

# PRACTICAL FIGHTING STRATEGIES OF INDONESIAN KUNTAO-SILAT IN THE WILLEM REEDERS TRADITION

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# Practical Fighting Strategies of Indonesian Kuntao-Silat in the Willem Reeders Tradition

by Michael DeMarco, M.A.



*"They Met in A Clearing"* (1982), PAINTING BY MICHAEL LANE DEPICTING HIS BROTHER TOM LANE WITH TIM SHERRANGE. • [www.golfandsportsbylane.com](http://www.golfandsportsbylane.com)

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## Abstract

This article offers a glimpse of how cultural streams from India and China contributed over centuries to native Indonesian fighting arts to form hybrid systems. General references were used to provide the historical background. To illustrate the unique traits of *kuntao-silat*, specific published materials on Indonesian combatives were utilized, and examples were derived from personal observations of practitioners in the Willem Reeders lineage. Additionally, a technical section of *kuntao-silat* applications is included. This research on *kuntao-silat* combatives offers insights into the original intent and practices of any highly efficient combative art.

## Introduction

What fighting arts are found in Indonesia? Do they have distinguishing traits that we can recognize as unique to that geographic area? Since the Republic of Indonesia is a country that comprises 17,508 islands and is home to over 230 million people, we can be certain there are numerous styles to bewilder any researcher. However, when looking at the variety of Asian martial art styles, there are a few characteristics that may help us distinguish which are Indonesian. Helpful guidelines can be derived from historical and geographical perspectives as well as combative body postures that seem to have been molded by centuries of social norms.



The following pages offer a very brief look at Indonesia's historical development and general features that may have contributed to its unique repertoire of martial art styles. The present understanding among the average reader is limited by the lack of publications about Indonesian martial arts, as well as the scarceness of qualified teachers living outside Indonesia. One important pioneer in bringing Indonesian martial arts to the United States was Willem A. Reeders (1917–1990). This short article is a very humble attempt to present aspects of Reeders's teachings as indicators of the general state of Indonesian martial arts, how and why they are taught, and the general curricula. A technical section illustrates not only fighting techniques, but also the physical and mental traits that have permeated Indonesian culture in general.

## Historical Elements in Indonesian Martial Arts

The world's fourth-most-populous country is blessed with abundant natural resources and has been a center of international trade for over two thousand years. Many ethnic groups came into contact with varying degrees of social mixing. Immigrants from India and China made major cultural contributions to Indonesia. For example, Buddhism and Hinduism mixed with native animism (Wilson, 1993). Muslims from India brought their religion also. Today the country is home to the largest Muslim population in the world. Many immigrants came to work and a large number became leading merchants. Of course, those with financial power played a growing part in the area's local and regional politics.

Europeans were drawn to Indonesia for the spice trade during their "Age of Discovery." The Portuguese were first, arriving in 1512, and the British and Dutch soon followed. The Dutch came to dominate much of the area now known as Indonesia from 1603 to 1949. It wasn't until World War II that circumstances ended Dutch rule. Since Japan invaded and occupied Indonesian islands during the war, and The Netherlands had to focus its energies on postwar rebuilding at home, the resulting strains forced the Dutch to eventually recognize Indonesian independence.

The brief overview presented above indicates the complex nature of Indonesian society. In all, there are over 300 ethnic groups in Indonesia that have contributed to a multicolored cultural tapestry. The resulting fabric possesses a mesmerizing beauty, but also includes inherent tensions stemming from social diversity among the numerous ethnic, cultural, and linguistic groups. Warfare and social disturbances have occurred across the lengthy archipelago in different times and locations over the centuries. Within each social layer the presence of martial arts can be found.

## Research on Kuntao-Silat

Cimande, Pencak Silat, Bakti Negara, Cikalong, Harimau, Serak ... a long list of terms can describe Indonesian martial art styles. Some styles were named after particular masters, animals, locations, or associated combat terms. Major styles have branches, and branches have offshoots. The easiest way to classify Indonesian martial arts is to demarcate them into the two main categories: 1) *silat*: the indigenous martial arts, and 2) *kuntao* (Mandarin, *quandao*; "fist/boxing ways"): styles of Chinese origin.

Immigrants from China came to Indonesia over many centuries. Some Chinese fled to Southeast Asia as northern Chinese dynasties brought their power into southern China. Others came for work opportunities, and many

became leading businessmen and traders. The waves of immigrants included boxing masters, a number of whom were enticed by wealthy merchants to teach Chinese and help protect their business establishments. There are still strong social ties among Chinese-Indonesians; however, social relations between them and native Indonesians remain strained to this day.



REEDERS WITH HIS UNCLE, LIU SIONG.

Kuntao styles bear resemblance to a number of styles from the Chinese mainland, especially those from the south, such as Shaolin styles of White Crane, Five Animals, etc. Time has allowed Chinese and native Indonesians to build better relationships—through friendships, intermarriages, and business relationships. In turn, this affected the martial arts’ development with pure Chinese styles mixing in varying degrees with native Indonesian styles.

Native Indonesians also had a longstanding need to protect their interests, and martial arts permeated their culture from the village level up. Their styles are greatly influenced by ancient animistic beliefs and practices, along with complementary Hindu and Arab beliefs and practices (Wilson, 1993; Farrer, 2009). The resulting cultural blending can be seen in the number of physical arts, especially in dance and theater (Pauka, 1986, 1998, 1999, 2003).

Many combative postures are low to the ground, in part because it is likely that combat would take place on slippery terrain. Indonesia is situated along the equator and is nearly all tropical with long monsoon seasons. Fighting on slippery terrain would necessitate that combatives styles include practical postures allowing one to fight on the ground, as well as provide a flowing continuity between ground and standing postures and vice versa (Davies, 2000). Low postures and ground fighting skills are also practical elements in kuntao-silat’s fighting strategy.

Regarding Indonesian martial arts as an academic subject, books and articles of scholarly quality have been sorely lacking, especially compared with martial traditions of China, Japan, and Korea. Indonesian fighting arts have been secretive for centuries, and only in recent decades have there been substantial recordings made on film, in print, and in digital formats. In the early 1970s, Draeger, Alexander, and Chambers presented a glimpse into the martial arts of

the archipelago through their books in English. However, no doubt because of the Dutch period of colonization, some of the best writings on kuntao-silat have been published by Europeans who have studied and lived in Indonesia. For example, Dr. Hiltrud Cordes wrote her doctorate dissertation (1990) on *Pencak silat*. Dr. Kirstin Pauka's dissertation (1999) on Randai theatre was published in CD-ROM format, and she was responsible for the U.S. debut of silat-based Randai theater of West Sumatra (2003). A recent example is Dr. Douglas Farrer's scholarly work dealing with the Muslim Sufi mysticism and silat (2009).

Of course, there is a growing amount of writings on websites about kuntao-silat, but most of it is presented for promotional reasons and is lacking in objectivity and accuracy. Oftentimes materials presented take the reader further from the truth than closer to it!

### **Migration and the Spread of Kuntao-Silat**

There is a large number of martial art practitioners spread throughout the Indonesian archipelago. A relative number are highly skilled, but their names may not be well-known outside their own locale. For fame and honor, there were formerly regular challenge matches, often including weapons. Some masters have gained reputations much like gunfighters in the American "Wild West." Over the centuries, fighting traditions were passed from generation to generation, usually within a family lineage or within a clan. Such arts continue to prosper today under similar conditions, while others are taking the modern route of commercializing kuntao-silat, bringing a few masters international acclaim.

Recent decades have seen a growth of kuntao-silat schools and associations in Indonesia. Ties established during the colonial period between the Netherlands and Indonesia contributed to the introduction and slow-growing presence of kuntao-silat in the Netherlands, where it later was spread into neighboring countries. However, by the mid-20th century, it was still very rare to see any martial art style from Indonesia performed publicly outside the archipelago. Writings on Indonesian styles were rare. What could be better to gain knowledge of kuntao-silat than seeing a master in action? Some practitioners began presenting their arts to the public, and taking on students.

A few Dutch-Chinese kuntao-silat practitioners from Java emigrated to the United States in the late 1950s and early 1960s, including Willem Reeders (1917–1990); three brothers, Paul de Thouars (1930–1972), Willem de Thouars (b. 1936), and Victor de Thouars; and Willy Wetzels (1921–1975). Their teachings and presentations brought some recognition of kuntao-silat to people in the United States and Canada.

## Willem Reeders's Early Teachings in Western New York

The following pages focus on the teachings of Willem A. Reeders (1917–1990). He moved to the Jamestown, New York, area in the mid-1960s and to Albuquerque, New Mexico, in 1972, where he opened the doors to many new students. In the 1960s most people in the United States were aware of karate and judo, but little else of Asian martial traditions. Stylistically, Reeders's system was a stunning contrast to the karate styles popular during that period. An objective for this article is to look at Reeders's teaching and practice in order to gain one perspective on Indonesian fighting arts that may offer some insight into kuntao-silat systems in general.

Reeders's teachings attracted a number of students from the Jamestown area at the far western corner of New York state. Jerry Bradigan was a longtime student who carries on Reeders's tradition in Fredonia, New York. Marilyn Feeney carries on his teaching in Albuquerque. Others studied with Reeders in Jamestown and also in Erie, Pennsylvania. Noted first-generation students from the Erie area include Raymond Cunningham (1928–2008), Arthur E. Sykes (1934–2008), Richard Lopez (b. 1933), Harry Zimmerman, Ed "Tiny" Sealy, Ed Carter, and Robert Servidio. One of the most respected of Reeders's students is Mr. Servidio, noted for his highly advanced level in the system, as well as his upright character.

What did Reeders teach? Ask his longtime students and their answers vary. According to Reeders's students, his main influence came from his grandmother's brother, Liu Seong, who moved to Indonesia from China. Uncle Liu taught young Willem the family gongfu system. In addition, Reeders studied a number of kuntao and silat styles, plus Shotokan karate and Kodokan judo. From his rich trove of combat skills, he taught different techniques to different students, and changed curricula over time and locations.

Because many were familiar with Japanese martial art terminology, Reeders and students often mixed Japanese terms with unfamiliar Indonesian and Chinese terminology. Many students, unaware of Asian history and language, misinterpreted much. Intentionally or unintentionally, Reeders himself was responsible for passing on inaccuracies regarding the history of what he taught and where his techniques originated. To this day, second- and third-generation practitioners often repeat hearsay as fact, many times adding their own embellishments. Others note the inconsistencies, mistranslations of foreign terms, and hyperbole, and simply state that they cannot clearly separate the fact from the fiction.



WILLEM REEDERS.

*Photo courtesy of R. Lopez.*

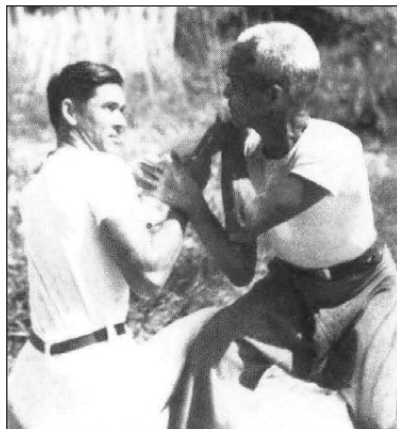


ERNST DEVRIES, LIU SIONG, AND WILLEM REEDERS  
PRACTICING KUNTAO ON THE ISLAND OF JAVA.

*Photo courtesy of Richard Lopez.*







REEDERS  
WITH HIS  
UNCLE,  
LIU SIONG.

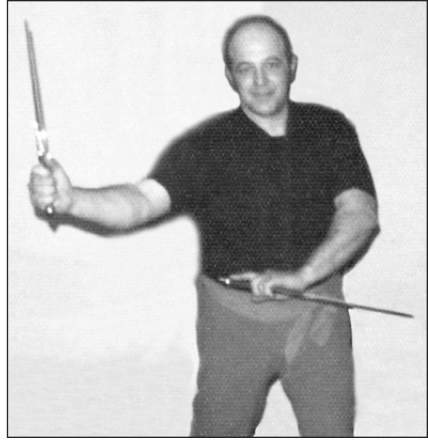
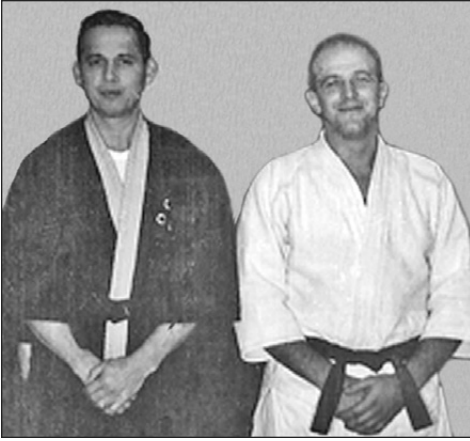
*Photo courtesy  
of Richard Lopez.*

What proves certain is that Willem Reeders taught a variety of styles. As a Dutch-Chinese living in Indonesia, his studies were primarily Chinese-based kuntao styles, but included training in native Indonesian silat styles as well. From his technical repertoire, he taught whatever he wanted. Students may not have known what style they were studying; all they knew was that Reeders was a superb fighter with something special to teach.

### **First-Generation Representatives: Arthur Sykes and Richard Lopez**

In 1965 my introduction to the martial arts came through Arthur “Sonny” Sykes. My friend and classmate at the time was Thomas Pepperman, one of Sykes’s most senior students. I worked out with Tom regularly for a few years. Classes with Mr. Sykes were never regular, but they were always insightful. This period was important for me because it brought a reality of

what combatives were designed to do. Performed at a high level of skill, kuntao-silat is fluid, yet powerful and devastating. Practice was sweaty, interesting, and fun. I appreciated the gesture when Tom presented me a green belt, which was originally given to him by Sykes. Unfortunately, Sykes’s classes were not always on a schedule, and became even more irregular.



REEDERS & RICHARD LOPEZ. • LOPEZ PRACTICING WITH TJABANG, EARLY 1970S. HE MADE MANY TJBANG ACCORDING TO REEDER'S STYLISTIC SPECIFICATIONS. *Photos courtesy of R. Lopez.*

On a warm summer day in 1971, I went to a car wash and needed change. I asked a guy if he had some quarters for a dollar bill. His name was Richard "Dick" Lopez, and he recognized my family name and knew my relatives. Turns out he was one of the earliest from the Erie area to study with Willem Reeders. When we met, Lopez was teaching kuntao-silat in a small studio behind the home of another Reeders student, ex-marine Raymond Cunningham (1928–2008). He invited me to visit his school.

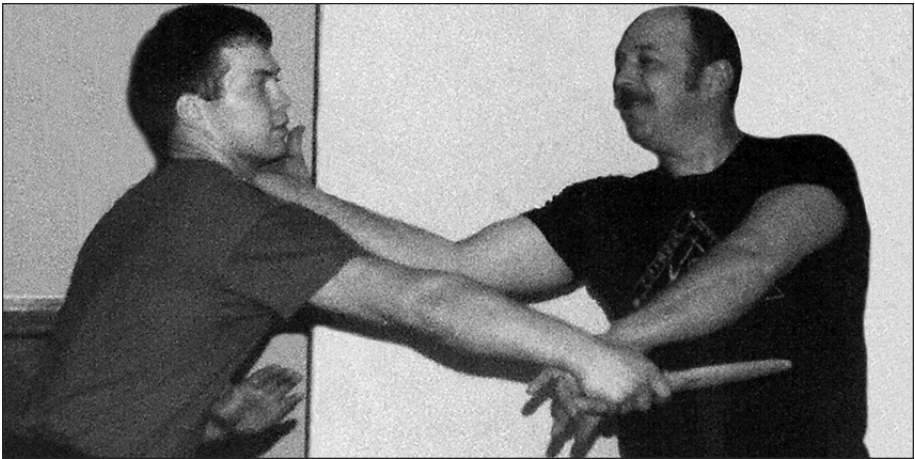
As it turned out, Lopez was a gem of a martial artist and, more important, proved to be a man of rare character. I can call him a true friend for life. He began his studies with karate and judo in Erie, Pennsylvania. His judo skills benefited by studies in Germany while he was serving in the military. When he returned to the United States, he heard that Willem Reeders was teaching judo and karate in Jamestown, New York. Lopez went to meet him, was impressed with his judo, and traveled weekly to study with him. They developed a good friendship through their joy of judo practice and humor. When Reeders decided to stop teaching judo and start teaching kuntao, Lopez decided to study the new curriculum. Others followed Lopez to study with Reeders.

Lopez would take my kuntao-silat studies to a higher level, but more important, he was a living example of what martial arts entailed, technically and theoretically. Although I chose not to wear any belts, he presented me with an orange sash (black belt level). The sash is valuable to me, not as any symbol of rank, but for what it specifically means coming from this person I respect. It represents a part of Lopez's own tradition.

Lopez was well trained. He would teach—showing what he learned and explaining where the techniques came from—but he always would point out the limits of what he was absolutely sure about regarding style, technique, and history.

Sykes and Lopez both studied closely with Reeders. When in Erie, Reeders often stayed at the Lopez home. As first-generation students, Sykes and Lopez eventually started teaching, and the methodology used was the same that Reeders taught them. Most classes focused on learning the movements in a technique and its application, and perhaps some variations. Students individually practiced the movements repetitively for most of the class time. The same techniques were later practiced with a partner, repeated for months until the techniques became fluid. Speed intensified and control became more and more precise. Few forms were taught, but there was a lot of sparring. Reeders was quite fluent with a variety of weapons, a favorite being the *tjabang* (Japanese, *sai*) (Dohrenwend, 2002). However, it seems he shared only part of his repertoire with selected students.

Lopez kept the same type of teaching regimen as Reeders, while Sykes changed over the years by embellishing whenever he liked. For example, he created a number of routines from the individual techniques he learned from Reeders. In “karate tournaments” during the 1960s, Sykes would state the kata’s name—which he had just made up—and then spontaneously perform for judges. If asked to repeat the routine, of course he’d opt to perform a different one! Very creative.



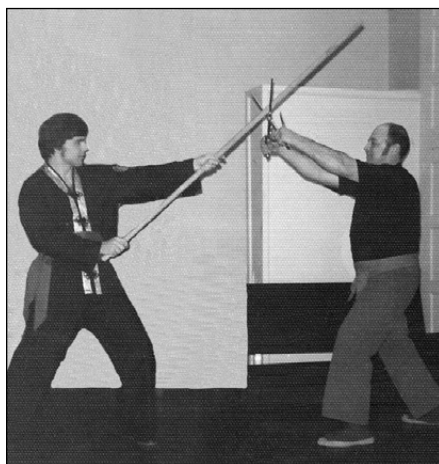
RICHARD LOPEZ COUNTERING HIS STUDENT PETER PJECHA'S KNIFE THRUST BY UTILIZING KUNTAO PRINCIPLES. EARLY 1970S. *Photo courtesy of R. Lopez.*



WILLEM REEDERS WITH RICHARD LOPEZ. THIS PHOTOGRAPH WAS TAKEN WHILE REEDERS WAS VISITING JERRY BRADIGAN IN WESTERN NEW YORK STATE IN THE LATE 1990S. *Photo courtesy of R. Lopez.*

The common thread in Reeders's teachings—clearly exemplified through the way Sykes, Lopez, Cunningham, and Pepperman were teaching—is practicality. Theory and practice had one objective, which was to devastate an opponent or opponents as quickly and severely as possible. Lopez said Reeders often referred to his methods as “dirty fighting.” There was nothing nice or compassionate about them. There was little pushing or restraining, but there were plenty of finger strikes to the eyes, throat, and groin areas. Blocks were usually not simply blocks, but were employed to break bone or cripple. Neck, vertebrae, and joints were targeted for quick breaks. Defense and attack blended into one concept where the mind and body moved spontaneously as needed.

The following technical section presents a few examples of Reeders kuntao-silat as taught by Sykes and Lopez.



LOPEZ INSTRUCTING THE AUTHOR (TJABANG / STAFF). PHOTO TAKEN INSIDE RAY CUNNINGHAM'S STUDIO IN THE EARLY 1970S. *Photo courtesy of R. Lopez.*

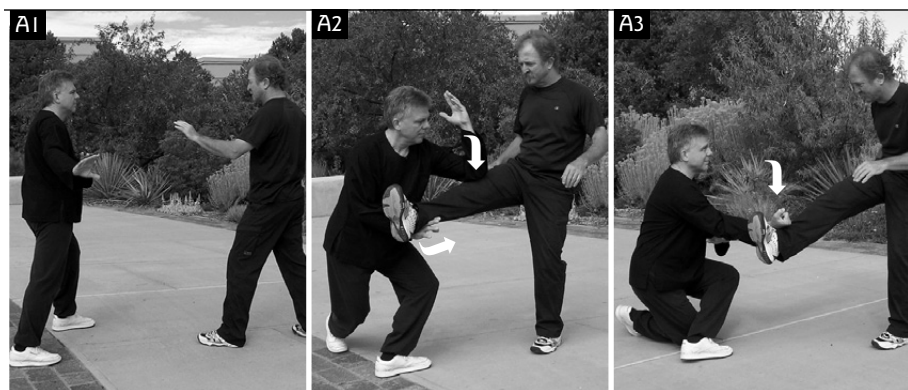
## Technical Section

The goal for a kuntao-silat practitioner is to end any confrontation quickly. Combative encounters are not prolonged exhibitions of skills, as so commonly shown in the movie industry. Two fundamental guidelines for Indonesian systems are to evade any attack and to incapacitate the attacker. In most cases, one can evade an attack by moving the body away or turning at angles to deflect or neutralize the opponent's movement. Incapacitating an attacker is usually accomplished by attacking soft vital areas, such as the eyes, ears, throat, groin, and joints. Highly skilled masters evade and attack simultaneously at lightning speed.

## Defenses against a Front Kick — Stepping to the Outside

**A1** The defender steps into an open guard position with his stance spread to the left and right. **A2** As the attacker kicks, the defender moves his right arm counterclockwise to circle under the kicking leg while shifting onto the left foot, turning the body, and bringing the right foot behind. (In full movement, catching the kicking leg in an upward movement will cause the attacker to lean backward.) Just as the right hand catches the kick's upward movement, the left arm moves clockwise to elbow strike, breaking the knee.

**A3** An alternative to the above technique is to circle the right arm clockwise as the body shifts left and turns into the crouching posture. As the body sinks, the right backfist comes downward on the attacker's shin, making the attacker off balance and potentially fracture the tibia.



## Defense against a Punch — Stepping to the Outside

From an initial face-to-face standing position, the attacker throws a right punch. **B1** The defender steps with his left foot to the outside of the attacker's arm at a 45-degree angle while simultaneously blocking the attacking arm at the elbow and letting his right leg follow the 45-degree angle movement. The right foot does not touch the ground, but immediately reverses direction.

**B2** As the right leg sweeps backward, the right palm swings upward to strike the attacker's jaw. Following through with the coordinated sweep and palm strike would cause the attacker to slam to the ground. The palm strike can break the neck.



## Against a Punch

**C1** The defender steps outside the line of attack, moving his right arm clockwise to meet the attacking arm with his forearm and smoothly sliding down to grasp the opponent's wrist. His left arm simultaneously follows to break the elbow.

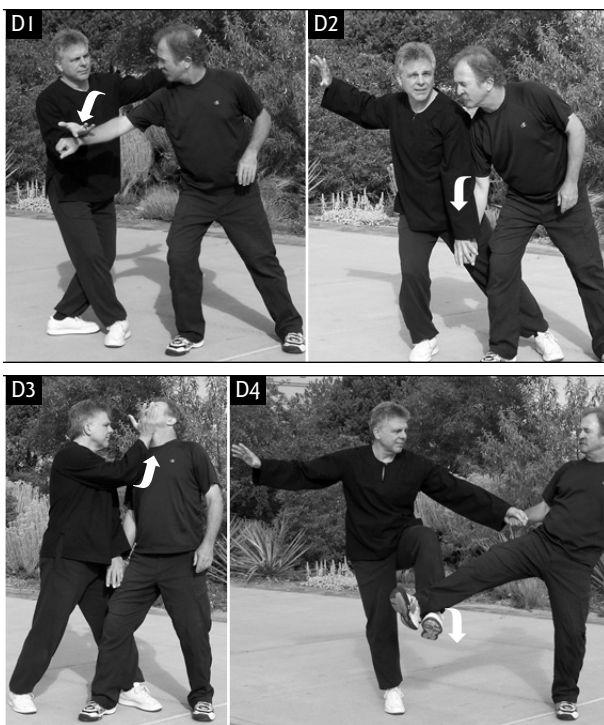
**C2** The defender immediately turns his body right, moving his left arm to his right side, then **C3** shifts toward the attacker with an elbow strike to the ribs, which **C4** causes the attacker to bend forward into a backfist.



## Against a Punch

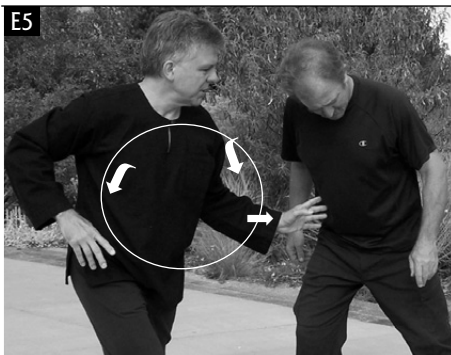
**D1** The defender first steps outside the line of attack with his left foot and turns right, bringing his right hand circling down on the attacker's arm. **D2** The left arm follows the same circular path, sliding down the attacker's arm to secure the fist. The momentum pulls the attacker's head downward, and he instinctively draws his head upward, exposing his throat.

**D3** The defender reverses movement, turning left and striking with his palm. **D4** He follows with a leg reap, which would cause a fall.



## Defense against a Punch — Stepping to the Inside

**E1** The defender steps into an open guard position with his stance spread to the left and right. His weight is mostly on his left leg. **E2** As the attacker strikes, the defender shifts onto his right leg as he turns his waist left, bringing his right arm to circle toward his left shoulder, flowing with the incoming strike, but keeping it safely to the side. **E3** The right hand continues to circle slightly downward as the left arm circles upward against the attacker's arm. This frees the right hand to strike the attacker's face or eyes, causing the head to tilt backward. **E4** The left hand also continues to circle downward and flows into a midsection strike, **E5** followed by a palm strike to the groin.



## Wrap Around

In the case of confronting multiple attackers, a simple guideline is to move where there is the least danger.

**F1** An attacker readies to strike. The defender observes the surroundings.

**F2** As the punch is executed, the defender steps slightly back and to the right side.

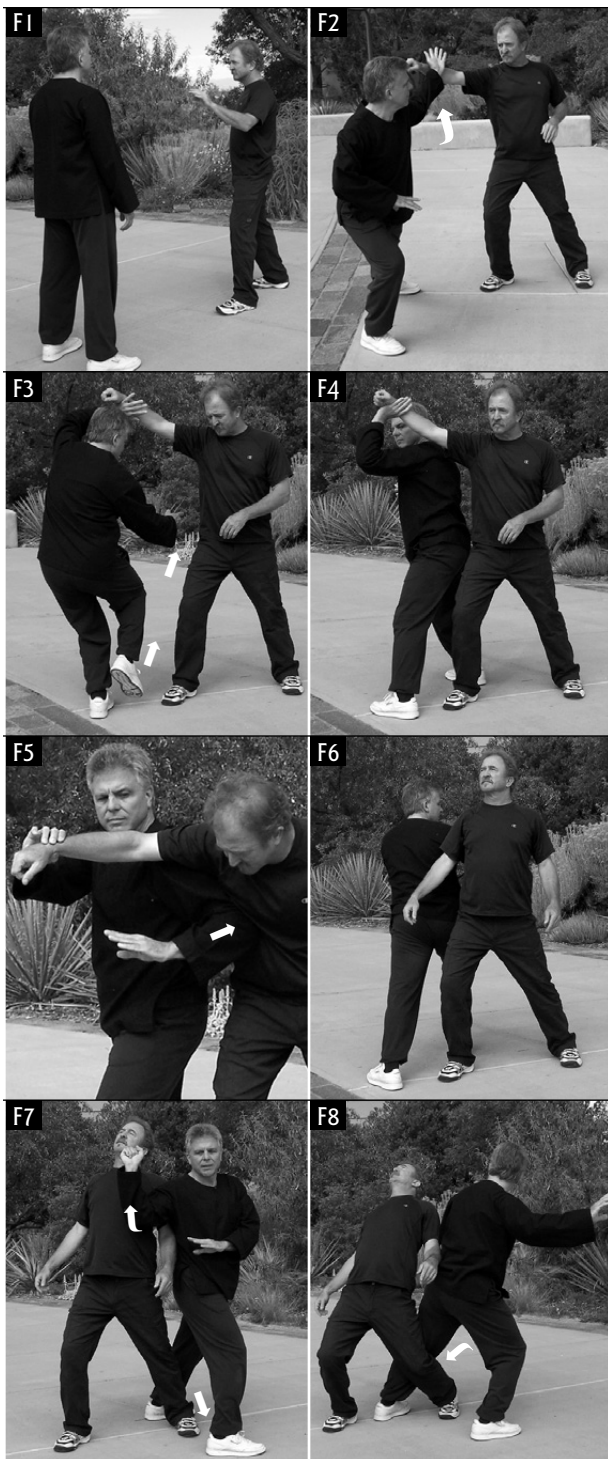
**F3** Seeing another potential attacker approaching from the right, the defender swiftly moves to the left, underneath the striking arm. He thus uses the attacker as a barrier between himself and the other potential attacker.

**F4** While he moves close to the attacker and turns his shoulders left, the momentum brings his left elbow into the attacker's midsection.

**F5** The defender reverses direction to the right, bringing in another elbow strike to the attacker's back.

**F6** While shifting slightly left, the defender turns his body right, letting his right foot pivot on the heel before stepping with his left foot behind the attacker.

**F7-8** The defender then steps to the side with his right foot allowing a backfist strike, reverse, and leg reap.





## Thoughts on Kuntao-Silat

At the start of this article, we asked what traits distinguish kuntao-silat from other Asian martial arts. The natural starting point for this inquiry is Indonesia's geographic setting as the crucible where kuntao-silat developed and where it was nurtured through contributions from three main cultures: 1) native, 2) Indian, and 3) Chinese. Considering that this archipelago includes hundreds of islands and many ethnic groups, there has been a history of strife at the village and regional levels for nearly two millennia. Over the centuries, the sociopolitical pressures among groups made martial art study a priority.

The ancient native culture included animistic beliefs and a physical regimen that suited the Southeast Asian body type and lifestyle in the equatorial tropics. Sufi mysticism from India, as well as Chinese Daoist beliefs, blended to give kuntao-silat unique psychological tools that infused their fighting arts. An example is how the mesmerizing music of a gamelan ensemble can enhance the hypnotic, deathly dance of a Pukulan silat practitioner. Actually, kuntao-silat is often practiced with musical accompaniment.

The practice of Chinese Animal Styles was animated by the very presence of dangerous and cunning animals living in the Indonesian jungles, such as the fierce sun bear, Komodo dragon, Sumatran tiger, and numerous species of snakes and monkeys. Chinese kuntao mixed with silat, and both no doubt were also tinged with theories and practices from India, such as the fighting art of kalaripayattu.

All people living on the Indonesian islands have blended a variety of cultural streams to form their own unique identities. Martial artists in Indonesia manifested their arts with differences, much the way that faces of members in one family reflect their own identities. Indonesian martial arts are largely individualistic hybrid styles containing elements of body movement found also in Indonesian-style dance and theater.

When we look at any form of kuntao-silat, we see movement inspired by a deepseated mind-set which is also unique to the archipelago. This deals with the survival instinct and a physical and psychological need to possess a highly practical fighting art. For example, those of an indigenous group called the Dayak in Kalimantan province on Borneo were famed headhunters. Their trophies remind us that the origin and purpose of martial arts were focused on life and death realities of combat. Such arts are not practiced for sport and will never gain great popularity.

As author, I can only write from my own experience with kuntao-silat. Here we looked briefly at the teachings of Willem Reeders as viewed through my

studies with Arthur Sykes and Richard Lopez, contacts with others familiar with Reeders, and with some supporting published books and articles dealing with kuntao-silat. It is apparent that Reeders and many Indonesian martial art masters studied with a variety of teachers and mixed styles into their own hybrid systems. The de Thouars brothers certainly did this too.

Most martial art systems are not as neatly organized with detailed lineage scrolls as those found in Japan. On the contrary, it seems most combative arts have developed ad hoc, infused by experts through fateful circumstances. Generally, Indonesian kuntao-silat systems do not have reliable documentation for their history and evolution. It would be interesting and insightful to have access to details regarding family histories, lineages, reports on how kuntao-silat was utilized over the centuries, and precise overviews of all physical and mental practices associated with particular systems. However, many details are not necessary. What does the art itself exhibit? Effectiveness is the only yardstick for measuring a truly combative system.

In the case of kuntao-silat, we can see and feel the highly effective fighting techniques in the many styles found in Indonesia. We can learn more about the individual styles: Cimande, Pencak Silat, Bakti Negara, Cikalong, Harimau, Serak, etc. Learning even a little about such arts will certainly prove insightful for those practicing and researching other Asian styles that have either lost their original combative foundations or have focused on other aspects, such as health, sport, or entertainment.

In addition to its near-mystic mental states, distinguishing traits of kuntao-silat can be seen in its beautiful, dancelike fluidity of movement; human imitation of animal stances accompanied by panther clawing, gorilla striking, evasive monkey stepping, and snake-darting finger strikes. All such traits organically combine in kuntao-silat styles to embody radar sensitivity to spontaneously face any realistic combative situation.



## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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