



The Historical Evolution and Preservation of Semende Kuntau Martial Art in South Sumatra

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Abstract

This study examines the history and development of the Semende Kuntau martial art in Muara Enim Regency, South Sumatra. Semende Kuntau is a form of local cultural heritage that serves not only as a martial art but also as a medium for transmitting cultural, moral, and religious values from one generation to the next. This study aims to examine the historical development, social functions, and preservation efforts of Semende Kuntau in the face of modernization. The research employed the historical research method by utilizing written sources and oral sources obtained through interviews with community leaders and Kuntau practitioners. The findings indicate that Semende Kuntau has existed since the eighteenth century and was initially transmitted through certain family lineages before gradually becoming an integral part of the community's customary and cultural activities. Over time, its function shifted from a means of self-defense to a traditional performance art presented during customary ceremonies, particularly wedding celebrations. Modernization has contributed to a decline in young people's interest in learning Kuntau. However, since 2010, various preservation efforts have been undertaken through the establishment of martial arts schools, regular training programs, and participation in cultural events. Therefore, Semende Kuntau continues to survive as an important cultural identity of the Semende community, possessing significant historical and philosophical values.

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INTRODUCTION

The Semende region is part of the administrative area of Muara Enim Regency, South Sumatra Province. Administratively, the region is divided into three sub-districts, namely Semende Darat Laut, Semende Darat Tengah, and Semende Darat Ulu, covering an area of approximately 900 km² (Saputro et al., 2020). Geographically, the Semende region is located in the Bukit Barisan highlands at an elevation ranging from approximately 700 to 1,500 meters above sea level. Its natural landscape is predominantly characterized by hilly terrain and upstream river areas and is directly bordered by the Mount Patah region to the west. This geographical setting gives Semende a relatively cool tropical climate compared to the lowland areas of South Sumatra (Badan Pusat Statistik Kabupaten Muara Enim, 2024). These geographical characteristics and the way of life of the Semende community have contributed to the formation of a rich local cultural diversity that has been passed down from generation to generation, including traditional martial arts practices.

Martial arts constitute one form of culture that has developed widely across various regions of the Indonesian archipelago. Martial arts emerged as a means for humans to defend and protect themselves and represent a combination of physical activity, art, self-defense techniques, sports, and spiritual development that evolved according to human needs for survival. Over time, martial arts spread throughout the world, and almost every country developed its own forms of martial arts in accordance with its cultural characteristics and local traditions (Magfirah, 2016). Their function is not only as a means of self-defense against threats but also as a physical activity that fulfills human bodily needs through sports. The complexity of these functions has encouraged martial arts to grow and develop within the social life of communities (Habsary et al., 2023). The diversity of martial arts in the Indonesian archipelago demonstrates variations in forms, techniques, and values that have developed in accordance with the social and cultural characteristics of their respective communities. One form of martial art that has developed and possesses distinctive characteristics is Kuntau. Kuntau is a traditional martial art that is practiced in several

regions of Indonesia, particularly in Sumatra and Kalimantan (Sapentri, 2023:12).

The Kuntau martial art originated from Chinese communities who migrated from the Guangdong (Kwantung) region. The arrival of these Chinese communities was later followed by the presence of the Dutch colonial government. In its development, the Chinese communities cooperated with local inhabitants in resisting Dutch colonial rule, which subsequently gave rise to and strengthened the practice of Kuntau martial arts (Vera et al., 2023). Etymologically, the term *Kuntau* can be broken down into two elements: *kun*, meaning "fist" or "clenched hand," and *tau* (referring to the concept of *Tao* in Taoism), which is interpreted as the way, method, or wisdom of life. Based on its linguistic origins, this term is known as *Kuntao* in Indonesian, *Kuntaw* in Tagalog, and is also believed to have originated from Chinese influence in the Malay language, particularly from the Hokkien dialect, where it is pronounced *Kunthau* (Said, 2025).

The martial art of Kuntau is believed to possess a deeper meaning than merely physical combat. Its practice not only trains physical strength but also instills moral and ethical values in its practitioners. A person who studies Kuntau is expected to develop a humble character, avoid arrogance, and be able to control personal desires and situations that may dominate them (Ruswinarsih et al., 2023).

One of the regions that maintains the tradition of Kuntau is the Semende region, located in Muara Enim Regency, South Sumatra. Therefore, Kuntau is not merely regarded as a technique of self-defense, but also as a cultural heritage that embodies philosophical, social, and spiritual values transmitted from one generation to another (Khabibah et al., 2023). Semende Kuntau is not only understood as a martial art but also as a cultural heritage that reflects historical values, life philosophies, and the identity of the community that supports it. Kuntau is a form of martial art inherited from the ancestors and has a close relationship with the belief system of the community that supports it (Lidiantari et al., 2023). Therefore, Kuntau is not merely regarded as a technique of self-defense, but also as a cultural heritage that embodies

philosophical, social, and spiritual values transmitted from one generation to another. The uniqueness of its movements, social functions, and embedded values makes Semende Kuntau important to study and preserve. At present, Kuntau faces several challenges, particularly due to the development of modernization. The younger generation is more interested in modern martial arts such as Karate and Taekwondo, as well as other popular activities. Consequently, interest in learning Kuntau has gradually declined.

In addition to modernization, scientific studies discussing the historical development of Kuntau remain very limited. Information regarding its origins, development, and functions has largely been transmitted through oral traditions by practitioners and community leaders. Therefore, this research was conducted to document the history and development of Semende Kuntau in order to obtain comprehensive information and contribute to efforts to preserve local culture.

This study employs the theory of social change and the concept of cultural heritage as the analytical framework. Social change theory is used to explain the changes in the functions and development of Semende Kuntau amid societal dynamics and the influence of modernization. According to Selo Soemardjan, social change refers to changes in social institutions that affect the social system, values, attitudes, and patterns of community behavior (Marius, 2006). In the context of this study, modernization has influenced the younger generation's interest in traditional martial arts, resulting in changes in the patterns of transmission and functions of Semende Kuntau.

Furthermore, this study applies the concept of cultural heritage, which views Semende Kuntau as a cultural legacy possessing historical, social, and philosophical values for the Semende community. As part of the local cultural heritage, Semende Kuntau functions not only as a martial art but also as a cultural identity that needs to be preserved and passed on to future generations.

METHOD

This study employs the historical research method to examine the development of the Semende Kuntau martial art. The historical method is used to systematically reconstruct past events through the

collection, verification, interpretation, and writing of historical facts related to the development of Semende Kuntau. Historical research in this study aims not only to describe past events chronologically but also to understand the social, cultural, and local values surrounding the development of Semende Kuntau. Therefore, this research utilizes both written and oral historical sources to provide a comprehensive understanding of the existence of Semende Kuntau as a traditional martial art (Halim & Manaanu, 2021). In this study entitled *"The Historical Development of Semende Kuntau Martial Arts"*, the author applies the historical research method.

This study employs the historical research method, which consists of four stages: heuristics, source criticism, interpretation, and historiography. The heuristic stage was carried out by collecting written and oral sources related to the historical development of Semende Kuntau (Caron & Markusen, 2016). It involved gathering data and sources concerning the development of the Semende Kuntau martial art, including both primary and secondary sources. Primary data were obtained through in-depth interviews with six informants: Syawaludin Fitra (68 years old), an advisor and Kuntau instructor; Marwan (50 years old), an advisor and Kuntau instructor; Herianto (35 years old), a Kuntau student; Rahman (54 years old), a Kuntau practitioner; Muhaimin (47 years old), a Kuntau instructor; and Mahpus (76 years old), a Kuntau master and instructor.

The informants were selected using a purposive sampling technique because they were considered to possess extensive knowledge, experience, and direct involvement in the development of Semende Kuntau. In addition, this study also applied a snowball sampling technique, in which additional informants were identified based on recommendations from previous informants to obtain more comprehensive and in-depth data. Secondary data were collected through a literature review of books, journal articles, theses, articles, and other documents relevant to the study.

The source criticism stage involved both external and internal criticism to examine the authenticity and credibility of the sources (Hartati, 2023). Subsequently, the interpretation stage was

conducted by interpreting the verified historical facts to understand the development, functional changes, and preservation efforts of Semende Kuntau within the socio-cultural context of the Semende community (Sidik & Sulistyana, 2021). The final stage was historiography, which involved organizing the research findings into a systematic and chronological historical narrative (Caron & Markusen, 2016). The validity of the data was ensured through source triangulation and methodological triangulation by comparing information obtained from various informants, interviews, documentation, and written sources so that the findings could be scientifically justified.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Semende Kuntau is one of the local cultural heritages that has developed within the Semende community. Based on interviews with several informants, Kuntau is not only understood as a martial art but also as part of a cultural identity that embodies various life values. Kuntau is one of the martial arts traditions that has developed in the life of the Semende people. Its existence is not merely understood as a self-defense technique but also as a cultural identity that has been passed down from generation to generation. In practice, Kuntau reflects the values of the Semende community, such as discipline, courage, and respect for parents and fellow human beings (Interview with Mr. Marwan, January 2, 2026).

The term *Kuntau* consists of two words, namely *kun* and *tau*. *Kun* represents human identity, namely the ability to see, hear, and speak, while *tau* means to know or understand the meaning of every movement being learned. Therefore, Kuntau is considered not merely a form of martial movement but also a body of knowledge related to attitudes and daily behavior (Interview with Mr. Marwan, January 2, 2026). Kuntau has been known since approximately the eighteenth century and was first taught by a figure known as Puyang Gambir Melayang to Puyang Awak or Puyang Junjungan Raje Nyawe. Through these figures, Kuntau subsequently developed and was passed down to later generations. Semende Kuntau functions not only as a martial art but also as a medium for Islamic propagation (*dakwah*), whereby individuals wishing to learn it are first required to recite the *shahada* and

study religious values (Interview with Mr. Mahpus, March 30, 2026).

The explanation provided by Marwan regarding the meaning of the words *kun* and *tau* does not contradict the view that Kuntau originated from Chinese influence and the Hokkien dialect. The explanation by Said (2025) refers to the historical and linguistic origin of the term *Kuntau*, whereas the interpretation conveyed by the informant reflects the local philosophical understanding that has developed within the Semende community. This indicates that, although Kuntau may have originated from Chinese cultural influences, the Semende people have reinterpreted and adapted its meaning according to their own cultural values and worldview. Such a process demonstrates cultural acculturation and the localization of martial arts traditions within the Semende community.

Kuntau also played a role in the struggle against colonial powers, both the Dutch and the Japanese. Kuntau masters were often involved in safeguarding villages or became part of the people's militias, relying on their physical abilities and agility on the battlefield (Said, 2025). During the Japanese occupation, the political strategy adopted differed considerably from that of the Dutch colonial period. Kuntau, as an indigenous Indonesian martial art, was permitted by the Japanese authorities to continue developing as part of Japanese propaganda efforts (Sapentri, 2023:23).



Figure 1. The researcher with Mr. Mahpus during the interview process.



Figure 3. Photograph with Mr. Muhaimin.



Figure 2. Interview session with Mr. Fitra, Mr. Marwan, and Mr. Herianto.



Figure 4. Photograph with Mr. Rahman.

The development of Kuntau can also be seen in the changes in the clothing worn by its practitioners. In its early period, Kuntau practitioners wore simple attire consisting of dark-colored everyday clothing, accompanied by a *peci* (traditional cap) or headband, reflecting simplicity and a focus on movement. However, over time, particularly in traditional performances, guest welcoming ceremonies, and wedding events, Kuntau attire began to incorporate aesthetic elements, such as batik shirts, songket cloth, traditional fabrics, and head accessories in the form of a *tanjak* (Interview with Mr. Muhaimin, December 30, 2025).

Over time, Semende Kuntau began to be taught through several martial arts schools spread throughout the Semende region. One of the schools that remains active today is *Perguruan Kuntau Semende Seriw Sakti*, which was established in 1998 in Semende Darat Laut District and is led by Syawaludin Fitra, with Zofa Marwah serving as an advisor and Ramlan as the chairman. This school has approximately 23 active members, more than 260 semi-active members, and over 500 inactive members. Another school is *Perguruan Kuntau Semende Benang Setupal*, led by Mahpus since 1986 and developed in Semende Darat Tengah and Semende Darat Ulu Districts, with approximately 20 active members and hundreds of semi-active and inactive members. Another institution is SBS (*Seni Bela Diri Semende*), which has been led by Muhaimin since 2008 and has approximately 20 active members.

Kuntau has developed in two forms, namely as a martial art and as a performing art. This development indicates a shift in the function of Kuntau from a means of self-defense to a form of performance and ceremonial activity in society (Mezak et al., 2025). In traditional ceremonies, particularly weddings, Kuntau serves as a complementary element in the procession that accompanies the groom and his family from the groom's residence to the bride's house. As the procession approaches the bride's residence, a Kuntau performance is usually presented as a form of welcome and as a symbol of respect within the traditional ceremony. During the wedding procession, the Kuntau performers take positions at

the front of the bridal entourage, while the musicians walk behind them toward the bride's house (Mezak et al., 2025).



Figure 5. Kuntau Performance during a Traditional Semende Wedding Ceremony
Source: Personal Documentation (December 28, 2025).

Kuntau performances at wedding ceremonies have existed since approximately the 1980s. During that period, Kuntau performers did not receive a fixed payment; instead, they were given voluntary compensation by the host, which was generally provided in the form of *saweran* (monetary contributions from the audience or host). Over time, changes have occurred in the system of compensation for Kuntau performers. At present, in addition to receiving *saweran*, performers generally also receive payment from the event organizers. The amount of payment is not fixed, but it generally ranges around IDR 500,000 per performance, depending on the agreement and the circumstances of the event (Interview with Mr. Muhaimin, December 30, 2025).

CONCLUSION

Semende Kuntau is a local cultural heritage of the Semende community that functions not only as a martial art but also as a cultural identity passed down from generation to generation. Kuntau embodies various life values, including discipline, courage, respect for others, and religious values reflected in its learning process and practice. Based on the oral traditions of the community, Kuntau has existed since the eighteenth century through the figures of Puyang Gambir Melayang and Puyang Awak and was subsequently transmitted to later generations. In addition to serving as a means of self-defense, Kuntau has also functioned as a medium for Islamic propagation (*dakwah*) and played a role in the community's struggle against both Dutch and Japanese colonial rule.

The development of Semende Kuntau demonstrates changes in its functions, transmission system, and forms of performance. In its early development, Kuntau was taught only to certain descendants and primarily functioned as a means of maintaining community security. During the 1970s and 1980s, Kuntau began to develop as part of traditional and cultural activities, such as welcoming guests and wedding ceremonies. However, since the 1990s, interest in Kuntau has declined due to the influence of modernization and changes in people's lifestyles. Nevertheless, from 2010 to 2024, various preservation efforts have emerged through the establishment of martial arts schools, training activities, and the involvement of Kuntau in the cultural activities of the Semende community.

The development of Kuntau can also be observed in changes in clothing, performance systems, and the continued existence of active martial arts schools, such as *Perguruan Seriw Sakti*, *Benang Setupal*, and *SBS*. In addition to developing as a martial art, Kuntau has also evolved into a performing art that is presented during traditional wedding ceremonies of the Semende community. Therefore, Semende Kuntau is not only a cultural heritage with historical and philosophical values but also a symbol of the cultural identity of the Semende people that must continue to be protected and preserved so that it remains recognized by future generations.

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