



Silat Warriors, Heroism and Resistance: Tales from the Malay Archipelago

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Abstract. This article examines the notion of heroism in the Malay Archipelago and highlights the significance of Silat, the traditional Malay martial art, as a physical and spiritual discipline that shapes cultural identity and resistance to colonial subjugation. The research examines five notable Malay figures—Mat Salleh, Mat Kilau, Tok Janggut, Dato' Maharaja Lela and Dol Said—who arose during colonial expansion and socio-political turmoil in Malaya. This study focuses on these figures due to their prominence in colonial-era resistance narratives. These individuals, celebrated for their expertise in Silat, illustrate the dichotomy of the warrior as both a protector of physical autonomy and a custodian of spiritual and ethical principles. Their opposition to colonial forces was sometimes described as a *jihad* (struggle) to safeguard Malay and Islamic traditions. The article analyses the mythologisation of these heroes in Malay folklore and national narratives, thereby converting them into lasting symbols of Malay identity. The article examines the relationship between Silat, heroism and resistance, providing an insight into the enduring impact of these historical figures on Malaysia's cultural heritage and national memory, while challenging the reductionist interpretations of their intricate legacies in modern discussions.

Keywords and phrases: folklore, cultural heritage, heroes, Malaysia, martial arts

Introduction

A “hero” is a figure who stands at the intersection of the personal, the social and the political (Frisk 2019). On the one hand, he—it is usually a “he”—is someone who goes on a journey (Campbell 2004), which may be literal or actual, but is certainly one of self-development. On the other hand, he embodies group

identity and aspiration (Jayawickreme and Di Stefano 2012): he will be the epitome of all the qualities a group values and strives to emulate. That these qualities are often associated with martial valour has much to do with how heroes emerge. Rarely will immorality be attributed to a hero, yet heroes may perform immoral acts if they are in a cause regarded as “correct” (Franco, Blau and Zimbardo 2011).

While the implication may be that heroism is a universal quality, the fact that heroes represent groups suggests that heroism is culturally specific (Sun, Kinsella and Igou 2024). Indeed, one group’s hero is often another group’s villain (Jayawickreme and Di Stefano 2012). An illustration of this point is the extent to which heroism is intricately woven into the sociopolitical and cultural fabric of present-day Malaysia (Wang 2005). The most notable heroes in Malaysian history lived during times of sociopolitical turmoil, colonial expansion and glaring sociocultural inequalities. Characterised as *pendekar* (warriors), they are renowned for fierce battles against foreign invaders and for their commitment to fundamental ethical standards.

Central is Malay heroism’s connection to Silat, the most widely used term for Malay martial arts. Silat has long been integral to Malay warrior culture as a traditional form of combat, combining strength, spiritual training and resistance to subjugation (Bailey 2024). Skill in the practice of Silat is central to Malay concepts of heroism. However, non-physical elements, such as religious and philosophical teachings, are also given prominence as reinforcers of a hero’s identity as a defender of his nation’s fabric and moral standards (Farrer 2009).

To explore heroism more deeply in context, this article analyses notable Malay fighters who all originated in different Malayan states. Geographical diversity is one reason for their selection as case studies. Others are closeness in time and the object of their resistance. All lived within a few decades of each other and their experiences were intimately bound up with colonialism, albeit not always in obvious ways. Moreover, their divergent social classes and backgrounds allow for a nuanced consideration of the penetration of heroic ideals across Malay society. Their heroism is shaped by various factors, including Islam, local cultures and the politics of their times. This study aims to bridge a gap in heroism studies and enhance the understanding of heroism in the Malay world. It is a perspective piece (Narula 2024) that aims to investigate and comment upon an issue of interest from a conceptual standpoint. No attempt has been made to perform a systematic review or primary research. It should be noted, however, that some of the events and personalities to be addressed remain under-researched and would certainly benefit from further empirical work.

One such area is the impressive female figures with whom Malay history and folklore are replete, some of whom engaged in martial arts (Wain 2021). That they have, to date, generated little scholarship is a notable gap. The fact may reflect the common image of hero—especially when physical conflict is involved—as masculine in character and embodiment (Bigazzi et al. 2023). In any case, female Malay heroes are usually semi-mythical in conception and so not readily mapped onto the “real person made legendary” template to be explored here. Of those under discussion, the focus is on the process of mythologisation, or heroisation: the extent to which they have been raised—usually posthumously—from simple historical figures to embodiments of national character and pride.

This article provides a broad analysis of the factors that sustain the notion of heroism, including sacrifice, defiance, moral leadership and cultural identity, and explores the significance of Silat in shaping Malay heroism and the duality of the warrior as both a man-at-arms and a man of God (Shaharuddin 2014). Therefore, this article examines the influence of the legacies of Malay heroes and addresses the evolving meaning of heroism within the context of historical dominion and contemporary collective national memory. It employs a qualitative historical-conceptual methodology to examine five emblematic figures of anti-colonial resistance in the Malay world: Mat Salleh, Mat Kilau, Tok Janggut, Dato' Maharaja Lela and Dol Said. Selection was guided by three criteria: (1) verifiable engagement in organised resistance against colonial authority, (2) explicit linkage to Silat, either as martial practice or ideological framework and (3) sustained commemoration within national or regional memory. The analysis draws upon a range of sources, including secondary historical literature, colonial archival materials, oral traditions and commemorative narratives. Each figure is examined through four analytical dimensions: (1) historical context and motivational drivers, (2) the role of Silat in shaping resistance and identity formation, (3) mechanisms of mythologisation and (4) enduring legacy within collective memory. A thematic synthesis is subsequently undertaken to distil comparative insights across the cases.

The Study of Heroes

Heroism can be seen from two perspectives – as a narrative trope and as a social phenomenon in the real world. Of the first of these, the key text is Campbell's “Hero with a Thousand Faces” (2004), which identifies common patterns in stories, myths and legends that evince deep-rooted psychological and archetypal needs in human beings. As Campbell (2004) emphasises, heroes in stories—whether based on historic originals or simply invented—are mythologised through an embellishment of their deeds. This process allows

societies to adapt heroic stories to contemporary values (Campbell 2004; Dundes 1984). Ordinary people who played significant roles in history are thus transformed into symbolic figures who both epitomise a society's values and serve as epic leaders, inspiring others to strive towards the highest societal visions (Kinsella, Ritchie and Igou 2015). To take a Western example, Robin Hood has evolved from being a simple, albeit rather mischievous, outlaw to a figure of resistance to oppression to a precursor of the modern gangster (Cartlidge 2016).

Mythologisation is, however, a double-edged sword. It preserves the glory of notable individuals for future generations to draw cultural and moral inspiration, but it can also distort the past and be employed for political deception. Many of those who have been mythologised into heroes were not necessarily forces for good while they were living.

Heroism in its social aspects, therefore, is related to storytelling but locates those stories in historical and current reality, endowing different types of behaviour with the patina of "heroism". Self-sacrifice, courage and moral virtue in adversity are lauded as heroic qualities (Allison, Goethals and Kramer 2017). However, from a moral perspective, a contrast could be made between basic courage, such as bravery and ethical courage. While many can be considered brave, real heroes are defined by what they do, not by what they stand for (Walker and Frimer 2007).

Modern thinkers argue that the qualities of heroism are not confined to warriors but are visible in social and political activism, fundraising, humanitarian work and intellectual contributions to society (Kinsella, Ritchie and Igou 2015; Jarvis and Mishra 2019). Some feminist scholars have broadened the scope of heroism from primarily male characteristics to include non-violent, caring actions (Rankin and Eagly 2008). Franco (2024), in proposing that heroism is possible in mundane situations, moves away from the view of heroism as the exclusive possession of exceptional people. Studies have shown that, as long as conditions are appropriate, anyone can act heroically; specifically, pro-social behaviour suggests that situational factors, rather than dispositional ones, are more likely to predict heroic behaviour (Van Vugt 2006). This change in focus has impacted the study of contemporary heroic acts, such as digital activism, whistleblowing and caring on the healthcare frontline, which are typically perceived as outcomes of collective heroism rather than individualistic endeavours (Efthimiou, Allison and Franco 2018).

Zimbardo (2018) further distinguishes between spontaneous heroism—unpremeditated acts of gallantry performed in perilous situations—and enduring heroism—voluntary engagement in social action over time—disputing

the conception of heroism as always immediate and dramatic. New research in evolutionary psychology has proposed that heroism may be an example of socially adaptive behaviour, promoting social cohesion and group survival (Franco et al. 2018) and that sacrificing one's life for the group is rooted in our most primal human drives (Van Vugt 2006). Modern studies of "costly signalling" argue that self-sacrifice sends strong in-group signals, reinforcing communal bonds (Koh and Li 2024). The greater a hero's sacrifice, the greater their authenticity. This can be seen in national histories, which are often woven around heroic figures who embody the spirit of a people and help to construct cultural cohesion. Nationalist movements frequently seek to foster national consciousness by glorifying past heroes (Seal 2001). Doing so, they contemporise historical narratives, ensuring that collective memory remains practised and alive (Anderson 2006).

Critics of heroism point out that its traditional features can be used to validate oppressive or violent behaviour. Military commanders or political revolutionaries are often remembered as heroes, but only when their more morally ambiguous or destructive actions are overlooked or forgotten (Allison, Goethals and Kramer 2017). Equally, individuals vilified as forces of rebellion or resistance at one stage might later become revered patriotic figures—and vice versa—depending on prevailing ideology (Seal 2001).

Others have identified a pro-Western bias in heroism studies, stating that people from elsewhere, especially in indigenous and decolonial areas, are frequently neglected or sidelined (Frisk 2018). Malay heroism intertwines physical, spiritual and moral dimensions through concepts, such as *budi pekerti* (ethical virtue), *syahid* (martyrdom) and *amar ma'ruf nahi munkar* (commanding right, forbidding wrong). Such integration of moral-spiritual duty within martial practice extends existing heroism theory by merging religious obligation with social virtue, producing a culturally embedded model of heroism distinct from individualistic Western paradigms. However, Malay ideals of heroism include many features that are conventional everywhere, such as nobility of purpose, courage, determination and accomplishment (Alatas 1972). Some studies assert that postcolonial heroism, as practised in Western countries, embodies a denial of the contributions of former anti-colonial resistance leaders to national liberation movements (Seal 2001). The concept of resistance heroism has served as a primary agent in shaping historical processes, especially in struggles against colonisation, authoritarianism and social injustice (Adam 2022). The heroes of these struggles become representatives of collective endurance and enhancers of group cohesion (Drury and Reicher 2009). Defiant actions are usually rooted in morals; defiant heroes are regarded as imbued with a sense of obligation to protect and deliver justice to their people (Miron and Brehm 2006). Resistance

heroism is thus correlated with psychological empowerment. Exposure to a narrative of resistant behaviour hypersensitises people to the willingness to participate in self-help or altruistic actions and to confront oppressive forces actively (Thomas, McGarty and Mavor 2009).

In addition, the historical record, of course, tends to privilege male warriors, reinforcing gendered constructions of martial heroism. While figures such as Tun Fatimah and Mahsuri feature prominently in Malay legend, their roles remain insufficiently examined within Silat-centred narratives of heroism. This underrepresentation signals a significant lacuna in the literature, inviting further inquiry into the gendered dimensions of martial virtue and the symbolic place of women within Malay heroic traditions.

Silat, Heroism and Resistance

Silat, the collective name for traditional Malay martial arts, is inextricably linked to Malay identity, cultural heritage and historical resistance (Farrer 2009; Khoo 2021).¹ Historically, it has functioned as both a defensive system and a symbol of Malay sovereignty (Andaya and Andaya 2017). More than a means of armed conflict, Silat embodies a holistic philosophical framework that intertwines martial excellence with Islamic ethics and Malay socio-political structures, reinforcing notions of justice, honour and communal solidarity (Shamsul 2001). Figures such as Hang Tuah, Mat Kilau and Tok Janggut have exemplified its principles of resilience, honour and strategic defiance.

The role of Silat in shaping Malay identity extends beyond its function as a combat discipline. It serves as a marker of cultural distinction and historical continuity, reinforcing *kemelayuan* (Malayness) by embodying values of bravery, loyalty and spiritual resilience, celebrated in historical narratives and nationalist discourses (Milner 1995). In the context of postcolonial nation-building, Silat has been promoted as a key component of Malay heritage, distinguishing it from other martial traditions within Malaysia's broader national identity (Khoo 2021). Integrating Islamic teachings and *adat* (tradition/culture/custom) within Silat practice further strengthens its role in shaping Malay self-perception. Unlike purely combative martial arts, Silat emphasises a harmonious balance between physical mastery and moral discipline, reflecting broader Islamic principles of self-control, justice and spiritual endurance (Farrer 2009) in line with the Malay concept of *budi pekerti* (Shaharuddin 2014).

Hang Tuah remains the most celebrated Silat hero. His legend, preserved in the *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, portrays him as a quintessential warrior – unparalleled in martial prowess, deeply loyal to the Malaccan Sultanate and devoted to honour and justice (Milner 1995). Hang Tuah’s mastery of Silat was not confined to battlefield tactics; it was emblematic of a broader Malay warrior ethos that fused physical combat with intellectual acuity, spiritual wisdom and unwavering loyalty (Andaya and Andaya 2017). His famed battles and unwavering dedication to the sultan have led scholars to interpret him as the archetypal Malay warrior, embodying the ideal balance between martial skill and statesmanship (Khoo 2021). His legendary duels, particularly against Hang Jebat, illustrate the moral complexities of heroism, where personal loyalty and justice come into conflict (Bailey 2024).

Historically, Silat has been fundamental to training Malay warriors, including figures such as Hang Tuah, Mat Kilau, Tok Janggut and Dato’ Maharaja Lela. These individuals demonstrated martial proficiency and adhered to Silat’s philosophical and ethical tenets (Andaya and Andaya 2017). Moreover, Silat has been instrumental in Malay resistance movements against colonial forces. British reports from the 19th and early 20th centuries frequently identified Silat practitioners as key insurgents in armed uprisings, with many resistance leaders using their Silat expertise to conduct guerrilla warfare, stage ambushes and mobilise local militias (Milner 1995). The British administration sought to regulate and suppress Silat training, particularly during the Pahang Uprising (1891–1895) and the Kelantan Revolt (1915), reflecting its perceived threat to colonial authority (Harper 1999).

Again, though, complexity must be acknowledged since warriors such as Hang Tuah represented regimes that suppressed and enslaved Malaysia’s indigenous *Orang Asli* tribes (Angit and Jarvis 2024). It should not be forgotten that Malays are themselves colonisers (Angit and Jarvis 2024). Arriving from the region of Western Sumatra in the 14th century (Parthipan and Ishar 2022), they increasingly marginalised the indigenous peoples until, perhaps ironically, the very British colonialists against whom Silat heroes fought were forced to take protective measures. These included the outlawing of slavery and the granting of various legal rights to members of the oppressed communities (Endicott 2016). Such, perhaps inconvenient, truths underline the fact that the term “national hero” is not to be used uncritically. In some cases, those to whom it refers belonged to communities that were selective in their definition of who might be included within the “nation” (Barr and Govindasamy 2010). Even today, “Malay” refers to a specific population found across Malaysia and elsewhere; it is not synonymous with “Malaysian” (Hakim 2017).

Heroes

In highlighting the importance of Silat to heroism as conceived in the Malay Archipelago, it is instructive to consider the lives of several key historical heroic figures. These have been selected from different geographies and cover a range—admittedly narrow—of time periods. They share both Silat and the fact that they all resisted external control, mostly in the form of colonialism. They demonstrate the various activities considered “heroic”. Mat Salleh, for example, was a freedom fighter, while others exemplify different, arguably more complex, virtues. All also, demonstrate how the process of real men becoming heroes in others’ minds occurs. Their deeds were sometimes mundane, small-scale, or motivated by far from noble impulses, but over time, they have grown in stature as their roles in nation-building have become more salient.

Mat Salleh (Sabah)

Mat Salleh,² born Datu Muhammad Salleh, was a Bajau-Suluk³ warrior in Sabah who led an anti-colonial resistance against the British North Borneo Company from 1894 to 1905. His rebellion was fuelled by grievances over excessive taxation, restrictions on local trade and the undermining of traditional authority. His resistance movement was characterised by guerrilla warfare tactics, alliances with various indigenous groups and strategic attacks on British installations (Tregonning 1965). Despite some successes and temporary recognition from the British as an independent ruler, he was eventually killed in 1905 after sustained British military campaigns. His resistance movement was notable for its ability to unite native groups such as the Bajau-Suluk and the Murut peoples (Andaya and Andaya 2017). Though the rebellion was eventually quelled, Mat Salleh became a symbol of Sabah’s defiance against colonial rule, inspiring later nationalist movements (Runciman 2011).

Mat Kilau (Pahang)

Mat Kilau, born Mat Kilau bin Imam Rasu around 1847, was a prominent Malay warrior who led resistance efforts against British rule in Pahang during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. He was the son of Tok Gajah, a highly regarded *pendekar* and counsellor of the sultan of Pahang. As was typical of a child of the royal court in the day, he was schooled in both Islamic values and Silat. Much of his youth was spent training in the jungles and villages of Pahang, where he developed extensive knowledge of the terrain and developed allegiances with the local people (Gullick 1992).

Before British intervention, the famous warrior and tribal chief, Dato' Bahaman, Mat Kilau and other chiefs exercised significant autonomy, levying taxes and administering justice according to traditional Malay customs. At first, they cooperated with the colonisers. This ended with the imposition of direct rule in Pahang (Andaya and Andaya 2017). The sultan refused to support the resulting uprising, fearing the loss of his position and influence, but Bahaman managed to secure support from local tribal leaders, such as Mat Kilau. Even the *Orang Asli* sided with their Muslim neighbours, sharing a loathing of British interference in their traditional practices (Gomes 2007).⁴

The first steps toward resistance occurred in 1891, when the allied locals employed guerrilla tactics against British outposts (Harper 1999). The warriors carried distinctive, wavy-bladed Malay *keris* (or kris) and wore talismans that they believed would make them invincible (Winzeler 1983). The British expanded their military campaigns and crushed the revolt in November 1895 (Gullick 1992), but Mat Kilau used his knowledge of the land and unconventional fighting methods to set ambushes and keep evading capture for several years (Gopinath 1993). Mat Kilau's life has been depicted in fiction, folklore and films that celebrate him as a great figure in Malaysian history (Bailey 2024). His heroic exploits during the colonial rebellion are often presented as a beacon of hope and Islam for the Malay people (Andaya and Andaya 2017).

For many years, his fate remained mysterious, the accepted narrative being that he died while en route to the city of Kota Bharu. But, in a shocking twist, an old man appeared in 1969, claiming to be the great warrior. He quickly captured the public's imagination and nationalist feelings leading the government to conduct identity checks that ultimately proved positive (Roff 1974).⁵ Historians, though, take a sceptical line and have cast doubt (Iman 2022) on the story, pointing out that the investigation used a flawed methodology and that the death of the man soon after his appearance rendered impossible any further attempts at verification. That the incident occurred at a time of tension for Malaysia (Muhammad Izzuddin, Akhmatova and Rabi'ah 2020), with race riots between Malays and the Chinese community threatening the country's social fabric, has not gone unnoticed: a semi-divine visitation by a long-lost hero had a galvanising effect on Malay ethnic identity. Scholarship today mostly focuses on the incident as an exercise in mythmaking rather than speculating on the truth or otherwise of the man's claims.

Tok Janggut (Kelantan)

Tok Janggut, or Haji Mat Hassan, was a Kelantanese nobleman who revolted against British authority in 1915. He was born in the Jeram village of Pasir Puteh in 1853 and, in common with others discussed here, was a student of Islamic scholarship and Silat. Returning from a pilgrimage to Mecca, he held a prominent position in the community and began campaigning to preserve traditional Malay rule against colonial encroachments. He was frustrated by the Kelantanese elites' obeisance to the colonial state and unhappy with the dispossession of the Malay peasants and chiefs. His resistance primarily grew out of discontent with the taxation policy placed by British colonists, especially in land and agricultural produce, which greatly affected the finances of Malay farmers (Cheah 2006). The British imposed administrative reorganisation of Kelantan, creating an imbalance in the Malay sociopolitical system by consolidating power to colonial officials at the expense of local rule (Gullick 1992). These factors fed into growing resentment that led to Tok Janggut and his followers openly opposing British subjugation of elite Malays and poor rural farmers (Harper 1999).

The Kelantan Revolt of 1915 began in Pasir Puteh when Tok Janggut and his forces seized control. Tok Janggut's leadership was not solely based on his military prowess; his ability to integrate people from different ethnicities by stressing shared religious and national identities was crucial. He and his associates proclaimed the independence of Kelantan from British rule, declaring themselves defenders of Malay power and Islam from foreign domination (Andaya and Andaya 2017). In the final battle at Kampung Merbuk, Tok Janggut and his men performed great deeds of valour, but they were overwhelmed by superior British arms and tactics. Following his death, Tok Janggut's body was hung in public for several days to deter further opposition. Instead, it exacerbated Tok Janggut's reputation as a martyr (Hooker 2003). His legacy, politically speaking, survived beyond the rebellion. Over time, he transformed from a local defiance figure to a national icon. His tale has been preserved in history, literature and debates about nationalism and defiance in Malaysia today (Harper 1999).

Dato' Maharaja Lela (Perak)

Pandak Lam, also known as Dato' Maharaja Lela, was one of the movement's most important leaders in the late 19th century against British rule in Perak. He was a Pasir Salak noble and high chief and opposed British expansion, especially that of J.W.W. Birch, the first British Resident of Perak. The catalyst of his opposition was British political meddling that broke traditional Malay rule while imposing economic policies that were poorly received (Milner 1995).

Coming from a noble family, Dato' Maharaja Lela held the hereditary title of "Orang Besar Lima", one of the sultan of Perak's chief nobles. The Perak governing elite was also administered by Lela as a powerful aristocrat (Gullick 1992). After the Pangkor Treaty of 1874, Birch's imposition of direct rule through taxation and land alienation made him unpopular. Sultan Abdullah Lela Andaya and others, such as Ibrahim, strongly resisted British rule because it deeply interfered with Malays' control over their affairs and politics (Andaya and Andaya 2017). On 2nd November 1875, Birch was killed while in his bath in the river at Pasir Salak. This incited the British and they embarked upon what has become known as the Perak War (1875–1876), which ended with Lela's and his co-dissenters' capture and execution (Azmi 2012).

Dato' Maharaja Lela's death marked the end of an era of Malay resistance in Perak, but his defiance cemented his legacy as a martyr for Malay sovereignty. Myths created around him were enough to replace his actual name with that of a legendary figure (Cheah 1988). He is remembered even today, where posters, cultural stories and the Malaysian school education system tell his story. His sacrifice is mentioned at The National Heroes Mausoleum (Makam Pahlawan Negara), while Pasir Salak is remembered as a historical site honouring his resistance.

Dol Said (Naning, Melaka)

Dol Said, born Abdul Said, was the 9th *penghulu* (chief) of Naning, a small but strategically significant region near modern-day Melaka. Although Naning was not formally part of British-controlled territories, the British East India Company attempted to impose taxation policies on local chiefs, demanding an annual tribute of one-tenth of agricultural produce in exchange for military protection. Dol Said, recognising the historical independence of Naning, refused to comply, arguing that Naning had long been a self-governing territory rather than a British dependency. His resistance escalated tensions between British colonial administrators and local leaders, culminating in the Naning War (1831–1832). Dol Said, who claimed supernatural powers, emboldened his followers and chiefs from neighbouring areas and initially defeated the British invasion of 1831 through guerrilla warfare and knowledge of the terrain. However, a second British offensive in 1832 began a year of fighting in which 1,200 Indian soldiers opposed a relatively small number of poorly armed Malays. Dol Said eventually surrendered. He was not executed, as the British were very aware of the precariousness of a long-drawn-out battle with Muslims should their unifying figurehead be made a martyr. Instead, he was exiled, marking the end of Naning's resistance (Adam 2022).

Dol Said became recognised as one of the early figures of the Malay resistance against colonisation. The British control and taxation of his hometown, Naning, sparked his defiant attitude, catalysing subsequent uprisings in the region, such as that of Dato' Maharaja Lela in Perak and Mat Kilau in Pahang. Dol Said's defiance was a microcosm of the broader reality faced by Malay leaders as they struggled to safeguard their communities from external forces, making him significant to the study of anti-colonial movements in Malaysia (Andaya and Andaya 2017). Although his resistance ended in defeat, his attempts to maintain Naning's sovereignty remain imprinted in the collective memory of the Malaysian people alongside the folklore surrounding him (Adam 2022).

Comparative Insights Across Cases

The five cases of Mat Salleh, Mat Kilau, Tok Janggut, Dato' Maharaja Lela and Dol Said reveal a spectrum of motivations and contexts that together define the contours of Malay heroism. Their motives varied significantly. Dol Said's defiance in Naning arose from economic grievances and opposition to unfair taxation; Dato' Maharaja Lela's resistance in Perak was rooted in political autonomy and the defence of *adat*; Mat Kilau's and Tok Janggut's struggles combined spiritual and political dimensions, with Tok Janggut explicitly framing his resistance as *jihād*; Mat Salleh's uprising in Sabah reflected both local sovereignty and ethnic identity against external control.

Temporal variation shaped these forms of heroism. Early 19th-century figures such as Dol Said faced the authority of the East India Company. In contrast, late 19th- and early 20th-century leaders like Tok Janggut and Mat Kilau contended with the more institutionalised British colonial state. This chronological shift corresponded to changes in tactics and ideology: from localised disputes to broader appeals to religious solidarity and Malay nationalism.

The role of religion likewise differed. Tok Janggut's revolt in Kelantan fused Islamic obligation with political rebellion, while Dol Said's struggle was largely secular, framed around communal independence. Dato' Maharaja Lela's defiance drew upon both *adat* and Islamic moral codes, situating his resistance within the moral universe of Malay governance.

Despite these distinctions, shared ideals unite these figures. Each demonstrated self-sacrifice, spiritual endurance and adherence to Silat's ethos of courage, honour and discipline. Collectively, they express a moral archetype of the Malay hero: a warrior guided by ethical conviction and communal responsibility, embodying the integration of faith, resistance and moral virtue that continues to inform Malaysian national identity.

What Does This Tell Us About Malay Heroes?

These findings reveal that Malay heroism represents not a single tradition but a continuum shaped by shifting political and religious imperatives. Without a doubt, there is diversity among these tales, but they also have much in common. Religion is a theme, although only occasionally—such as with Tok Janggut—was it promoted in its own right. It was more often used as a rallying cry. Equally intriguing is the question of how far resistance to colonial rule, *per se*, was clearly not a primary motive in most cases. Indeed, internecine conflict among Malays was as likely a consequence as fighting with the British. It is also worth noting how localised many historical actions were. States, such as Perak and Kelantan are not large, as much as the jungle lends them an air of impenetrability. The various uprisings are, moreover, not generally remembered in Britain, which contrasts with colonial adventures elsewhere – for example, the siege of Rorke's Drift in 1879 or the Battle of Omdurman in 1898. The elevation of the Malay heroes into larger-than-life figures is not always a reflection of their broader historical significance (Harper 1999; Cheah 1999).

Within the folklore of the Silat warriors, some stories combine historical facts and myths, performed traditions and cultural imagery. The major focus is on heroism, spiritualised power and a fight against hegemony, with warriors often depicted as champions of justice and guardians of society (Cheah 1999). Unlike many other figures whose deeds have been chronicled in scholarly outputs, these warriors are known primarily through oral tradition (Endicott 1991). Some are said to have possessed blades of light, been invisible (Malay: *siluman*) or summoned spirits to turn them into brave, skilful and defiant icons (Skeat 1900).

Primary documents paint a less mystical picture. Mat Kilau worked as a community leader, whereas his compatriots in the anti-British revolt in Pahang, Dato' Bahaman and Tok Gajah, held positions as senior chiefs of the area, albeit that they lacked noble status. Similarly, Tok Janggut, the famous war hero of Kelantan, was close to the centre of power, as his father was a bodyguard to the sultan. Yet, he is best known today through folklore rather than through court records (Cheah 1999). Both Mat Kilau and Tok Janggut are remembered in heroic stories that have grown more heroic over time. Furthermore, both men were masters of Silat, famed for their extreme bravery and skilled combat techniques, who commanded squads of warriors who defended peasants from banditry and colonial rule (Bailey 2024). That said, the most remarkable parts of their biographies begin with disputes over taxation (Aljunied 2019), which is rarely the stuff of legend. In the case of Dato' Bahaman, the ambivalence of the local sultan—seeming to support the British while offering tacit support to the rebels—suggests a local lack of confidence in Dato' Bahaman's ability to

effect change (Wan Kamal et al. 2014). Tok Janggut, meanwhile, was a relatively minor irritant to the British, his reputation largely based on a single victory at Pasir Puteh, followed by much evasion of capture in the jungle before his final defeat. It is also questionable whether his motives were anti-colonial or driven by opposition to Kelantan's Malay rulers (Kheng 2006).

Folklore has been a transformative influence, raising these heroes from participants in often-complicated matters of policy, statesmanship and commerce to objects of popular veneration. Their portrayal as outstanding fighters with magical powers further cements their status as guardians of defiance against colonial oppression. The more their tales are narrated, the more powerful they become as tools for shaping people's cultural memory, as they choose to preserve the heritage of Malay martial arts and the values of courage and tenacity. The readiness of the Malaysian population in 1969 to believe that an old man from an obscure kampung really was Mat Kilau speaks to this effect – regardless of whether his claims were true or not.

The virtues of self-sacrifice and defiance are exemplified, even exaggerated, in the stories of these heroes. The display of Tok Janggut's body shows the special status of self-sacrifice within Malay culture, connecting it to the Islamic conception of *syahid*. By this, serving justice and sovereignty through dying is a mark of courage and a spiritual obligation. Within Malay culture, the notion of actively opposing foreign subjugation is often cast in the context of a civil and religious obligation to uphold justice (*amar ma'ruf nahi munkar*), meaning that self-sacrifice transcends the merely political (Reid 2015; Roff 1974). Historical sacrifices are still discussed in modern political discourse on nationalism, dissent and moral obligation, proving that true heroes do not seek personal gain or fame but serve their people (Shaharuddin 2014). The self-sacrificial martyrdom of Tok Janggut, the enduring self-sacrifice of Mat Kilau and the defiant self-sacrifice of Dato' Maharaja Lela illustrate forms of Malay adversity. In celebrating these sacrifices, Malaysia ensures that its legacies endure.

The defiance of these heroes is also worthy of note, despite their labels as "freedom fighters" being sometimes the result of post-mythologisation rather than historic deeds (Harper 1999). Tok Janggut and Dato' Maharaja Lela fought primarily against the encroachment of colonial power on the domination of local rulers. While this might be an understandable motive, it amounts to a desire to defend an elite's position rather than to liberate the nation. The emphasis on Silat's primacy in these heroes' modus operandi enabled them to ground their claims on behalf of their people and culture (Farrer 2009).

The Malay heroes, then, were not purely warriors but also strategists of the resistance, able to appeal to distinctive Malay identity markers to create mobilisation networks that sustained protracted uprisings (Milner 1995). Their heroism was active and intelligent and they refused defeat, thus articulating their subjugation. Their prolonged defiance is rooted in an unwillingness to be dominated and forms an undying part of Malay identity and sovereignty. Ensuring that these figures are inculcated in school lessons through historical accounts and national festivities and keeping alive the issues they facilitate, shows that Malay identity will always be bound up with resilience (Khoo 2021).

In addition to their military skills, Malay resistance leaders were proficient in moral, ethical and spiritual leadership. Men, such as Mat Kilau, Dato' Maharaja Lela and Tok Janggut are considered to be more than soldiers who fought in battles. They are held up as men of honourable character and spiritual virtue (Andaya and Andaya 2017; Harper 1999). This, in part, developed through viewing their struggles as a form of *jihad*. Tok Janggut's resistance was presented as more than just a revolt against British tax imposition. It was also deemed an Islamic obligation to defend the sovereignty of Malay Muslims (Roff 1974). Local Islamic scholars (*ulama*) supported his insurgency (Aljunied 2019). Islamic beliefs and Malay *adat* also influenced Mat Kilau's resistance to the British in Pahang (Khoo 2021). His possible return after supposedly dying in the mid-1900s helped solidify his mythic image, making him a true hero who never disappears but returns at times of crisis – a common hero trope from around the world (Shamsul 2001; Campbell 2004).

Dato' Maharaja Lela, a leader of the Perak Rebellion (1875–1876) in opposition to British control, exemplifies the moral aspects of Malay heroism. His antagonism towards colonial rule, which resulted in the murder of J.W.W. Birch, a colonial officer, was not simply a case of opposing alien administration. It was also an attempt to defend Malay self-determination and *adat* (Milner 1995). The British had already started dismantling the existing systems of power and control, weakening the position of Malay lords and religious leaders. To Dato' Maharaja Lela and his followers, this was a double tragedy for political and cultural self-determination (Andaya and Andaya 2017). The merging of spirituality and resistance is indicative of a broader moral Malay paradigm in which resisting oppression is both a political necessity and a religious duty (Reid 2015). As in other cultures, Malay culture practises collective moralistic values, celebrating heroism not only as self-satisfaction or military triumph but also of the leader as a defender of justice and faith.

In retelling historical Malay heroism, actual resistance figures have come to be regarded as quasi-mythical exemplars of boldness and moral beauty, whose lives are laden with folklore and legend (Seal 2001). This phenomenon enables the constant reinterpretation of such characters within emerging social and political realities (Dundes 2005). The metamorphosis of Malay warriors such as Mat Kilau, Tok Janggut and Hang Tuah from historical figures to cultural symbols is one case of how societies create archetypes of heroism that surpass a given historical context (Andaya and Andaya 2017).

Mythmaking is important in any society for many reasons. It encourages the maintenance of national identity, supports the reinforcement of cultural values and helps modify historical characters to suit modern-day needs. Malay heroes serve as symbols of nationalistic defiance while simultaneously embodying virtue, morality and nationalism, which makes them pertinent to sociopolitical discourse. Such a transformation of history into mythology ensures that Mat Kilau, Tok Janggut and Hang Tuah do not merely become historical relics but actively shape contemporary Malaysia's collective memory and identity.

Cultural and National Identity

The remembrance of Malay heroes is central to the development of Malaysia's national identity, providing narratives of resistance, sovereignty and cultural preservation. For instance, national figures Mat Salleh, Tok Janggut and Mat Kilau are no longer regarded solely as historical characters but as embodiments of anti-colonial nationalist sentiments. Their narratives, largely part of historical discourse, education and collective memory, reinforce the idea that resistance and self-determination are central to Malay identity and Malaysia's sovereignty (Andaya and Andaya 2017; Khoo 2021).⁶

Incorporating these narratives into collective memory occurs through the inclusion of heroic narratives in the curriculum and history textbooks (such as the *Buku Teks Sejarah Tingkatan 3*) and through flag-waving celebrations on national holidays, such as *Merdeka Day* (celebrating independence from the British) and *Hari Pahlawan* (Heroes Day). In Malaysian educational discourse, the anti-colonial struggle of the Malay warriors is fetishised as critical nationalist history, with their contributions portrayed as fundamental to the construction of Malaysian identity (Shamsul 2001). By telling these stories to children, the government shapes and solidifies social memory while guaranteeing that the fight for independence remains integral to the nation's identity (Harper 1999).

The construction of public monuments and other commemorative sites entrenches people in the national consciousness beyond the scope of education. Statues, museums and landmarks such as the Tok Janggut memorial in Pasir Puteh, Kelantan, the memorial to Mat Salleh in Tambunan, Sabah and the mausoleum of Dol Said in Melaka serve as living witnesses of history, helping the community remember their past (Khoo 2021). These sites commemorate the heroism of these individuals. Still, more so, they assist in reinforcing nation-building myths, especially during the Independence Day celebrations and other official government functions (Shaharuddin 2014), although it is worth noting that the British erected the memorial to Mat Salleh while Dol Said's mausoleum was built during the period of colonial rule and is sited in a British military cemetery. The implication—which touches on the nature of such figures' heroism—is that their actions were not necessarily viewed as anti-colonial at the time. Dol Said was motivated less by patriotism than religion, while Mat Salleh fits the description of the “plucky underdog”, a type respected by the British even when opposed to them.

Nonetheless, the depiction of these warriors as protectors of cultural preservation is important for constructing Malaysia's identity after colonisation. In idealising them as the embodiment of global solidarity and strength, Malaysia ensures that their sacrifices are pertinent to current political and cultural debates (Shamsul 2001). The construction of myths around certain leaders of the Malay resistance is also associated with state nationalism, in which individuals from the past are turned into icons and subjected to reinterpretation to fit the changing sociopolitical context (Milner 1995). This illustrates how nations actively decide which figures to celebrate and which narratives to accompany them in the context of nationalism (Reid 2015). This again helps to account for the relative invisibility of female figures in national hero narratives. Additionally, the remembrance of Malay warriors emanates from the local and communal levels and is therefore not purely a top-down exercise.

People's stories, tales blended with history and folk myths, continue to preserve and reinterpret the characters in ways that resonate with the corresponding regional cultural identities (Dundes 2005). A case in point is Tok Janggut, who, to many, is considered a national hero, but in Kelantanese oral tradition, is remembered as a warrior who challenged colonial forces in an Islamic sense, thus defending both local and religious identity (Roff 1974). Equally captivating was the grassroots response to Mat Kilau's reappearance in 1969, which illustrates how historical figures continue to contribute to the construction of community stories and current political narratives (Khoo 2021).

Malay heroes have been transformed into national symbols, underscoring the role of commemoration in constructing a nation. Events and characters are commemorated for integration and legitimisation, defining Malaysia in the postcolonial phase, emerging from long external control (Harper 1999). By embedding their narratives in the sociopolitical sphere, Malaysia encapsulates these figures in the discourse of cultural pride, sovereignty and resistance, providing a sense of national identity while casting the people as enduring patriots.

Conclusion: The Legacy of Malay Heroes

This article has argued that the heroic figures discussed are inconsistently treated in the scholarly literature, despite their prominence in stories and folklore. This analysis contributes to a more rounded understanding of Malay heroes within the context of Malaysia's history and cultural identity than has traditionally been the case. These men's acts of defiance, moral leadership and willingness to make sacrifices could, perhaps, create images that empower communities resisting oppression. Commemorative practices, the construction of myths and the incorporation of heroic figures into national narratives indicate socio-political changes and cultural transformations (Dundes 1984).

While these heroes are celebrated in the national memory, such portrayals also warrant some form of critique. Some scholars argue that an exclusive focus on the military aspect of warrior heroism obscures other leadership styles, such as diplomacy and intellectualism, involved in the resistance to oppression faced by Malays (Kinsella, Ritchie and Igou 2015). Furthermore, the mythical depiction of certain characters tends to oversimplify or overemphasise their historical significance, thereby erasing the good-versus-evil struggles that surround their existence (Zimbardo 2018). As has been argued, applying Manichean binaries to the moral agendas of several of the heroes explored is not always helpful. Taken together, these cases extend global heroism scholarship beyond such framing by embedding moral-spiritual duty within collective resistance.

Integrating Malay legends into notions of heroism reinforces the contention that heroism extends beyond fighting on the battlefield; it also encompasses the preservation of culture, defiant diplomacy and even intellectual resistance. Mat Kilau and Tok Janggut used Silat in battles while serving as ethical leaders, rallying their people towards shared interests and traditions (Bailey 2024). Their demonstration of heroism stemmed from obligation and a socio-political landscape that necessitated opposition to foreign rule. Understanding the context of heroism invites a fresh appreciation of Malay heroes, not as larger-

than-life iconic figures but as ordinary individuals who, like many, chose to act resolutely when confronted with domination and subjugation – even if the dominance in question was most potently expressed in taxation policy. This view aligns with other approaches, such as Zimbardo's Heroic Imagination Project, which aims to equip people with the capacity and motivation to actively oppose systemic injustice, unethical authority and the abuse of power (Efthimiou, Allison and Franco 2018).

Do countries like Malaysia need a glorious past? What do a historical figure's integrity, selfless courage and brave deeds contribute? Malaysian history textbooks are frequently given a heroic gloss, presenting real people as embodiments of moral and nationalist fervour infused with hyperbolic ideas of virtue. This casts the characters as semi-divine mythical figures with invincible Silat skills and indomitable bravery. However, as Cheah (1999) has shown in his study of Tok Janggut, complicated historical reality often varies from these simplified narratives. In truth, Tok Janggut was a rebel seeking to engage in multi-layered, politically motivated battles and the details of his rebellion remain disputed. Yet some simplistic textbooks pay little heed to history as they try to subject deadening reality to the pull of legend. Photographs of Tok Janggut, an old, frail man, suggest he did not resemble the idealised sketches that enliven his purported life story. It must also be admitted that, ultimately, all of the heroes explored here proved ineffectual. Malaysia's Merdeka in 1957 was a peaceful political process. The concurrent emergency (which continued until 1960) was an ongoing battle with communist insurgents and not an anti-colonial movement (Ucko 2010).

Like any other nation, Malaysian history is constructed not only by extraordinary men but also by the everyday activities of common people, including those who work, nurture children, engage in state-sponsored entertainment and interact with the government. Although some ordinary citizens may do extraordinary things, categorising them as superhuman or extraordinary is historical and oversimplifies our past. This understanding of history lowers the bar of critical self-reflection. It repeats celebrating our history rather than making honest attempts to show greater respect for the historical figures and events, or for the more complicated entity called Malaysia's collective history.

As we have briefly hinted, future scholarship would profitably investigate the gendered contours of Malay heroism by interrogating how women's roles in resistance have been elided or reinterpreted within nationalist narratives. Further research could also investigate the transmission of moral and cultural values through Silat pedagogy in contemporary educational settings, where martial ethics intersect with civic identity formation. Analysis across ASEAN

might help illuminate diverse constructions of heroism, offering a regional framework for exploring the interplay between religion, resistance and national memory. These avenues of inquiry would deepen the cross-cultural relevance of Malay heroism and contribute to broader discussions on postcolonial identity and historical consciousness.

Notes

1. Silat groups comprise *pesilat* (combatants) who belong to one or more *perguruan* (schools), each with countless styles. Every *perguruan* is associated with a Silat *guru* (instructor) who professes a particular lineage and is often a traditional healer and/or master of occult practices (Farrer 2009).
2. To avoid potential misunderstanding, it is worth noting that the “Mat Salleh” discussed in this article is (to our knowledge) entirely unconnected to the colloquial Malay expression for white people. The origin of this slightly insulting sobriquet probably originates in locals’ shocked reactions to the outrageous drunken behaviour of English seamen (mad sailor – *mat salleh*) during colonisation (Aqil 2022).
3. The Bajau-Suluk people are a distinct ethnic group found primarily in Borneo. They are a fusion of two historically and culturally rich communities: maritime nomads and warrior-traders (Nasution and Ghofur 2017).
4. As Pahang warriors, Mat Kilau and Dato’ Bahaman were raised in a society where Islam was the dominant religion, deeply integrated into governance, law and daily life. Their Islamic beliefs and values significantly influenced their resistance against British colonial rule, as they viewed British interference as a threat not only to Malay sovereignty but also to Islamic traditions and governance in Pahang (Aljunied 2019). Moreover, Tok Gajah, Mat Kilau’s father, was an Islamic scholar and religious leader. Both figures were known to practice Islamic rituals, prayers and fasting, and their fight against the British was sometimes framed as a *jihād* to protect Islam and Malay identity (Andaya and Andaya 2017).
5. The 1969 riots in Malaysia, also known as the May 13 Incident, were ethnic clashes that broke out in the capital, Kuala Lumpur, on 13th May 1969, following the general election. The violence, primarily between Malays and Chinese, resulted in hundreds of deaths, a state of emergency and significant changes in Malaysia’s political and economic policies. It remains one of the most sensitive and defining moments in Malaysian history. Amid the political instability of 1969, Mat Kilau emerged from hiding after being presumed dead for decades. His reappearance at the height of ethnic tensions was symbolically significant, as Mat Kilau was seen as a national hero who had resisted foreign dominance and upheld Malay sovereignty and Islamic values.

6. This can be seen in the recognition offered to these heroes: Tok Janggut Memorial/Tomb in Kampung Tok Janggut, Kelantan; Mat Salleh Memorial in Kampung Tibabar, Sabah; Pasir Salak Historical Complex, Kampung Gajah, Perak; Dol Said Mausoleum, Taboh Naning, near Melaka; Mat Kilau Gallery and Tomb, Kampung Kedondong, Kuantan, Pahang.

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