

Silat Warriors as Malay Cultural Heroes

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Abstract. The unprecedented success of the film *Mat Kilau: Kebangkitan Pahlawan* and ongoing discussions about the cultural significance of Hang Tuah and Hang Jebat suggest that Malay Silat warriors continue to be seen as heroic figures among many Malaysians. This article examines this idea by considering the phenomenon of warrior heroes, in general, and the Tuah/Jebat story, in particular. The perennial question of which of the Melakan warriors who fought to the death was right is discussed, concluding that the answer is much more ambiguous than traditionally presented. The whole notion of cultural heroes raises questions about the context in which they emerged, the values with which they have been identified and the aspects of their lives and actions that are selectively constructed. This is true for Hang Jebat, whose celebrity seems to stand in stark contrast to his reported behaviour, and Hang Tuah, for whom popular recreations of his adventures typically omit large and significant parts of his epic journeys. Stories of heroes, I suggest, serve multiple functions, and to an interesting and, to significant extent, these stories can hold somewhat tenuous ties to the heroes themselves.

Keywords and phrases: Silat, martial arts, hero, Malay, Hang Tuah

Introduction

Mat Kilau: Kebangkitan Pahlawan (*Mat Kilau: The Rise of the Warrior*) (afterwards will be referred as “*Mat Kilau* film”) was released in June 2022. It quickly became the first Malaysian film to collect more than MYR1 million on its opening day of screening. It also outsold the Hollywood movies being shown in the country. It is currently the best-selling film in the history of Malaysian cinema (*The Star* 2022). *Mat Kilau* film tells the story of the eponymous *pendekar* (warrior) and nationalist hero who fought the British colonists in the Pahang uprisings between 1892 and 1894. Its success is credited with invigorating the floundering Malaysian “patriotic film industry”, leading the government to direct large amounts of funding

to support more films about Malay warrior heroes. Several commentators have attributed the film's impact to its ability to reinvigorate a sense of pride among Malaysia's largest ethnic group (Rizal 2022). Others have dismissed the film as nationalist propaganda (Palanisamy 2022).

The real Mat Kilau is one of a group of Malay warrior heroes celebrated by nationalist groups as role models for future generations. This article examines this phenomenon. While many countries memorialise their warrior heroes, I suggest their Malay counterparts maintain a degree of cultural currency and reverence that is unparalleled. Of course, there are non-combative Malay heroes, too, primarily heralded political leaders (Khoo Kay Kim 1979). Nevertheless, as the *Mat Kilau* film demonstrates, the cultural significance of great warriors continues in present-day Malaysia. I begin by considering these figures within folklore and the Malay tradition of warrior heroes. Attention then turns to the two pre-eminently memorable heroes, the Melakan warriors Hang Tuah and Hang Jebat and their changing roles in Malay culture. Finally, the article considers how the concept of a warrior hero has been co-opted for various ends and to different effects.

Warriors as Heroes

Mat Kilau film is the most successful example of a Malaysian "patriotic film" in recent years. Earlier films based on warrior heroes include *Sarjan Hassan* (1958), *Leftenan Adnan* (2000) and *PASKAL* (2018). The genre "speak(s) of loyalty and love for the nation, as of the duty and honour of sacrificing the personal, even one's life, for a larger cause" (Lim 2012, 94). The underlying presumption is that these films will promote nation-building and rouse the Malays to reclaim their former greatness. These films tend to promote the trinity of ideals of Malay-ness: *agama* (religion: Islam), *bangsa* (race: Malay) and *negara* (country: Malaysia) in an overtly muscular way. These themes are not restricted to the cinema. They can be seen in the values espoused by nationalist politicians who have held power for almost all of post-independence Malaysia and in history teaching in schools (Rusaslina 2016).

Local and national folklore continues to hold currency in Malaysian popular consciousness, as well as in literature and film (Khoo 2011). *Mat Kilau* film exhibits many of the characteristics of oral folk tales, which typically represent the perspectives of the lower classes. Traditionally, these are colourful tales of super-human figures performing extraordinary feats of bravery and contrast with *hikayat* (the stories written for the royal courts), which tended to be focused on and celebrate the exploits of the upper classes (Mohd Taib 1974). Folk tales are sometimes discussed as expressions of *adat* (local customs), considered Malay

but not Islamic (Nagata 1986). It is undoubtedly the case that *adat* can include mysticism, healing, magic, dance and martial arts that were current in pre-Islamic Malay states (Khoo 2011). This does not mean there was a conflict between these cultural practices and Islam. Malay *adat* has proved to be highly dextrous over time, absorbing the animism of the Orang Asli, the indigenous people of the archipelago, influences from China and India and the emergence of the “Animist-Hindu-Buddhist Religious Complex” (Aljunied 2019, 22) that dominated the region for centuries before the conversion to Islam in 15th century Melaka. The result was a folk culture that retained many of the features of traditional feudal society, with its shaman, healers and warriors but made complementary with Islam (Shaharuddin 2014).

The warrior-as-hero has been a running theme in Malay history for centuries. In colonial times, oppression calls forth heroes of resistance and rebellion. Heroes also have a role to play in the post-colonial world as emerging nations struggle to make sense of change. It has often been asserted that these heroes should be identified, celebrated and emulated because history is primarily about great people. The infatuation with the lives of great people (read “men”) can be traced back many years, but “nationalistic” history perhaps reached a peak in the years immediately after World War II and again in 1969 at the confluence of heightened ethnic violence and press announcements that Mat Kilau was still alive (Khoo Kay Kim 1979). One author listed 23 national heroes that included warriors who fought colonisers—Dol Said of Naning, Dato’ Bahaman of Pahang (Mat Kilau’s chief), Dato’ Maharaja Lela of Perak and Hang Tuah of Melaka—as well as great writers, scholars and leaders of the past. Another warrior frequently mentioned by politicians and journalists was Tok Janggut, leader of the 1915 rebellion in Kelantan (Razha 1990). The list of Silat¹ (martial arts) heroes could go on. A more comprehensive, albeit still partial, list of warrior heroes still heralded is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Famous Silat warriors, their states of origin and dates of the main activity

Name of the warrior	States of origin	Date
Hang Tuah	Melaka	15th century
Hang Jebat	Melaka	15th century
Hang Kasturi	Melaka	15th century
Hang Lekir	Melaka	15th century
Hang Lekiu	Melaka	15th century
Alauddin Riayat Shah	Melaka	15th century
Enrique of Malacca	Melaka	16th century

(Continue on next page)

Table 1. *(Continued)*

Name of the warrior	States of origin	Date
Raja Haji	Melaka	18th century
Mat Kilau	Pahang	19th to 20th centuries
Tok Gajah	Pahang	19th century
Datuk Bahaman	Pahang	19th century
Pawang Nong	Pahang	19th to 20th centuries
Panglima Muda Jempol	Pahang	19th century
Tok Raja	Pahang	19th century
Kampar	Kedah	17th century
Panglima Ismail	Kedah	17th century
Tengku Kudin	Kedah	19th century
Panglima Nayan	Kedah	19th century
Tunku Anum	Kedah	19th century
Tunku Muhammad Saad	Kedah	19th century
Wan Muhammad Ali	Kedah	19th century
Tok Janggut	Kelantan	19th to 20th centuries
Rentap	Sarawak	19th century
Rosli Dhobi	Sarawak	20th century
Syarif Masahor	Sarawak	19th century
Patinggi Abdul Ghapor	Sarawak	19th century
Datu Tating	Sabah	18th century
Syariff Osman	Sabah	19th century
Mat Salleh	Sabah	19th to 20th centuries
Pak Musa	Sabah	19th to 20th centuries
Embo Ali	Sabah	19th to 20th centuries
Si Bongkok Tanjung Puteri	Johor	19th century
Muhamad Salleh Perang	Johor	19th to 20th centuries
Kiai Salleh	Johor	20th century
Yamtuan Antah	Negeri Sembilan	19th century
Moyang Salleh	Negeri Sembilan	18th century
Dol Said	Naning	19th century
Dato' Maharaja Lela	Perak	19th century
Ngah Ibrahim	Perak	19th century
Dato' Sagor	Perak	19th century
Pandak Indut	Perak	19th century
Tuan Guru Hj Bakri	Perak	20th century

(Continue on next page)

Table 1. (Continued)

Name of the warrior	States of origin	Date
Syed Mashhor	Selangor	19th century
Paduka Seri Rama	Terengganu	17th century
Haji Abdul Rahman Limbong	Terengganu	19th to 20th centuries
Tok Ku Paloh	Terengganu	19th to 20th centuries

Of course, not all Malay heroes are warriors. Arkib Negara Malaysia has a department specifically dedicated to national heroes and politicians, and other civic leaders stand alongside Silat fighters. Nevertheless, the admiration directed towards warriors in Malay oral history is of a different degree and type than that given to other leaders. They are saviours.

The Malays do not hold a monopoly on warrior heroes. Campbell (1949) famously reported heroic mythologies worldwide, often sharing remarkably similar patterns beneath their narrative elements. From Odysseus to Aeneas, Beowulf to King Arthur and the Mahābhārata to the Ossetian “Nart” tales, epic heroes and their stories have represented the power of the human spirit (Miller 2000). However, these tales of ancient glories are typically viewed at a distance; they are told and remain in the past. They are presented as exciting memories of bygone days, not role models for modern descendants. Malay heroes are different. Famous warriors from the glory days of the Melakan court and the more recent opponents of colonial rule are presented to children and adults as role models deserving of emulation. Loyalty to a sultan or chief remains a potent symbol of cultural survival and identity, translating to patriotism and nationalism (Maier 1999). Muhammad Haji Salleh (2011) captures the spirit of the sustained relevance of warrior heroes in his introduction to his translation of *Hikayat Hang Tuah (The Epic of Hang Tuah)*:

While Hang Tuah has been present in the minds of the Malays for at least the last six centuries, he is still very much alive there today, as their symbol of self-sacrifice, achievement, patriotism and, not least, as the foremost symbol of their survival... Renewed passion for him and what he means surges to the surface when Malays feel threatened in one way or another militarily or even economically. (p. i)

The Story of Hang Tuah

The examination of warrior heroes begins, predictably enough, with Hang Tuah. It is predictable because Hang Tuah is, by far, the most recognisable cultural figure for the Malays, in particular, and Malaysians, in general. Hang Tuah was born in Sungai Duyung during the rule of the Melaka Sultanate in the 15th Century in

what is now Malaysia.² Shortly before his son's birth, his father had a portentous dream of the moon falling from the sky above the child's head, which inspired him to move his family to a *kampung* (village) near Bentan in pursuit of a better life. Significantly, this turned out to be the home of the *bendahara* (chief minister of the state). In Bentan, Hang Tuah met his four closest friends, Hang Kasturi, Hang Lekir, Hang Lekiu and Hang Jebat, and showed signs of extraordinary talents. The *Hikayat Hang Tuah* implies Hang Tuah and his fellows were of rural stock, poor peasants whose families worked the land. These origins stand in stark contrast to his later life.

His circumstances changed when Hang Tuah saved the *bendahara* from an amok.³ The new sultan of Melaka heard of Hang Tuah's exploits and instructed the *bendahara* to bring the five young men to the royal court. Their education continued when they were placed under the tutelage of the Javanese teacher and ascetic Sang Persata Nala, who taught them *ilmu ghaib* (mystical knowledge) of the art of being a physical and spiritual warrior. Returning from their training, the five friends found another amok in the marketplace, which they defeated. Before long, the friends were called to Melaka and appointed as *hulubalang-hulubalang* (military commanders-cum-bodyguards to the sultan). The young Hang Tuah exemplified the values of the Melakan royal court from an early age. He was humble, courteous and responsible, learned many languages, and studied the Quran and other spiritual teachings from several *lebai* (religious teachers). His outstanding personal quality, however, was his courage:

He is known for his extraordinary bravery and heroism. These are his qualities that always play an important role. He is not afraid of anything and cannot refuse a challenge to fight. It has become a principle of his life that he does not submit to any threats, even his own. And he cannot be stopped by any difficulties. (Kassim Ahmad 1966, 41–42)

Hang Tuah was a complete warrior, with a perfect physique, spirit and strategy. He and his companions trained to become highly skilled *pesilat* (martial artists), exceptionally competent with the *keris*, the distinctive knife of the Malay world. Together, the gang had many adventures and overcame adversaries, including pirates, Javanese warriors and marauders.

Hang Tuah became the sultan's favourite. He was entrusted with escorting the sultan's envoy to Majapahit in Java, the most powerful empire of the day and with being the representative of the sultan in courting the king of Majapahit's daughter. This was a risky journey, as Majapahit had long been the enemy of Melaka, but Hang Tuah succeeded through his courage and diplomacy. When he

revisited Majapahit, this time with the Sultan himself, for the marriage ceremony, the challenges were even more severe. Still, he managed to defend the travellers against amok and trickery. Hang Tuah defeated the greatest Majapahitan warrior Taming Sari in a duel and won his legendary and magical *keris*. The dagger, it was said, imparted *kebal* (invincibility) to its owner.

After shepherding the sultan back to Melaka, his reputation was further enhanced, as Hang Tuah was given the title *laksamana* (admiral). His fortunes did not last long, though, as fame and favour made him the target of jealousy and slander by the other court officials. Hang Tuah was wrongly accused of adultery with the sultan's favourite concubine and was sentenced to death by his incensed ruler. With unquestioning loyalty and equanimity, Hang Tuah accepted his fate, saying he "does not have two or three masters and he has no intention of going against his master" (Kassim Ahmad 1966, 169). Fortunately, the *bendahara* came to Hang Tuah's aid and sent him into hiding. Using his guile and magical knowledge, Hang Tuah eventually won back the sultan's trust, but the jealous officials again spread false rumours of his adultery. Hang Tuah was sentenced to death a second time. Once again, Hang Tuah's response was resignation: "Tuah has no intention to go against the master and I do not serve another ... total servitude is what I seek" (Kassim Ahmad 1966, 289). And once again, the *bendahara* hides Hang Tuah.

Hang Jebat, Hang Tuah's closest friend, took over the role of *laksamana* and was given the Taming Sari *keris*. Before long, he learned of his friend's unjust punishment and committed to avenging his death. He ran amok, killing anyone who came near him, eventually locking himself in the royal palace with several of the Sultan's favourite concubines. The *bendahara* told the sultan that Hang Tuah was still alive and he was granted an official pardon. He was then instructed to kill Hang Jebat. During the ensuing battle, the two warriors argued about their duty to their ruler and friends. Hang Tuah knew he had to kill Hang Jebat, but his friend would be invincible if he held the mystical *keris*. So, Hang Tuah managed to trick Hang Jebat and gain its possession again. He wounded Hang Jebat and left him to bleed to death.

The rest of the story follows the mature and decidedly less combative Hang Tuah as he becomes a diplomat representing Melaka's fast-growing trading and cultural centre, travelling on behalf of his sultan to far-off civilisations to secure agreements. Hang Tuah became famous again, this time as a skilled diplomat. He also visited many holy lands and was deeply affected by his experiences at the Muslim sites of Jeddah, Mecca and Medina. By his return to Melaka, Hang Tuah was an old man, but he could still defend his state against an attack by Portuguese colonisers. Eventually, though, the sultan, Hang Tuah and other senior ministers

left Melaka and settled down for a life of quiet contemplation. The Portuguese launched a second attack, capturing Melaka and the dynasty was exiled to Johor and then to Indonesia. The epic ends with Hang Tuah, still alive, disappearing into the forests of Perak and becoming the leader of the “forest people”, presumably the indigenous Orang Asli.

“Who was right? Hang Tuah or Hang Jebat?”

The fight between Hang Tuah and Hang Jebat is widely considered the central story of the epic of Hang Tuah (Ida Baizura 2010; Muhammad Haji Salleh 2011). Questions about the moral righteousness of the two Silat warriors have become a staple of school history lessons, Malaysian literature, children’s stories and cinema (Sohaimi and Rohaya 2012). Indeed, the most famous retelling of the story, P. Ramlee’s 1956 film, concludes with this question: “Who was right? Hang Tuah or Hang Jebat?”. An indication of the extent to which this simple question has entered Malay consciousness can be found in a story told by the Malaysian journalist, Rehman Rashid (1993, 237):

A few years after the episode of which I’m writing now, the director of the police special branch, while interviewing me for possible subversive tendencies, would pose me the conundrum: “Who do you think was right? Hang Tuah or Hang Jebat?” It was a question that seemed to strike to the very heart of matters; the true “Malay Dilemma”.

The framing of this question remains remarkably consistent over the centuries, with Hang Tuah as a symbol of total loyalty to the ruler and nation while Hang Jebat has been taken to symbolise justice and truth (Nasirin 2016; Kassim and Noriah 2008). What has been framed as the view of the “Malay elites” (Shaharuddin 2014), or those holding high status within society, is unambiguous: Hang Tuah is the true Malay hero. Hang Tuah is a Malay icon transcending time, “symbolising the Malay community’s sense of heroism, valour, loyalty, uprightness, deep love for his country and king” (Rozita and Hashim 2021, 1360). The nationalist politician, Syed Nasir Ismail, said he was “the source of inspiration for the Malays to aspire in achieving the same great height now and in the future” (Kassim Ahmad 1966, v).

It is necessary to acknowledge that the *taat* (loyalty) celebrated in Hang Tuah was not a general sense of allegiance to others or even to family or friends. Loyalty was owed to the ruler with a supernatural basis for the sovereignty and superiority in *daulat* (status) bestowed by God. This idea was efficacious. While internal rivalries and battles were common throughout much of the region’s history, direct challenges to members of ruling elites were rare. Hang Tuah’s unwavering and

unquestioning loyalty to his sultan was demonstrated throughout the *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, most clearly in his willingness to die for an unjust cause and to kill his closest friend when Hang Jebat turned against the ruler. Utter loyalty to the Sultan is a noble virtue in both *Hikayat Hang Tuah* and *Sejarah Melayu (Malay Annals)*. Hang Tuah was a Malay hero because of his bravery, wisdom, and—most of all—loyalty to his ruler. *Hikayat* are court tales (Cheah 1999). Unlike the folktales that typically speak for the peasant class, these texts focus on the activities of the nobility and display their ability to maintain diplomatic relations with the great powers of that time (Sohaimi and Rohaya 2012). Hang Tuah was intimately connected with these developments, as was the *bendahara* and as senior ministers in the royal court, their decisions and actions directly affected the state. Indeed, when the elderly Hang Tuah finally left Melaka, the state was defeated by the Portuguese. Hang Tuah, then, was the symbol of Melaka, its power and glory. His life reflected the sultanate and the feudal Malay society it embodied (Kassim Ahmad 1966).

Undoubtedly, Hang Tuah is supposed to be the hero within the official story and he was right. Nevertheless, an alternative interpretation has also been offered and continues to be maintained by many people: it is Hang Jebat who is the real Malay hero. His decision to choose friendship over rulers reflects modern, westernised, individualised presumptions of the hero. Hang Jebat, according to this narrative, “represents the seeds of democracy” (Khoo 2011, 28). According to Muhammad Haji Salleh (1991, 162), probably the most influential recent editor of *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, the spirit of Hang Jebat is a sign of the times:

Over the centuries, the individual and his rights have slowly taken centre stage. The Western education system, which lays a great value on the person has given him a new confidence and a sense of himself... In the meantime, social values have changed. Even in the close-knit Malay society that puts the interest of the community over that of the individual, the latter has been slowly recognised and applauded in his success. Literature plays a big role in foregrounding the new individual. He may appear as a leader of his people, a nationalist, a fighter against the colonialist, but also a rebel in the tradition of Hang Jebat.

In other words, Hang Tuah is the feudal hero; Hang Jebat is the modern hero. However, this is not quite right, as Hang Tuah’s popularity has not been overridden by his rebellious friend over time. It does seem to be the case that many modern Malays identify with Hang Jebat’s decision-making and criticism of corruption. However, the pair’s popularity has ebbed and flowed over the centuries. The country’s long history of feudalism and, with it, absolute loyalty to rulers expresses a different set of values and conceptions of heroes than more recent anti-

colonialism and independence (Alatas 1972). From the 1930s to the 1950s, Hang Tuah served as a unifying nationalistic figure in the colonised nation on the brink of independence (Van der Putten and Barnard 2007). This phase culminated with P. Ramlee's classic pro-Hang Tuah movie. Several interpreters evidently equated Hang Tuah's extreme loyalty and bravery with a notion of appropriate patriotism (Abdul Rahman 1994).

Independence in 1957 brought "a socialist interpretation of Hang Tuah" (Rusaslina 2016, 232) that challenged the value of loyalty to rulers. This was essentially the thesis of Kassim Ahmad, editor of another widely read edition of *Hikayat Hang Tuah* (Kassim Ahmad 1966). He argued that the epic portrayed a conflict between traditional values (associated with the feudal notion of blind loyalty to the ruler) and modern values (associated with justice):

Jebat is a rebel. He rebels against the existing feudal order ... To demonstrate his loyalty to the Sultan, Hang Tuah killed his friend when ordered to do so by the ruler. Hang Jebat, on the other hand, had risen against his ruler in defence of "justice" for Hang Tuah, believing him to have been put to death on a false charge and without a trial. (Kassim Ahmad 1966, 68)

This new interpretation was expressed in books, plays and films, such as the musical drama *Matinya Seorang Pahlwan, Jebat (Death of a Warrior, Jebat)* by the Malaysian National Laurette, Usman Awang. The tide turned again at the turn of the century with the rise of *ketuanan Melayu* (Malay supremacy) among nationalist politicians. The famous call *Takkan Melayu hilang di dunia* (The Malays shall never vanish from the world) attributed (wrongly) to Hang Tuah became the rallying cry for the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) and further-right groups. Hang Tuah is not a forgotten hero in the 21st century. The fact that Hang Tuah has been cited by politicians as a source of inspiration and emulation and immortalised in naming streets (in Kuala Lumpur, Melaka and Jakarta), train stations, housing estates, mosques, buildings, stadiums, schools, ships and a university and in many parts of the Malay-speaking world is evidence that he has remained a figure of considerable cultural importance. Meanwhile, Hang Jebat has lent his name to a smaller but still admirable group, including an academic journal, a naval ship, a rail engine and a road in several cities and he has been claimed as representing the spirit of the popular Pertubuhan Seni Silat Lincah Malaysia (Association of the Agile Malaysian Martial Arts) school.

The central importance of the Tuah-Jebat battle in Malay culture suggests that dichotomous judgements about their relative value may ultimately be wrong-headed. Parnickel (1976), describes the two friends as “two parts of one ego’, which are usually more or less harmoniously combined in one character”. This seems to be Khoo’s (2011) position, too, when she writes that the Malay psyche can be summed up through the characters of the two Malay heroes: *merendah diri* (humility) and amok. So, perhaps the standard account in which Hang Tuah and Hang Jebat are metaphors for the long-running conflict in Malay history between a feudalist loyalty to the ruler and a more democratic reliance on individual judgement is mistaken. The central conceit, it might be argued, is not shared between the two posited heroes but resides within their conflict. Support for this view comes from the fact that the Tuah-Jebat conflict hugely over-shadows every other portrait of heroes and heroism in Malay literature, films and plays. If this is accepted, our focus should not be on simple dichotomies: Loyalty or friendship? Acquiescence or revenge? Humility or self-assertion? Instead, there is a need to accept and reflect upon an essential tension between apparently contradictory qualities, which commentators on the Malay psyche have often noted (e.g., Razha 1990).

Finding heroes

The characters of Hang Tuah and Hang Jebat have proved futile grounds for representation and interpretation. Explicitly, their clash is framed as a conflict of values: loyalty to the State or defending truth and justice? This approach has been widely used in Malaysian history, beginning, in almost all cases, with Hang Tuah as the symbolic role model, “the ideal Malay man, warrior, citizen” (de Jong 1965, 140). This is particularly the case with adaptations of *Hikayat Hang Tuah* written for children, highlighting, simplifying and endorsing the protagonist’s fine qualities. In other words, these texts assume a central pedagogical function that aims to communicate a type of person the young readers should emulate and aspire to become. This emerges from Sohaimi and Rohaya’s (2012) textual analysis of retellings of *Hikayat Hang Tuah* for children.

Adaptations are, of course, the results of active and creative changing, correcting, forming and simplifying (Sanders 2006) and they often also carry solid pedagogical ambitions. All the available versions of the Hang Tuah story are adaptations. The storybooks which introduce the conflict to children are selectively translated accounts. So, too, are the vast number of plays, films and novels written for adults. In each case, certain aspects of the original story are stressed and others are downplayed or ignored. In fact, the idea of an “original story” is problematic here, as *Sejarah Melayu* probably and *Hikayat Hang Tuah* drew on earlier sources

(Braginsky 1990; Muhammad Haji Salleh 2012). So, the brief account of the life of Hang Tuah given above attempted to trace a path between the inclinations of two influential retellings of the *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, the “pro-Hang Tuah” account of Muhammad Haji Salleh (2011) and the “pro-Hang Jebat” version of Kassim Ahmed (1966). The authors of *Hikayat Hang Tuah* seem to have borrowed certain elements from earlier versions of *Sejarah Melayu* (Shellabear 1977), with the significant difference being that Hang Tuah appears as an ordinary human and an ambitious courtier whose personal failings highlight the *bendahara*’s noble character (de Jong 1965). The characters of Hang Tuah and his friends, the *bendahara* and the sultan, are usually common in all interpretations of the story. But details and morals vary with the intentions of the teller. It is also worthwhile remembering that neither *Sejarah Melayu* nor *Hikayat Hang Tuah* is a “folktale” as often reported (e.g., Efendi and Muttaqien 2017). As already noted, *hikayat* were stories of the royal court, usually written by palace scribes and promoting the dominant ideology of that day, namely feudalism.

Other tales of Silat warriors do belong under the umbrella of folktales. Mat Kilau was a community leader and his collaborators in the anti-British uprising in Pahang, Dato’ Bahaman and Tok Gajah were senior regional chiefs. But importantly, they were not of noble stock. Tok Janggut, the legendary Kelantanese warrior, was connected to the local sultan by his father, his bodyguard. Still, his legacy lives on in oral folklore, not courtly accounts (Cheah 1999). Both legends are based on sympathetic presentations, colourful details and liberal hints of magical forces. And, of course, both were highly skilled in Silat, fighters of fearless reputation, leaders of their gangs that protected the villagers from bandits.

The close connection between Silat dexterity and magic is not coincidental and the belief that martial arts training built on and developed supranational powers is a continuing narrative in clubs to this day. However, the precise relationships between Silat and magical arts are controversial and ambiguous. The guru and shaman belong to distinct traditions and hold different forms of authority among Malay communities. The anthropologist, Razha (1990, 92) wrote:

Silat ... [is] ... more private and cult-like, involving the mastery of animistic, Hindu and Islamic ideas of spiritualism and supernaturalism and the Imam more public and open, involving the mastery of principles, statutes of the Koran and Hadith. Again, the guru silat may have certain rituals in common with the bomoh (shaman or medicine man) in the evocation of dead humans, animistic or Hindu spirits, and in the use of similar ritual items like the lemon, black and yellow cloth, and myrrh (kemian).

It is not surprising, perhaps, that Silat is often interpreted as a form of war magic or shamanism (Farrer 2009). The pre-Islamic, animist origins of many of these practices mean that overt expression is condemned by Islamic teaching (Shaharuddin 2014). Nevertheless, magic is a common theme running through most great Malay warriors' stories. Consider, for example, the story of another Malay warrior, Dol Said, the hero of the Naning resistance against British tax policies (Adam 2021). Aside from his evident martial skills, Dol Said was said to possess magical powers, extraordinary physical prowess and a *keris* that could cure all illnesses. Mat Kilau's life and death were also said to have benefited from mystical forces. In his case, *susuk* (magical implants) meant that he could die and return to life five times. And, of course, both Hang Tuah and Hang Jebat were said to possess magical qualities precisely due to their possession of the Taming Sari *keris*.

Folklore and court texts share a striking characteristic: the heroism depicted in these stories and the glory they portray rest on a single narrative of the Malays being in crisis. Hang Tuah's Melaka faced continual existential threats from the Majapahit Empire, more local chiefdoms, and eventually, the Portuguese invaders (Andaya 2008). Mat Kilau's Pahang, Tok Janggut's Kelantan and the states of most of the warriors listed in Table 1, faced the British. In post-independent times, threats more commonly come from perceived challenges to racial dignity and pre-eminence in the hands of other ethnic groups (Lim 2012), with the best-known case being the bloody 13 May 1969 race riots between the Malays and the Chinese in the larger urban areas. Razha (1990, 88) captured the continuity from the martial combats of the past and the present day:

Almost spontaneously, an army of silat exponents from a variety of silat groups united under one banner to form a special force that spearheaded the formation of a massive [impromptu] phantom army known as the *selendang merah* (red sashes)... it was almost like a ritualistic preparation for war; here and there in the rice-fields at night could be seen pockets of lights framing different *gelanggang* (practice area), throwing shadows of young boys, men, and women in an eerie silat shadow-play.

It is hardly surprising that there is such a close temporal and emotional knit between the emergence of warrior heroes and times in which the Malays believed themselves to be under threat. De Jong told of his travels in Malaysia shortly before independence, when he was repeatedly told that Hang Tuah was secretly hiding, "and always with the additional clause that if ever his people, the Malays, would be in danger of being over-run by foreign enemies, he would come forth once more to lead them" (de Jong 1965, 38). The violence in 1969 was short-lived, but narratives of the events continued to be rehearsed for decades after, signalling

a resurgence of attendance at Silat clubs that has continued into the 21st century. Several large Silat organisations have explicitly associated themselves with the defence of Malay society, leading Ross (2019, 7) to describe them as “a latent militia” whose members stand ready to defend their community.

Heroes are saviours and crisis is the context in which heroes emerge. However, it is a lesson well-taught by history that a sense of crisis, fear and uncertainty can be magnified or even created. This seems to lie behind Shaharuddin’s (2014) thesis that the ruling elite has employed archetypal Malay heroes like Hang Tuah to justify obedience among the rest of the population, which harks back to the feudal past. By this account, the stories that cultural leaders promote serve a specific political agenda. Feudal values include servility towards authority, the acceptance of arbitrary notions of power and indifference to social justice. Several writers have claimed that many of these feudal values have outlasted the feudal era in Malaysian history, at least the psychological traits of feudal societies (Alatas 1968). Alatas introduced the term “psychological feudalism” to indicate an attitude or relationship characterised by personal attachment to a leader, in which the follower is expected to be loyal under all circumstances in a manner that sometimes comes into conflict with the norms and ethics of his work or religious values (Alatas 1968).

There are at least two reasons to be cautious when considering Hang Tuah, Mat Kilau and the many warriors in between their ascendance as national heroes. The first is that nationalism is a poor bedfellow to feudalism. Indeed, it is the case that a long history of feudalism, of loyalty to authority, has a firmer grip on ideas about cultural identity than the more recent notion of nationalism that came in the wake of anti-colonialism and independence (Alatas 1972). Muhammad Haji Salleh has been accused of conflating precisely these two concepts in his interpretation of *Hikayat Hang Tuah* (Khoo 2011). Feudalism and nationalism point to two contradictory ideas: the former implies a horizontal relationship, whereas the latter suggests a vertical bond. In other words, feudalism is inherently connected to the ideas of loyalty and obedience; nationalism points to equality and siblinghood (Grosby 2005). The second concern is that feudal values not only seem to contradict the ethos of modern democracies but also clash with the fundamental values of Islam. Islam, at least as presented by Shaharuddin (2014), Alatas (1968) and others, assumes a far more rational and egalitarian view of authority than that embodied by Malay feudalism and assertively stresses the need for ethics and integrity in public affairs. Loyalty and obedience are essential features of Islam, but, as *Mishkat Al-Masabih* makes clear, they are directed to God alone and “to be given only regarding what is reputable” (Robson 1965, 780). Justice has been a

unifying concept running throughout Islamic teaching. The 11th-century scholar, al-Ghazali, wrote:

Perfect justice consists of this: that you treat the unknown litigant of no repute and the well-known litigant of high worldly rank and dignity with complete impartiality in (your handling of) claims and disputes, viewing each with the same eye and not favouring one over the other... For example, if a claim were lodged against the king by an uninfluential person, the king should withdraw from the seat of sovereignty and submit the case to God's jurisdiction and then grant redress against himself and satisfy (the aggrieved person). (Bagley 1964, 69)

It is difficult to reconcile this account of Islamic justice with the treatment administered to and accepted by Hang Tuah.

Does this shift the case towards recognising Hang Jebat as a more suitable Malay hero? As noted, many contemporary Malays—not to mention films and retellings of the *Hikayat Hang Tuah*—claim that the enigmatic Hang Jebat is the true Malay hero because he symbolises justice and integrity (Kassim and Noriah 2008). The problem with this view is that it flatly contradicts everything known about Hang Jebat's behaviour. Recall that he replaced his closest friend as *laksamana*, believing Hang Tuah to be dead due to the sultan's unjust sentence. He gained influence in the court, believing he was immune from all restraints: "Even if the whole country gathers and is ordered to kill Jebat, he will not die. Now that the *laksamana* is dead how can I die? ... Regarding the *laksamana*'s blood, I will take revenge on the jealous rulers and officials" (Kassim Ahmad 1966, 301). Predictably, Hang Jebat's newly awarded powers went to his head and he became arrogant and vengeful. He ran amok and locked himself up in the sultan's palace with several of the sultan's concubines, killing anyone who ventured near him.

It is difficult to reconcile the Hang Jebat of the *Hikayat Hang Tuah* with the representation of him as a modern hero in the conventional sense of that world. Perhaps Kratz's (1993, 80) interpretation is preferable: he represents an anti-hero insofar as his character can express criticism of the sultan's rule and manner of leadership "by creating a figure whose deeds were so bad that they obscured their original cause"? Shaharuddin (2014) suggests another view, namely that neither is a true hero. Hang Tuah stands in conflict with his claimed faith because his loyalty to his ruler, no matter what he did, contradicts the teaching of Islam. The feudal values of the Malay elite promoted through the story of Hang Tuah conflict with those of Islam. By idealising Hang Tuah's blind loyalty, it is claimed the Malay elite was preaching the tolerance of corrupt leaders. The idea of celebrating a feudal hero as a national hero seems odd. Despite the obvious differences in

his story, Hang Jebat can be confronted with a similar charge. By acting as he did, Hang Jebat became “an offender in the broadest sense of the word” and “...is *durhaka* (treason)..., a ‘public enemy’, ‘a socially harmful man’” (Teeuw 1961). However, his actions did not place him outside of feudalism. Instead, he is representative of a different kind of feudal psychology and shifting admiration towards Hang Jebat seems to be little more than re-directing attention within the same feudal system from one type of feudal personality to another (Alatas 1968). In this regard, the popular association of Hang Jebat with social justice is difficult to reconcile with the events of his story and conflating justice and amok blurs the distinction between genuine concern for human dignity and uncontrolled violence.

Compounding matters is the tendency to simplify and popularise the story of Hang Tuah through film and comic books so that its nuance is reduced to simplistic and essentialist accounts of heroism. This overlooks the fact that the plot takes a radical turn halfway through the *Hikayat Hang Tuah* when Hang Tuah abandoned his life as a warrior and became a diplomat on behalf of Melaka. He was a polyglot who spoke several languages and the social mores of the countries he visited. Perhaps the outstanding quality of the older Hang Tuah was his capability to learn and respect the traditions of the cultures he saw:

When one compares the inclusiveness of *Hikayat Hang Tuah* to the writings of the Orientalist scholars of the colonial era—for whom anything Asian or African was invariably deemed savage, backward or inferior—one cannot help but admire his character as well as the society that once produced and sustained such a universalist narrative. Like other works of world literature, *Hikayat Hang Tuah* speaks to and with works of its time and even those after its time. (Farish 2019)

This is perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the story, when an individual, celebrated as a great warrior, changes to a life of peace-building and then renounces all glory and influence to spend the rest of his days pursuing spiritual enlightenment. The Hang Tuah of the *Hikayat Hang Tuah* is presented as a hero, not just a warrior. His heroism emerges from his extraordinary bravery, martial skills and willingness to abandon this source of courage and admiration in favour of a life of service that embraced the changing and complex world far away from his home in Melaka. Far from sounding a rallying cry for nationalism and patriotism, this later Hang Tuah manifests tolerance and respect; instead of insularity and suspicion of others, he calls on the Malays to embrace a cosmopolitan spirit. That part of the story seems to have drifted into obscurity (Farish 2006).

Conclusion

According to Shaharuddin (2014), the concept of the hero in Malay culture depends on a presuppositional background shaped by questions like:

1. What constitutes noble acts?
2. What is the ideal of excellence?
3. What do they do for which they should be proud?
4. What lessons can be learned by the Malay people?
5. To what should the Malay people aspire?

These questions might help articulate a set of criteria for evaluating Malay heroes, or they might be used to clarify the characteristics of pre-determined heroes. Either way, they will always be indeterminant. One error shared by both advocates for feudalism and their Marxist critics is an underestimation of individual agency in matters of admiration and emulation. Cultures help shape choice, as do individuals' idiosyncratic wants and needs.

There is no objective standard of stories of cultural heroes. This becomes very clear in the story of Hang Tuah and Hang Jebat. The debate about which of these two Silat warriors is the real hero has oscillated over the years. It seems unarguable that the changing social and cultural values, real and perceived threats and media representations have shaped this movement. Yet, their stories retain autonomy, too. Before we can decide upon the heroic status of historical figures, we must first clarify which version is being considered. We might re-phrase the famous question: Who is right? Hang Tuah, the Silat warrior or Hang Tuah, the cosmopolitan diplomat? Hang Jebat, the defender of social justice or Hang Jebat, the vengeful brute? This much is also true of Mat Kilau, the warrior with whom he started this discussion. The unprecedented reaction in Malaysia to the film bearing his name is a testament to the power of patriotic storytelling. In some minds, he may have even displaced the great Hang Tuah as the embodiment of Malay nationalist pride. Yet, the real Mat Kilau was not a nationalist fighter. His concerns were local to Pahang and his opponents were not just the British but also his sultan and chiefs, who had switched sides to join the colonisers (Andaya 2008). In the words of the novelist David Mitchell (1999, 378), "The human world is made of stories, not people. The people the stories use to tell themselves are not to be blamed".

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Notes

1. Silat is conventionally described as a Malay martial art (Sheikh Shamsuddin 2005). This description may be misleading as the term “Silat” embraces several hundred styles and schools, each with its own representative fighting techniques, weaponry, histories, accompanying music, dance and mysticism. All systems include training with the distinctive *keris* (or kris), a traditionally wavy, double-bladed dagger often described as the cultural symbol of the Malay people and most are built from kuda-kuda (low stances). Beyond these shared characteristics, there is a great deal of variation. Some forms, such as Silat Melayu Keris Lok 9, focus on the keris and empty hands. Others, such as Silat Lincih, Silat Harimau Berantai and Seni Silat Kuntau Tekpi, use a broader range of weapons, including axes, chains, spears, “broken spears” and machetes. Some styles, such as Silat Gayung Fatani and Silat Cekak, can be labelled “battlefield Silat” (Mahaguru Jak Othman, pers. comm., 10th August 2022), as they prioritise forceful and explosive actions and generally exclude dance-like practices (Zainal 2012). They also employ fast changes of stance, arm locks, take-downs reminiscent of Japanese Ju-jitsu and punches and blocks similar to Okinawan Karate, resulting in an appearance of “a rough unpolished ‘masculine’ look” (Farrer 2009, 111). This contrasts with the more overtly graceful, flowing, “feminine” movements of what might be called “cultural Silat” observed in Lok 9 and Silat Sendeng. These styles involve dance-like forms or jurus, in which practitioners perform prearranged combative movements in a single set. So, Silat might be more accurately translated with the generic label “Malay martial arts” (comparable to budo in Japan or wushu/kuoshu in China). Reference to the Malay language cannot settle the matter as the absence of a clear singular/plural distinction means that common labels, such as *seni silat*, *silat Melayu* and *seni persilatan Melayu*, can be translated as either “martial art” or “martial arts”!). More importantly for present discussions, Silat is unambiguously associated with those who identify as Malays (Amirul Husni 2021). While the origins of several schools can be traced to Animism, Hinduism or Buddhism, contemporary versions of Silat are almost always presented within the nexus of affiliations represented by Malay Islam (Razha 1990). Some commentators have gone further, claiming that the last half-century has seen Silat’s history become further intertwined with ethnicity, religion and politics in Malaysia. Ross (2019), for example, claims that Silat has become a vehicle for expressing “Malay-ness”, taking the form of a latent (and sometimes active) militia defending a reactionary, anti-democratic Malay political elite. Former Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Najib Tun Abdul Razak, who, in addressing a national Silat gathering in 2010, called them a “third line of defence” (after the military and police) whom he confidently

believed “would be ready to fight against those who wish to challenge our country’s peace, security and sovereignty” (Zulkifli 2010). Situations where Silat was used not only for self-defence but also for the defence of the Malay “race”, such as the infamous 1969 race riots, suggest that the occasional call-to-arms from certain Silat group leaders might not be mere hyperbole. It is noteworthy that it is unusual to find non-Malays in Silat groups and especially rare in the case of Chinese people, although whether this is due to overt discrimination on the part of the teachers or avoidance by non-Malays is sometimes unclear. However, it should also be acknowledged that violence is rare in Malay communities and writers often comment on their peaceful natures (Razha 1990). Moreover, a significant proportion of current participants in Silat are women and children, many of whom engage for social, health, or sporting reasons (Maryono 2002).

2. The location of Sungai Duyung is unknown. Several places have been claimed, including Melaka, Riau, Terengganu and Palembang (Muhammad Haji Salleh 2012).
3. “Amok” is a Malay word referring to the behaviour of a mob in a murderous frenzy. It enters English with the phrase “running amok” (Winzeler 1990).

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