 pages \$97 / £59

Good anthropological research involves going into the field, making observations, and utilizing data to make an argument. Where possible, scholars read and reply to previously published work so as not to reinvent the wheel, avoid making the same mistakes, and respond to established findings. It is in these terms that I approached *Lee Wilson's Martial Arts and the Body Politic in Indonesia* [2015].

Unfortunately, Wilson exhibits zero knowledge of the vibrant and emergent field of martial arts studies and his book adds little to any of this field's emerging debates. Moreover, the style displays a kind of clunky artifice throughout, which makes it feel as if the book were the product of a postgraduate student lost in a maze of endless obscure academic references. Perhaps the book might have been more impressive had it delivered significant original results. Unfortunately, originality is difficult to locate in this chaotic assemblage. Several of the chapters have been published elsewhere, in part or in full, and the author has simply mashed them together in this book, with little consideration for developments in the field or relevant literature.

The book is mostly based upon (recorded?) interviews, punctuated by multisided participant observation gathered during 17 months in 2002-2003 (with occasional subsequent visits until 2013) [21]. A local research assistant and friend knowledgeable in the ways of *silat* accompanied Wilson for an unspecified amount of time. I suspect the account would have been more interesting had the assistant (key informant?) been allocated more ink.

Wilson's stated aim is 'to explain why Pencak Silat, as both fighting art and system of spiritual cultivation, has figured so conspicuously in Indonesian society and political culture' [3] – a task he attempts across six chapters. The first chapter, however, entitled 'From Out of the Shadows', is a lost opportunity. For instance, Wilson has either not read or not bothered to respond to *Shadows of the Prophet* [Farrer 2009]. 'The Management of Tradition' details the organizational structure of Ikatan Pencak Silat Indonesia (the Pencak Silat Association of Indonesia, or IPSI). But there is no account of the fighters in competition *silat* or *olahraga*. Indeed, overall, *Martial Arts and the Body Politic in Indonesia* would perhaps have been better entitled *The Oral History of IPSI: 1948-2003*.

In these pages, Indonesia is mostly conceived as a political entity divided between center and periphery, Jakarta and Cimande village, Java and Sunda, rather than considered in discrete geographical or culturally-bounded areas. A cradle of *silat*, Sumatra, in this account may as well not exist. The 'body politic', 'community', or 'common body' is utilized principally as a rather clumsy metaphor redolent of certain 1980s genres of academic writing. Conspicuous by its absence, there is no discussion of more recent work in phenomenology or embodiment. Equally

REVIEWER

D. S. Farrer is associate professor of anthropology at the University of Guam. He edited War Magic: Religion, Sorcery, and Performance [2016], co-edited Martial Arts as Embodied Knowledge: Asian Traditions in a Transnational World [2011], and authored Shadows of the Prophet: Martial Arts and Sufi Mysticism [2009].

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problematic is the fact that, whenever the author actually gets around to describing 'martial arts', we merely encounter a rather thin cameo description of Javanese and Sundanese varieties of *penca* and *silat*, including Setia Hati, Cikaret, Betawi, Syabandar, with a few details reserved for the supposedly 'peasant' or village style of Cimande.

However, the final chapter, entitled 'Sovereign Bodies and the Practicalities of Power' (although another borrowed concept), does provide some interesting material on organized violence in the overthrow of the Suharto regime in 1998. Unfortunately, by this stage, Wilson has abandoned any serious discussion of martial arts. Rather, he claims that the 'gist' of his argument is that, 'in subjectivities cultivated in IPSI and modern Pencak Silat schools, interpersonal relations and diffuse agency are circumscribed by a bounded individualism in which the state assumes prominence as the guarantor of spiritual well-being' [170]. As such, the title *Martial Arts and the Body Politic in Indonesia* amounts to a triple misnomer for a rather inadequate journey not through the subject announced in the title but rather through certain Western sociological and anthropological conceptions of power.

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