

From Tradition to Academia: The Institutionalization of Silat in Malaysia (2014–2024)

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Abstract

This study explores how Silat or *Silat Melayu*, long rooted in cultural tradition and community practice, has gradually evolved into a recognised academic discipline in Malaysia between 2014 and 2024. Led by Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) and supported by national organisations such as PASSMAL and PESONA, this transformation reflects a deliberate effort to bring together heritage, education, and science within a structured academic framework. Using a qualitative multi-source approach, the study draws on 47 publications, expert insights, and international case comparisons to understand this development. The findings reveal a clear three-phase progression: early efforts focused on building basic scientific evidence, followed by a phase of training innovation, curriculum integration, and athlete safety, and more recently, a shift towards international collaboration and interdisciplinary research through platforms such as AIRBORNE. Across this journey, five key areas have shaped Silat scholarship: performance science, training and conditioning, curriculum development, injury prevention and recovery, and the preservation of cultural identity. The integration of technologies such as motion analysis has further strengthened coaching practices and athlete welfare, while global networks like IMACSSS and UNESCO-ICM have expanded Silat's academic reach beyond Malaysia. At the same time, this rapid development brings important challenges, particularly in maintaining cultural authenticity and ensuring balanced global partnerships. Overall, the study shows that Malaysia's experience offers a practical and forward-looking model for integrating indigenous martial arts into higher education. By carefully balancing tradition with scientific advancement, Silat

demonstrates how cultural heritage can remain relevant, respected, and globally engaged in the modern academic landscape.

Keywords: Silat Melayu, academicization, curriculum development, motion analysis, cultural sustainability, international collaboration

1. Introduction

Silat Melayu (Malay Silat) is more than a system of combat; it is an intangible cultural heritage that embodies discipline, philosophy, and identity within the Malay world. Rooted in centuries-old village traditions, Silat was long transmitted informally by family master's through oral instruction and ritualised practice (Shapie, 2021). This heritage-driven mode of transmission helped to preserve authenticity but limited documentation, standardisation, and academic recognition. A pivotal effort to bridge tradition with modern education was the standardised Seni Silat Malaysia curriculum, introduced under the national Silat leadership in the early 2000s and formalised in educational institutions by the mid-2010s (Shapie & Elias, 2016; Shapie et al., 2015a;b;c;d). This curriculum defined uniform techniques, grading systems, etiquette, and philosophical values, enabling schools, universities, and community clubs to teach Silat consistently while safeguarding its cultural integrity (Shapie et al., 2024a; Shapie, 2021).

The past decade (2014–2024) marked a decisive shift from community-based practice to structured academicisation. The Malaysian government's cultural-heritage agenda coincided with a growing call to embed Silat within formal education and to examine it through the lens of sports science (Shapie, 2020; Shapie et al., 2013a; b), pedagogy, and cultural studies. Responding to this

need, the Faculty of Sports Science & Recreation (FSR) at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) initiated the first systematic Silat-focused research programme in 2013, concentrating on physiological profiling, sports performance, and coaching methods during the early phase (2014–2017). Injury-prevention and recovery strategies began to emerge as a dedicated line of enquiry from 2018 onward, as the research team explored pre-event massage, stretching protocols, safe plyometric training for children, and recovery-based performance optimisation (Shapie et al., 2018–2024). These studies collectively provided baseline scientific evidence—including aerobic-anaerobic capacity, agility indices, and safety-oriented conditioning—which set the foundation for more advanced sports-science interventions in later years. Parallel to the academic movement, PASSMAL (The Malaysian Organization of Authentic Malay Silat Arts) and PESONA Malaysia (National Federation of Silat Olahraga) championed the heritage and youth-development agenda, ensuring that cultural rituals—such as ceremonial attire, ethics of respect, and traditional music—remained visible as Silat entered schools, universities, and international showcases. This dual emphasis on cultural safeguarding and educational integration defined Malaysia’s distinctive approach to Silat development.

By the late 2010s, Silat research expanded beyond physiology to include curriculum innovation, sports-specific training science, recovery protocols, and the study of cultural identity in martial-arts education. A milestone innovation during this period was the introduction of *Silat Tempur*, a child-friendly combat-sport format designed to teach safe competitive skills while preserving traditional movements. This innovation reflected Malaysia’s broader vision of “sportifying” heritage arts to enhance youth engagement and inclusivity. A significant institutional leap occurred in 2021 with the establishment of the Martial Arts and Combat Sports Research Network (AIRBORNE) under UiTM’s Research Nexus (RENEU). AIRBORNE united sports scientists, pedagogues, biomechanics, ethnographers, and cultural scholars in one research hub to advance Silat studies in a coordinated, interdisciplinary manner. This initiative catalysed the move from isolated studies to integrated research agendas, strengthening UiTM’s leadership in Silat scholarship and positioning Malaysia as a regional knowledge hub for martial-arts education.

AIRBORNE also facilitated stronger international collaborations. Partnerships with the International Martial Arts and Combat Sports Scientific Society (IMACSSS) and the UNESCO International Centre of Martial Arts (UNESCO-ICM,

Korea) expanded the academic reach of Malaysian Silat. These collaborations promoted cross-cultural research exchanges, Scopus-indexed publications, joint conferences, and knowledge-sharing on safeguarding indigenous martial-arts traditions within global sport-science and physical-education frameworks. Despite this rapid growth in studies and innovations—including coaching-certificate programmes, the use of motion-analysis technology, and the rise of *Silat Tempur* (Shapie et al., 2019a;b) and *Silat EVO* competitive formats (Shapie, 2025)—research findings remained dispersed across journals, conference proceedings, technical reports, and institutional archives. The lack of systematic synthesis made it difficult for educators, policymakers, and international collaborators to fully appreciate Malaysia’s collective achievements in Silat academicization.

The present study responds to this gap by conducting a qualitative multi-source synthesis to map Malaysia’s evolving Silat scholarship between 2014 and 2024. It examines key drivers, milestones, and challenges that shaped Silat’s path from cultural tradition to global academic recognition. In doing so, it highlights how the interplay of curriculum standardisation, research-driven innovation, national heritage bodies, and global academic networks has created a replicable model for integrating indigenous martial arts into higher education. By documenting Silat’s journey of progression and recognition, the study contributes to a wider discourse on cultural sustainability, sports-science integration, and the future of martial-arts education in a global context. It argues that Malaysia’s experience demonstrates the possibility of maintaining cultural authenticity while embracing evidence-based approaches and international collaboration—an approach that could guide other traditional martial-arts communities seeking academic legitimacy without cultural dilution.

2. Methods

This study adopted a qualitative multi-source design to capture both historical development and present-day challenges in Silat academicization. Three complementary data streams were used:

2.1 Literature Review:

A total of 47 Silat-related studies published between 2014 and 2024 were reviewed. These included journal articles indexed in Scopus and Web of Science, conference proceedings (e.g., IMACSSS Congress), institutional reports, and grey literature such as coaching manuals. The review focused on works anchored in the Seni Silat Malaysia curriculum, excluding non-standardized Silat forms

to maintain thematic consistency. Each publication was organized in a matrix-based coding framework, with a sample excerpt shown in Table 1 (Sample Coding Matrix).

Table 1. Sample Coding Matrix of Silat Research (2014–2024)

Year	Author(s)	Research Theme	Methodology	Type of Innovation / Focus	Level of Impact
2014	Shapie et al.	Fitness characteristics of youth Silat performers	Field-based physiological testing	Baseline aerobic–anaerobic profiling	Grassroots athlete development
2016	Shapie & Elias	Seni Silat Malaysia curriculum description	Qualitative curriculum analysis	Standardised teaching & grading	Curriculum / national programme
2016	Shapie et al.	Static stretching vs pre-event massage (kicking speed)	Controlled intervention	Warm-up / recovery protocol	Athlete preparation / injury-risk reduction
2018	Shapie et al.	Circuit training & fighting performance (youth)	Applied training study	Conditioning protocol for competitive readiness	Athlete performance enhancement
2019	Al-Syurgawi & Shapie	6-week plyometric training & strength	Controlled intervention	Power development with safety emphasis	Athlete safety & performance
2019	Shapie et al.	Silat Tempur: children’s combat-sport innovation	Programme development	Child-friendly competitive format	Grassroots & youth engagement
2020	Samsudin & Shapie	Safety of plyometric for children (review)	Narrative review	Youth conditioning guidelines	Athlete safety / policy guidance
2021	Nawai et al.	Silat curriculum integration in education	Mixed methods	Formal adoption in PE syllabus	Curriculum / policy development

2.2 Expert Interviews:

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine key informants, comprising curriculum developers, senior Silat coaches, and academic researchers affiliated with UiTM’s AIRBORNE Research Interest Group (RIG). Questions explored the milestones of Silat’s integration into higher education, the role of sports-science innovations such as motion-analysis–based injury-prevention strategies introduced after 2018, and the challenges of balancing tradition with modern sport demands.

2.3 Comparative Case Studies:

To contextualize Malaysia’s progress, two reference cases were examined: (a) Indonesia’s Universitas Negeri Padang (UNP), which has pioneered formal Silat teacher-training programs, and (b) UNESCO-ICM in Korea, which advances martial-arts education for youth and cultural exchange. These cases highlighted convergent and divergent approaches in curriculum design, international collaboration, and policy frameworks.

2.4 Data Analysis

All documents and interview transcripts were analysed using a matrix-based coding approach adapted from Gough, Oliver, and Thomas (2017). Each source was coded by year of publication, research theme, innovation type, and impact level (athlete-centred, institutional, or policy). The matrix revealed chronological progressions—an early emphasis on physiological profiling (2014–2017), the emergence of injury-prevention and recovery studies from 2018 onward, and a later concentration on curriculum innovation and internationalisation (2021–2024). A sample of the coding structure is provided in Table 1.

To complement manual coding, were applied to the titles and abstracts of all 47 studies. This analysis generated a keyword-frequency heatmap that visually summarized thematic clusters such as “*training*,” “*curriculum*,” “*Silat Tempur*,” “*recovery*,” and “*cultural identity*”, as shown in Table 2 (Keyword-Frequency Heatmap).

Table 2. Keyword-Frequency Heatmap of UiTM Silat Research (2014–2024)

Keyword / Theme	2014-2016	2017-2019	2020-2022	2023-2024	Total Frequency
Training / Conditioning	████	██████	██████	██	22
Curriculum Integration	█	██	████	██████	18

Keyword / Theme	2014-2016	2017-2019	2020-2022	2023-2024	Total Frequency
Silat Tempur	–	■	■	■	19
Recovery / Injury Prevention	■	■	■	■	14
Cultural Identity / Heritage	■	■	■	■	12
Motion Analysis & Technology	–	■	■	■	9
Youth Engagement / Grassroots	■	■	■	■	13
International Collaboration	–	–	■	■	10

***Legend:** – = no occurrence; ■ = low; ■ = moderate; ■ = very high. Shades indicate relative keyword density detected via Voyant Tools & Excel ToolPak from the titles/abstracts of the 47 publications.

2.5 Integrated Analysis:

Finally, the three data streams—literature review, expert interviews, and comparative case studies—were integrated to enhance the credibility, consistency, and interpretive depth of the findings. The step-by-step workflow that linked manual classification with text-mining outputs is summarized in Figure 1 (Analysis-Process Diagram).

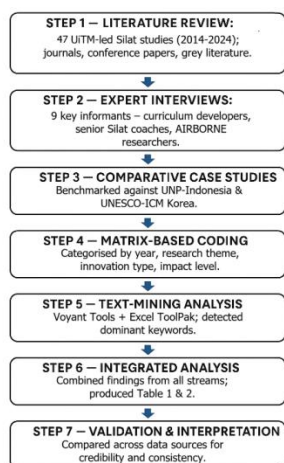


Figure 1. Analysis-Process Diagram for the Silat Research Synthesis (2014–2024)

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Overview of the Dataset

A total of 47 publications (2014 – 2024) met the inclusion criteria: 36 peer-reviewed journal articles (many indexed by Scopus/WoS), seven conference proceedings, and four institutional or grey-literature outputs including national coaching manuals and curriculum guidelines. The publication trend shows three distinct phases: an initial evidence-building stage (2014-2017), a training-innovation and curriculum-integration stage (2018-2020), and a strategic internationalisation stage (2021-2024) that coincided with the launch of UiTM’s AIRBORNE RIG. Keyword-frequency mapping (Figure 1) revealed five dominant research clusters:

(1) training science, (2) curriculum, (3) Silat Tempur, (4) recovery / injury-prevention, and (5) cultural identity. These clusters chart the discipline’s progression from traditional combat knowledge to an evidence-based academic field grounded in Malay cultural heritage yet responsive to contemporary sport-science demands.

3.2 Phase I: Evidence-building through Physiological Profiling (2014 – 2017)

Early UiTM-led studies established baseline physiological and performance profiles—aerobic-anaerobic capacities, reaction-time, strength and kicking-speed tests (Shapie et al., 2013a; b; 2014). At this stage, silat remained largely a heritage-sport practice (Shapie, 2016a;b; Parnabas et al., 2015). Research was descriptive and diagnostic, providing benchmark data for national-team selection and training targets but with limited pedagogical or policy influence.

Nevertheless, these foundations proved crucial for later intervention-based work, illustrating that culturally embedded practices can benefit from modern assessment tools without undermining their identity.

3.3 Phase II: Training Innovation, Curriculum Integration and Safety (2018 – 2020)

A marked shift occurred as sports-science experimentation accelerated. Key developments included:

- a) Plyometric and circuit-training protocols for explosive power and endurance (Al-Syurgawi, 2018; Al-Syurgawi & Shapie, 2019).
- b) Motion-analysis-driven injury-prevention and recovery strategies introduced after 2018, reflecting growing concern for athlete welfare (Shapie et al., 2018a; Samsudin & Shapie, 2020; Shapie et al., 2022a).
- c) The expansion of Silat Tempur, a children’s combat-sport format, which required age-

appropriate safety standards (Shapie et al., 2019a; Samsudin & Shapie, 2020; Shapie et al., 2022a).

- d) Pilot curriculum-integration projects embedding Silat in Malaysian schools and universities (Shapie et al., 2020; Nawai et al., Shapie & Meng, 2020; Samsudin & Shapie, 2020).

This period signalled a dual commitment to scientific rigour and participant safety—a necessary step for Silat’s sportisation while maintaining its role as cultural education (Nawai et al., 2024).

3.4 Phase III: Internationalisation and Inter-disciplinary Scholarship (2021 – 2024)

The creation of AIRBORNE RIG (2021) ushered in a phase of structured interdisciplinary collaboration. Research priorities expanded to include:

- a) Coach-education and certification frameworks aligned with national sport-governance (Shapie et al., 2022b; c).
- b) Integration of motion-capture biomechanics to study striking and evasive patterns (Shapie et al., 2022d).
- c) Recovery-science studies linked to workload monitoring. AIRBORNE Silat Recovery Projects (2021-2023) – internal UiTM RMC-funded work that extended earlier stretching-massage (Sani et al., 2023; Shapie et al., 2016c) & plyometric-safety studies into load-monitoring and recovery guidelines for youth & elite Silat (Rahim et al., 2022).
- d) Socio-cultural and historical inquiries into the Malay warrior ethos (Shapie, 2021).
- e) Design of Silat EVO, a professional cage-style format derived from Tempur (Pawista et al., 2020; Shapie et al., 2023;2019a;b; Aziz et al., 2023) principles that emphasises athlete safety, data-driven coaching and commercial-sport appeal.

Publication output increased sharply, with UiTM authors contributing to Scopus- and WoS-indexed journals and collaborating with global networks such as IMACSSS (Europe) (Gora & Wasik, 2014; Pawelec et al., 2015; Cynarski & Kubala, 2017; Gutierrez-Garcia et al., 2019; Pawel, 2022; Pawel et al., 2022) and UNESCO-ICM (Korea) (Shapie, 2022; Yeji, 2024). These platforms not only amplified Silat’s academic recognition but also provided cross-cultural dialogue that encouraged comparative learning while safeguarding local authenticity.

3.5 Cross-cutting Research Pillars

Five enduring pillars emerged across the decade:

- a) *Physical-performance metrics* – supporting talent identification and evidence-based training targets.
- b) *Training & conditioning science* – intervention studies for power, endurance, agility and technique refinement.
- c) *Curriculum & pedagogy* – embedding Silat in formal education and standardising coach education.
- d) *Recovery & injury-prevention* – post-2018 emphasis on motion-analysis-guided workload control.
- e) *Socio-cultural identity & heritage studies* – safeguarding the philosophical ethos of Silat Melayu while adapting to contemporary competition norms.

Together these pillars show that scientific advancement need not replace tradition; instead, it can reinforce cultural sustainability by making participation safer, more inclusive and academically credible.

3.6 Implications for Policy, Practice and Cultural Sustainability

The synthesis yields several strategic insights:

- a) *Research-to-practice translation*: The translation of research into practice is evident in the pathway that moved from baseline physiological studies to sports-science interventions, progressed into the development of safety standards for Silat Tempur, and ultimately informed the rules of Silat EVO—demonstrating how evidence-driven sport development can successfully emerge from indigenous traditions.
- b) *Institutionalisation as a catalyst*: Dedicated structures such as AIRBORNE, and heritage-custodian bodies PASSMAL and PESONA, ensured continuity of funding, data collection and culturally aligned curriculum oversight.
- c) *Technological adoption with safeguards*: The adoption of technology, particularly motion-capture-assisted biomechanical studies, enhanced coaching credibility and improved athlete welfare, which proved essential for ensuring the legitimacy of youth-sport programmes and supporting the development of future professional Silat leagues.
- d) *Global partnerships as accelerators*: Collaboration with IMACSSS and UNESCO-ICM served as a powerful accelerator by providing external peer

review, intercultural benchmarking, and meaningful policy dialogue—factors that proved essential for achieving international academic recognition.

- e) *Balancing authenticity and innovation:* While professionalised formats like Silat EVO increase public appeal, scholars stress the need to retain philosophical roots—rituals, etiquette, and Malay warrior values—within modern rulesets to prevent cultural dilution.

The three-phase progression of Silat scholarship — from early physiological studies to training-driven innovation and finally to globally connected interdisciplinary scholarship — is summarised in Figure 2.

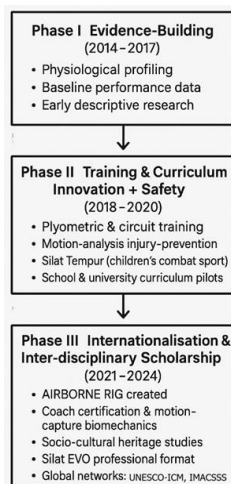


Figure 2. Three-phase progression of Silat research in Malaysia (2014-2024) showing the pathway from baseline physiology to training innovation and on to global academicisation and Silat EVO.

3.7 Relevance to the Broader Discourse

The findings reinforce a central proposition: that the preservation of Silat’s philosophical foundations, when aligned with interdisciplinary scholarship, provides a viable pathway for integrating indigenous martial arts into contemporary academic systems. Malaysia’s experience demonstrates that such traditions can evolve beyond heritage preservation to function as dynamic academic disciplines without compromising their cultural integrity. This transformation contributes to broader debates on traditional knowledge systems by illustrating a model of balanced integration, where empirical sports science, culturally grounded pedagogy, and philosophical values coexist as complementary dimensions rather than competing paradigms. In this sense, Silat Melayu reflects what may be understood as a “living tradition” within martial arts anthropology—continuously negotiated

between continuity and adaptation. At the same time, the internationalisation of Silat through networks such as IMACSSS and UNESCO-ICM positions it within a wider intercultural and comparative discourse. While these engagements enhance visibility and academic legitimacy, they also introduce critical concerns regarding epistemic balance, representation, and the risk of cultural dilution. Overall, the Malaysian case advances the discourse on cultural sustainability by demonstrating that the academicization of indigenous martial arts can serve as both a preservation strategy and a platform for global scholarly engagement.

4. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the academicisation of Silat in Malaysia—anchored by UiTM and supported by heritage-driven organisations such as PASSMAL and PESONA—has evolved from evidence-gathering and safety-focused training research into an internationally recognised interdisciplinary field. The systematic synthesis of 47 publications, complemented by expert interviews and comparative case studies, revealed how sports-science innovations, curriculum integration, and cross-cultural partnerships have strengthened both the academic credibility and the cultural sustainability of Silat. The findings confirm that scientific advancement and cultural authenticity can co-exist: the same research that enhanced performance, coaching, and athlete welfare also reinforced Silat’s philosophical and heritage values. By leveraging collaborative platforms such as IMACSSS and UNESCO-ICM, Malaysia has positioned Silat as a living heritage that contributes to global discussions on traditional knowledge systems and martial-arts education. Moving forward, future scholarship could deepen this framework by evaluating digital coaching technologies, long-term policy impacts on youth development, and comparative cultural-sport models across other Southeast-Asian traditions. The Malaysian experience illustrates a forward-thinking model for transforming an indigenous martial art into a vibrant academic discipline—preserving authenticity while expanding global relevance.

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