

The Significance of Silat as Intangible Heritage among Malaysian Youth: A Review

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ABSTRACT

Silat, a traditional martial art deeply rooted in Malay heritage, is more than just a form of self-defense, it embodies values, rituals, philosophies, and community identity. Recognised by UNESCO in 2019 as part of Malaysia's intangible cultural heritage, Silat faces a significant challenge: declining interest among the younger generation. This literature review investigates the cultural and social importance of Silat among Malaysian youth by synthesizing past studies, theoretical perspectives, and revitalization efforts. Drawing from cultural identity theory and social constructivism, the review explores how Silat serves as a medium of cultural transmission, self-expression, and identity formation. It also highlights barriers such as modernization, urban lifestyle changes, and competing global influences that contribute to the marginalization of traditional practices. Despite these challenges, various stakeholders—including educational institutions, cultural agencies, and digital influencers—have begun initiatives to revive youth interest in Silat. This paper concludes that preserving Silat requires an integrative approach that aligns cultural heritage with youth relevance in the 21st century, ensuring that this treasured tradition continues to thrive across generations.

Keywords: Silat, Intangible Cultural Heritage, Malaysian Youth, Cultural Identity, Heritage Preservation

INTRODUCTION

Silat, a traditional Malay martial art, represents the spiritual, cultural, and philosophical qualities of the Malay people and is more than just a method of self-defence. A significant part of Malaysia's intangible cultural legacy, Silat is frequently performed during ceremonies, rituals, and group gatherings. Silat was added to the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2019 due to its importance (UNESCO, 2019). Silat is a national identity symbol and an art form that embodies virtues like discipline, honour, respect, and spiritual strength (Hashim & Mat Zin, 2020).

But the relevance of traditional rituals like Silat has been called into question more and more in the face of globalisation and digital modernity, especially among young people. Because they grew up in a time when social media, global entertainment, and digital consumer culture predominated, the younger generation frequently views traditional arts as obsolete or useless (Yusof, 2018). Silat's generational transmission is in danger due to this alienation, which also puts the practice's cultural knowledge, values, and identity at risk of disappearing.

Young people actively contribute to the definition and remaking of cultural meaning rather than being passive consumers of it (Hall, 1996). Consequently, it is essential to comprehend the significance of Silat in the lives of young Malaysians in order to maintain legacy and guarantee its continued relevance, continuity, and development in modern society. In order to critically analyse the significance of Silat as an intangible legacy among Malaysian youth, this literature study will explore national strategies, theoretical frameworks, and previous scholarly work.

The assessment will specifically examine the ways in which Silat serves as a platform for social interaction, cultural expression, and identity building. Additionally, the study explores the difficulties of sustaining youth interest in Silat, and the tactics used by different stakeholders to bring it back to life and keep it relevant. The paper's scholarly investigation adds to larger conversations on cultural sustainability and youth involvement in heritage conservation.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

It takes a multidisciplinary theoretical approach to comprehend the significance of Silat as an intangible cultural legacy among Malaysian youth. This literature evaluation is based on two major frameworks: Cultural identity theory and social constructivism.

Social constructivism, which has its roots in Vygotsky's (1978) work, holds that shared experiences and social interactions shape cultural practices and knowledge. Through rituals, community meetings, and mentorship between masters (guru silat) and pupils (anak silat), cultural knowledge including movement, symbolism, ethics, and values is passed down through the generations in the Silat setting. Based on the strength of these social systems, this paradigm explains how cultural legacy is either strengthened or maintained (Nasir et al., 2017).

Second, Cultural Identity Theory investigates how people develop a feeling of self awareness and belonging by exploring their cultural ties (Hall, 1996; Ting-Toomey, 2005). Engaging with Silat can strengthen a young Malaysian's sense of national pride, Islamic faith, and Malay heritage. Young people's identities are shaped by the symbolic connotations of Silat, which include honour, humility, and resilience. This is especially true in multicultural settings when traditional values are challenged by global influences (Abdullah & Manaf, 2021).

When evaluating how Silat is spread and why it is still (or is not) relevant to young people today, both frames are essential. Additionally, they provide a prism through which to view how societal forces like the media, education, and policy support or undermine cultural continuity.

Silat as an Intangible Cultural Heritage

A traditional Malay martial art, silat is much more than just combat; it is a representation of social principles, spiritual teachings, historical memory, and cultural values. Silat is transmitted orally from one generation to the next, frequently through informal learning environments, social customs, and the interactions between gurus (masters) and murids (students) (Hashim & Mat Zin, 2020). Silat is usually performed with ceremonial greetings, ritualistic gestures, and gendang silat (a traditional percussion ensemble) to strengthen spiritual alignment and community cohesion (Nasir et al., 2017).

Silat was added to the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity and granted official recognition by UNESCO in 2019. In addition to being a martial heritage, silat is a social activity that fosters respect for one another, community cohesion, and cultural continuity, according to UNESCO (2019). Its importance as a living legacy that captures the character and outlook of the Malay-Muslim population in Malaysia and other Southeast Asian countries is shown by its widespread recognition. Silat is a storehouse of ancient wisdom and indigenous knowledge, according to several academics. According to Zainal and Rahman (2016), it incorporates adab (ethics), akhlak (morals), and rohani (spirituality), all of which are essential components of Malay-Muslim epistemology. Silat is situated within the larger tradition of Islam and Malay adat (custom) due to its emphasis on self-discipline, humility, respect for elders, and spiritual introspection (Shamsudin & Ibrahim, 2018). Together, these components establish Silat as more than just a martial art; it is a system of cultural instruction.

Additionally, Silat is a performative cultural expression that has various regional styles, each of which has a distinctive historical, geographical, and philosophical background. These styles include Silat Gayong, Silat Cekak, Silat Lincah, and Silat Harimau (Yusof & Zahari, 2019). These variances enhance the cultural fabric of the country while also reflecting regional variety. Scholars warn that the homogenising effects of urbanisation and contemporary media representations, which frequently oversimplify or commercialise ancient behaviours, jeopardise this diversity (Abdullah & Manaf, 2021).

As a martial art, spiritual path, performance heritage, and national identity symbol, Silat functions as a diverse cultural asset. One of the most important steps towards Malaysia's cultural sustainability is the recognition and protection of it as intangible cultural treasure.

Silat and Youth Identity Formation

For Malaysian adolescents, particularly those in the Malay-Muslim community, silat is essential to the development of their cultural and individual identities. Heritage customs like Silat play a crucial role in helping young people reconnect with their cultural roots in a multicultural and globalised culture where they are being exposed to more Western media, urban materialism, and secular lifestyles (Abdullah & Manaf, 2021; Yusof, 2018). In addition to providing physical training, Silat provides a comprehensive set of morals, ethics, and identity expression based on Islamic and Malay customs.

Participation in Silat by young people offers a platform for identity performance and negotiation. It enables young practitioners to spiritually, emotionally, and physically embody their cultural heritage. Youth internalise aspects of Malayness (Kemelayuan) and religious values like adab (manners) and ukhuwah (brotherhood) through the ceremonies, movements, and standards of behaviour ingrained in Silat. These factors help them comprehend themselves and society (Hashim & Mat Zin, 2020). Thus, Silat is a strategy to oppose cultural homogenisation and to build cultural identities.

Studies have indicated that youth who participate in Silat experience an increase in self-discipline, confidence, and social belonging (Kadir et al., 2019). These social and psychological advantages are especially important for teenagers adjusting to the demands of contemporary life. Furthermore, Silat promotes a sense of purpose and pride in tradition, which helps combat youth disenchantment. Traditional activities like Silat serve as "cultural anchors" for young people who are struggling with identity confusion in rapidly changing surroundings, according to Nasir et al. (2017).

Nonetheless, the degree to which Silat shapes a young person's identity is contingent upon their cultural, societal, and personal circumstances. Since they have less familial or communal links to the custom, some urban or multiethnic youth may not find Silat to be as meaningful. Some people could think it is less important or better than more international martial arts like mixed martial arts (MMA) or taekwondo (Yusof, 2018). Repositioning Silat as a contemporary and empowering cultural asset rather than an outdated custom is the difficult part in these situations.

With hybrid cultural manifestations, some young people have started to reimagine Silat by fusing traditional movements with modern music, fashion, or even internet media. These modifications demonstrate that legacy can change while preserving its essential principles and illustrate the fluidity of culture (Zainal & Rahman, 2016). As a result, Silat's influence on young identity is constantly contested across platforms and generations.

Challenges in Transmission of Silat to Younger Generations

Despite its historical significance and cultural richness, Silat has a difficult time effectively being passed down to the next generation. Concerns about diminishing young engagement, deteriorating intergenerational knowledge transfer, and waning interest in traditional practices have been voiced by both academics and cultural practitioners (Yusof, 2018; Zainal & Rahman, 2016). These difficulties are complex, involving societal, structural, and perceptual obstacles.

Perceived irrelevance is one of the main problems. Many young Malaysians, especially those living in cities, think that more international sports and martial arts like taekwondo, karate, or mixed martial arts (MMA) are more entertaining, more modern, or better than Silat (Kadir et al., 2019). Media representations of old traditions that frequently ignore or exoticize them instead of incorporating them into modern storylines serve to support this view. As a result, Silat finds it difficult to compete with contemporary recreational pursuits that are viewed as more exciting, fashionable, or pertinent to one's job.

The absence of integration into official educational systems is an additional obstacle. Co-curricular Silat programs are offered by some schools and universities, although they are sometimes underfunded, have untrained teachers, or are viewed as secondary possibilities in comparison to sports with more obvious competitive pathways and state sponsorship (Nasir et al., 2017). Youth involvement with Silat is still primarily informal and irregular in the absence of institutional support and incentives.

Disconnection within the family and the community also plays a role in the decline. In the past, elders or local gurus in close-knit communities were usually the ones to introduce Silat. Many young Malaysians today reside in metropolitan areas with less communal links and no longer have access to or activity in traditional knowledge bearers (Hashim & Mat Zin, 2020). Many young people are ignorant of or estranged from their heritage as a result of this breakdown in intergenerational transmission.

Youth priorities have also changed due to lifestyle changes and economic pressures. A lot of young people prioritise activities that provide instant pleasure or financial gains due to growing academic obligations, competitive job markets, and digital diversions (Yusof, 2018). In the fast-paced life of today's youngsters, silat, which calls for sustained dedication and intense cultural absorption, could appear unfeasible.

Lastly, the dissemination of Silat information is further hampered by its lack of digital adaption. While online platforms have been rapidly adopted by martial arts around the world for training and promotion, Silat is still under-represented in digital media, particularly in Gen Z-friendly formats like YouTube Shorts, TikTok, and gamified apps (Abdullah & Manaf, 2021).

Innovative youth-centered approaches that harmonise ancient values with contemporary platforms, institutional frameworks, and lifestyle trends are needed to address these issues.

Revitalization Efforts

Several revitalisation initiatives have been started by government agencies, cultural organisations, academic institutions, and individual practitioners in response to the decreasing transmission of Silat among young people. These initiatives seek to reframe Silat as an important part of Malaysia's cultural economy, youth development, and national identity in addition to being a martial tradition.

In order to raise public awareness and promote Silat as a national heritage asset, the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture (MOTAC) and Jabatan Kebudayaan dan Kesenian Negara (JKKN) have held public showcases, contests and workshops at the national level (JKKN, 2020). Such efforts gained a lot of impetus from UNESCO's 2019 designation of Silat, which confirmed its worldwide significance and promoted financing for cultural preservation projects (UNESCO, 2019).

Many schools and institutions of higher education in Malaysia offer Silat as an elective co-curricular activity through initiatives like Kadet Remaja Sekolah (KRS) and Program Silat Lincah and Cekak in some institutions. However, here are big differences in how it is implemented. With the help of student groups and yearly performances, some universities, like Universiti Malaya and UiTM, provide official instruction and cultural courses in Silat (Nasir et al., 2017). These programs give young people an organised way to get involved and aid in redefining Silat as a cultural and intellectual endeavour.

The utilisation of popular culture and the media is another successful revitalisation technique. To incorporate the art into popular narratives, local filmmakers have incorporated Silat into action films and television dramas (such as *Gerak Khas* and *Upin & Ipin: Keris Siamang Tunggal*) (Yusof & Zahari, 2019). Young people view Silat as thrilling, current, and cinematic because of these portrayals. There is, however, a dearth of more focused content for social media sites, particularly TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram, indicating potential for digital storytelling by Silat practitioners and influencers.

In order to draw in young audiences, a few cultural activists and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have started holding hybrid performance events, online webinars, and Silat festivals. These occasions frequently blend street art, contemporary music, inspirational speeches, and traditional Silat displays, resulting in a blend that

appeals to Gen Z sensibilities (Abdullah & Manaf, 2021). There are also new youth-led Silat groups that use digital media to disseminate lifestyle material, short videos, and lessons that include Silat into personal identity, fashion, and fitness.

All of these revitalisation initiatives are promising, but more cooperation and creativity are required. A multimodal approach is necessary for sustainable participation, incorporating Silat into community initiatives, schools, social media, and even policy development centred on youth well-being and cultural education.

DISCUSSION

The literature review emphasises how Silat serves as a traditional martial art and a means of expressing cultural identity, particularly for young people in Malaysia. It is clear from social constructivism and cultural identity theory that Silat serves as a socially embedded practice that creates and transmits identity markers, values, and customs (Vygotsky, 1978; Hall, 1996). Even Nevertheless, Silat's strong symbolic meaning is waning, primarily as a result of shifting cultural landscapes and younger generations' shifting interests.

It is significant to mention that one important takeaway from the literature is that young people look for ways to make legacy and modernity work together rather than rejecting it altogether. The opposition isn't against Silat in general, but rather against antiquated teaching strategies, a dearth of media representation, and inflexible institutional frameworks that don't effectively involve youth (Yusof, 2018; Kadir et al., 2019). This shows that Silat can continue to be a useful forum for young people's identity development and social cohesiveness with the right modifications.

Additionally, young people who are looking for a grounded sense of self in an increasingly digital and globalised society continue to find resonance in the symbolic significance of Silat, which stands for adat, Islamic ethics, and Malay identity (Hashim & Mat Zin, 2020). By grounding youth in local stories and common ideals, Silat can combat the effects of cultural alienation when delivered in inclusive, empowering, and innovative ways.

Crucially, initiatives for revitalisation like digital campaigns, school-based initiatives, and film representations indicate new avenues for re-engagement. But these endeavours need to be more than one-time events or ceremonial exhibitions. Collaboration between educators, cultural policymakers, community elders, youth organisations, and digital content producers is necessary for a sustainable approach. This multi-sectoral strategy will guarantee that Silat is developed into a vibrant, youth-driven cultural practice rather than just being maintained as a stagnant tradition.

It is relevant to note that the ability of silat to adapt without losing its core is ultimately what will determine its continued existence as an intangible cultural legacy. Our methods for conserving culture must be as dynamic as it is. Malaysian youth must be empowered to actively reinterpret and disseminate tradition rather than merely being viewed as passive inheritors.

CONCLUSION

As an intangible cultural heritage, Silat plays a vital role in shaping how Malaysian youth define their identity, values, and sense of belonging. The literature confirms its position as a cultural vessel infused with moral teachings, spirituality, and national consciousness, beyond its physical expression as a martial art (Hashim & Mat Zin, 2020; Abdullah & Manaf, 2021). However, processes of modernization, urbanization, and generational disinterest continue to threaten the continuity of this legacy.

Despite these challenges, Silat retains immense potential as a means of youth engagement and cultural renewal, provided it is recontextualized to resonate with contemporary sensibilities. Revitalization strategies such as integrating Silat into formal education, leveraging digital and social media, and promoting creative reinterpretations can help sustain its relevance (Nasir et al., 2017; JKKN, 2020). Importantly, young people must be empowered not merely as students or spectators but as co-creators and cultural transmitters, capable of reimagining Silat through their own cultural narratives.

Protecting and sustaining Silat therefore requires a holistic and collaborative framework one that balances tradition and innovation, community participation and institutional support. The preservation of Silat's future lies not in reverting to its past forms but in allowing it to adapt organically to the lived realities of Malaysia's younger generation. Through this adaptive process, Silat can continue to inspire pride, unity, and a renewed sense of cultural identity.

Future studies should explore how digital and creative media can be utilized to attract youth interest in Silat. Empirical research involving young participants would provide deeper insights into their motivations, barriers, and perceptions toward traditional practices. Furthermore, comparative studies across regions or between Silat and other martial arts both traditional and modern could enrich understanding of its cultural relevance, adaptive capacity, and educational potential. Such interdisciplinary inquiries will be essential in guiding policymakers, educators, and cultural practitioners to ensure that Silat remains a living and evolving tradition within Malaysia's rapidly changing cultural landscape.

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