



Introduction of Keris; an ancient weapon from Asian peninsula

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ABSTRACT

Out of many weapons possessed by myriad inhabitant tribes of southeast Asia, *Keris* is probably the most unique and well known. The dagger is a common weapon along the Malayan Peninsula, Indonesia, and the Philippines. *Keris* can be classified into two types based on its shape, namely straight *Keris* and *Luk* (wavy) *Keris*, which always odd in number. *Empu*, the name given to the *Keris* maker, hardened iron as the core material in making the knife with particular techniques passed from their predecessor. An object can be classified as a *Keris* if it has fulfilled the strict prerequisite of

Keris. Today's society put *Keris* as heritage that should be preserved. Its function progressed from the weapon into antiques, part of the traditional ceremony or even considered as a sacred relic by in Balinese communities. In addition, *Keris* is also hunted by collectors who put interest on it. The weapon was made throughout a long and challenging process. To keep its durability from the natural oxidation process, therefore, the *Keris* owner is compulsory to do regular cleaning to preserve its shine and durability.

Keyword: *Keris*, Weapon, Society

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INTRODUCTION

In ancient Society of Indonesia, weapons play two distinct roles as a tactical weapon and prestigious item. Out of many weapons possessed by myriad inhabitant tribes of southeast Asia, *Keris* is probably the most unique and well known. The dagger is a common weapon along the Malayan Peninsula, Indonesia, and the Philippines.^{1,2,3} It has a distinct wavy shape on its blade, but there is also a straight-shaped *keris*. Its characteristics and process of making *keris* vary depend on the culture and the period when it was made. This writing discusses the characteristics and some trivia of this precious antique weapon.

KERIS IN HISTORY OF INDONESIA

Keris can be classified into two types based on its shape, namely straight *Keris* and *Luk* (wavy) *Keris*, which always odd in number.⁴ The blade is flat and elongated with two sharp edges and pointed tip. A suitable figure as a stabbing weapon. According to History of Java (1817) by Raffles, He mentioned the *Keris* holds a definite position among the Javanese soldiers. They carried three daggers at a time. On their left waist was *Keris* from their wedding (*Kancing Gelung*), On the right waist from their parents, the third *Keris* is the one they used in battle, however as the last arsenal to end the fight, unlike sword or spear.⁵

In ancient inscriptions, the term of *Keris* has been discussed such as the one inscribed on a bronze plate in Karangtengah, dated 748 Saka, or 842 AD. The script mentions several types of offerings to determine *Poh* as a tax-free area; they offered various items like *Kres*, *wangkiul*, *tewek punukan*, and *wesi penghatap*. *Kres* is the *keris*, *wangkiul* is a spear, whereas *tewek punukan* is a double-edged weapon. Another record is the one written by a Chinese traveler in 922 AD. On his visit to the Kahuripan kingdom on Brantas Riverbank, East Java, he described 'a short sword with hilts made of rhinoceros horn or gold' was given to Emperor of China as a gift from Javanese Maharaja.⁷

In the lower corner of southeast relief of Borobudur Temple, in Central Java, Soldiers depicted carrying sharp blade resemblance to *Keris*. The similar carving also engraved In Prambanan Temple portrayed a giant holding the knife. In Sewu Temple, near Prambanan, A huge statue, slipping a sharp weapon, like a *keris* on its waist. Among many reliefs in temples throughout Java region, the relief on Suku temple probably is the most important finding. The relief displayed fragment about how the *keris* had been made. It answered the method of making *Keris* was by folding and forging metals in hot blazing flame.⁹

THE FORGING METHOD

Empu, the name given to the *Keris* maker, hardened iron as the core material in making the

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Figure 1. Keris has a distinct wavy shape on its blade, but there is also a straight-shaped keris⁶



Figure 2. Southeast relief of Borobudur Temple⁸

knife with particular techniques passed from their predecessor. Old fashioned method to improve the metal solidity was by dipping the blazing steel to a particular chemical liquid until it coated thoroughly. However, this practice resulted in a weapon to have a thick outer but remain fragile on the core. Hence, it is preferable to be used as finishing rather than to strengthen the blade. The second technique

conducted by inserting different type of metals while folding and forging the dagger. The Empu chose a flexible nature metal, serves as a framework to the Keris; thus, it would be more durable. The results of this process also emerging a silver pattern on the blade that is commonly called *pamor*. The *pamor* gives aesthetic value to the dagger. As the science of metallurgy and technology in forging continue to improve, the technique of making weapon as prestigious possession also flourished. The Empu may design the *pamor* motifs rather than let it formed naturally through the forging process. According to the myth, it is said that every *pamor* hold its mystical value that gives a particular effect to the owner of the keris. It might bring profits or losses to its master.

This stabbing weapon on its journey becomes a cultural heritage. Its value rests on the various phases that the Empu should pass before the dagger could be given to the requester. It is more likely to be addressed as spiritual work rather than a mere process of forging weaponry. The empu in making a keris could spend monthly to yearly to finish a single blade. The stages start from the process of meditation to determine the suitable day to start the work, including conducting special rituals to imbued a 'soul' to the weapon. Besides, the length of a keris represents its function. By measuring a keris from its base to tip using four fingers, the remaining length of the keris indicated the purpose of the keris. Three fingers mean it is to help the owner in decision-making, two fingers for spiritual purposes, one and a half fingers as an amulet, and last but not least, one finger is believed for agriculture.¹⁰

AESTHETICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL VALUE

An object can be classified as a Keris if it has fulfilled the strict prerequisite of Keris. The reason stands on core principle; thus, it can be distinguished with any other handheld weapon. The dagger must consist of two main parts, namely the blade part (including *pesi*) and *Ganja*. The length of the blade is at least 30 cm and a maximum of 42 cm. The usual length of the keris blade is between 33 - 38 cm. Some keris outside Java can reach 58 cm. In Bali, the average size is 40-45 cm.¹¹ The blade part represents *Lingga*, while the *ganja* symbolizes *Yoni*. In the Hindu philosophy, the union of *lingga* and *yonis* is a symbol of hope for fertility, eternity (preservation), and strength. The blade must always make a certain angle to the *ganja*, not perpendicular. The sloping or leaning dagger represents a philosophy, whatever his rank and position, must always show respect not only to the creator but also to others. Furthermore,



Figure 3. The relief on Sukuh temple⁸

Keris has some decorative details called *Ricikan*. Keris usually forged from three kinds of metal such as iron, steel and prestige material or at least two metals. In previous study analyzing Keris collection at Tosan Aji Purworejo Museum, the results of the analysis using the x-ray method showed that elements that were recognizable in the metal weapons were Fe (iron), Ni (nickel), Re (Rhenium), Cu (copper), Sn (Tin), Cr (chromium), Au (Gold), Mn (manganese), Zn (zinc), and Nb (niobium).¹²

Pesi, a cylindrical iron and extends from five to eight cm, inserted to the handle or in local tongue called *ukiran*. Ganja is a blunt-edged separated base of the blade to protect the hand from the blade base sharp edge. The Ukiran usually made of wood, ivory, or horns. The material is soaked in a mixture of herbs for months before shaped into a handle. Its shape is simple, but for a prestigious one, the ukiran sometimes compounded with gemstone or even covered with gold. In Bali region, the ukiran is carved into a figure of a deity, priest, dancer, giant, horse head, or any figure. The typical form of Balinese style is a giant figure with a radiant face. the handle symbolizes magical power as well as adds intimidating effect to the blade.⁷

KERIS IN MODERN SOCIETY

Today's society put Keris as heritage that should be preserved. It is no longer serve as a weapon or daily utensil. Its function progressed into antiques or part of a traditional ceremony. Some people keep Keris as a sacred relic in the temple, especially in Balinese communities. In addition, collectors of antique who put interest on it willingly spend their time only to find the best keris. The historical, artistic, as well as its mystical value, invites people around the globe to travel far away and spend their fortune to obtain the blade.

Although the weapon was made throughout a long and challenging process, it remains a metal object that can be damaged due to the natural oxidation process. Therefore, the Keris owner is compulsory to do regular cleaning to maintain its shine and durability.¹⁴ The keris should be maintained its purity both physically and yet spiritually for the sacred one. The physical maintenance is conducted by annual clean or every six months if necessary. The cleaning process must be done carefully, or it might damage the knife. Commonly, the cleaning process should be applied if it is started to get a rusty stain. The blade is washed by soaking it on the coconut water for several days. Should the stain persistent to be removed, then it is gently scrubbed with lemon juice until the rust dissolves from the blade. The process must be

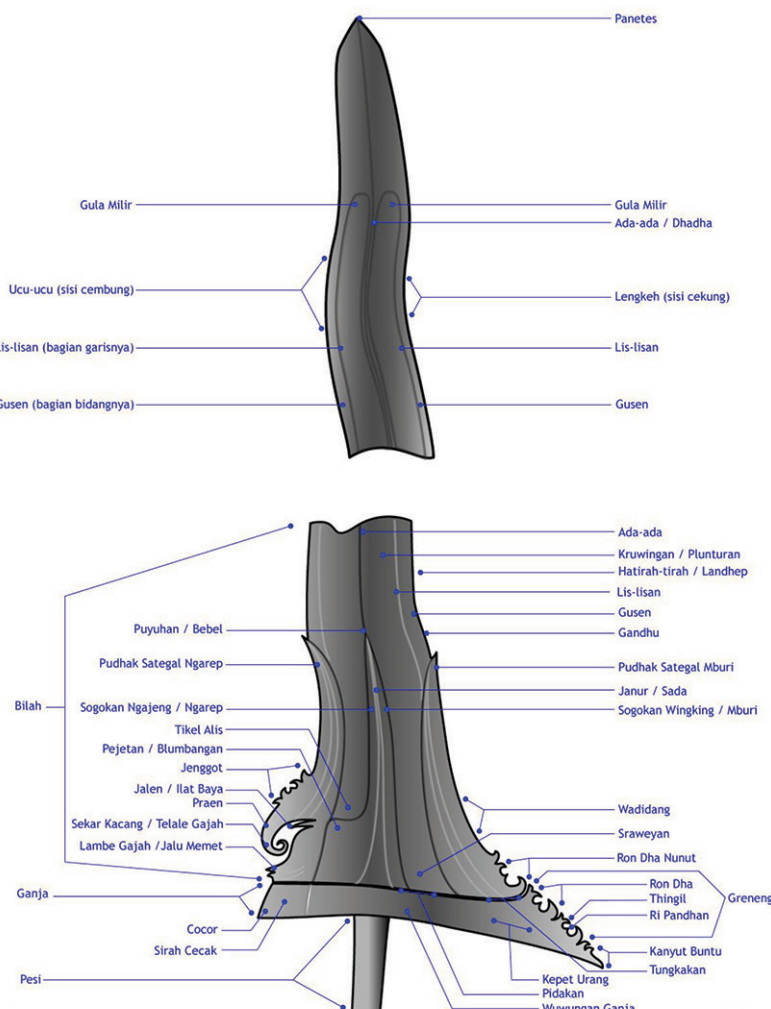


Figure 4. Details of a Keris¹³



Figure 5. Ritual on Tumpek landep¹⁶

conducted in a sacred area for the holy Keris. After the cleaning process, the Keris will be coated with coconut oil mixed with fragrance oil.¹⁵

In Bali, Keris and other weaponry or sharp-edged object are cleaned and celebrated by ritual, once every 210 days on *Tumpek Landep* day. The objects are cleaned, placed in the temple altar, sprinkled with holy water, and presented with offerings. Locals honor the blade with red flowers as an embodiment of Lord Brahma (the God of Fire and creation). The ceremony is also a prayer to Lord *Pasupati*, asking for a 'sharp mind,' a highly determined will to walk on righteous path.¹⁰

CONCLUSION

Based on its shape, Keris can be divided into two types, namely straight Keris and Luk (wavy) Keris. The *Empu* forge various metals in making the knife with particular techniques passed from their predecessor. The process of making the blade is considered a spiritual work rather than a mere forging process. An object is identified as a Keris if it has fulfilled the strict prerequisite of Keris. Today's society put Keris as heritage that should be preserved. Its function progressed from the weapon into antiques, part of the traditional ceremony or even considered as a sacred relic by in Balinese communities. In addition, Keris is also hunted by collectors who put interest on it. The weapon was made throughout a long and challenging process.

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