

An Introduction to the Kris

By Ronald P Stride

Wisma, wanita, kukila, turongga, curiga.

Happy was the Javanese man blessed with a house, a wife, a singing bird, a horse and a kris.
(Old Javanese saying)

What is a kris?

The kris is a distinctive dagger found throughout the Malay world, but the finest are arguably from Central and East Java and Bali, in Indonesia. Although all kris follow a basic model, there is an almost endless variety of blades, hilts, sheaths and decorations. This variety depends on local styles which can vary from island to island and the specific designs the kris smith, called an *empu*, wanted to create, especially in the blade's design.

The kris is a thrusting weapon made for close encounters; however, some experts argue that it is more a symbolic weapon than one meant for actual fighting. Moreover, it is a mystical object believed to have supernatural powers that can protect its owner from danger, bring him prosperity, make him courageous and ensure good luck. Up to about 100 years ago, krises were worn daily as part of male attire and also served as status symbols for their owners. Therefore, they are made of the best materials available and are occasionally decorated with gemstones and gold ornamentation. They were part of the regalia of Javanese kings and symbolised the ruler's power and his mandate to rule. Even today, the kris is part of the official regalia of Malay sultans.

What are the origins of the kris?

The early beginnings of the kris are obscure. According to western scholars, it evolved from Hindu origins in Central Java during the Majapahit period in the 14th century. Candi Sukuh, circa 1361, contains a forge scene that probably depicts the manufacture of krises. Since no evidence of them can be found on the walls of Borobudur, one can surmise that the origin of the kris was sometime between the 9th and 13th centuries. In this scenario, the kris evolved from a fish-shaped blade referred to as a *Kris Buda* and is over 650 years old.

A more accepted Javanese story has Panji, a hero-prince



Surakarta kris

who lived around 920, introducing the kris, gamelan and *wayang* puppet drama during his reign. According to interpretations of ancient Javanese manuscripts, there is evidence that straight blade krises were manufactured as early as the third century, but this seems to be unreliable. Another popular legend attributes the kris to a 14th century king of Janggala in East Java, Inakarta Pati. From these and other interpretations, the conclusion is that the true origin of the kris remains a mystery.

What are the characteristics of the kris?

The basic parts of a kris are the blade, sheath and hilt, although there are other components of kris dress as well. The hilt, called *ukiran*, is always finely carved out of richly grained woods or, in some cases, from ivory, silver, gold or bone. In Java, the most popular styles are an abstract figure of a *wayang* puppet character or garuda, and perhaps a highly abstract human figure typical of Central Java. In Bali, more often the *ukiran* is in the shape of mythological figures, such as Bayu, or other semi-gods and demons and contains a profusion of semi-precious gems. *Ukirans* are prized in

their own right and are the focus of individuals who specialise in collecting them.

Decorative ring ornaments (*mendaks*) smooth the transition from the hilt to the blade. These are beautiful works of art usually made of copper, but many are made of gold and fitted with precious stones. In Solo



West Java kris



A Balinese kris with a sinuous blade



A Balinese kris with a straight blade

and Sumatra, there is an additional cup supporting the base of the hilt, called a *selut*. The *selut* is a large roundish ring typically made of gold or silver. It also contains diamonds and other precious stones.

The blade or *wilah* has an elongated form – either straight or sinuous – of rough texture with a double-sharp edge and contains beautiful damascene-like patterns forged from iron ore and nickel. Isaac Groneman, in his masterwork *The Javanese Kris*, identified 118 types of kris, 40 of which are straight and 78 sinuous. The sinuous kris always has an odd number of waves, although it is sometimes difficult to distinguish the last small wave at the tip of the blade. Some people refer to the blade as serpentine – a sinuous blade is a snake in motion while a straight blade is a snake at rest.

The forged patterns or *pamor* in the blade have different symbolic meanings and associations; Groneman concluded that there are five basic patterns with hundreds of variations. His five patterns are:

- Scattered rice grain
- Nutmeg flowers
- Straight standing flowers
- Parallel coconut leaves and
- Ginger flowers

The last element of the blade is the *parobot* which denotes the figures found at the base of the blade. The elephant's trunk is the most common figure, but lions, serpents, garuda and other mythological figures can also be identified. In some high-quality krites, the base and lower portion of the *wilah* contain gold animal and floral patterns.

The sheath is an indispensable part of the kris – it is the house in which the *wilah* or blade resides. Sheaths, similar to other components of the kris, are the responsibility of specialised craftsmen. It was not uncommon over the centuries to have new hilts and sheaths made for old blades or to have new blades made for old sheaths. Hence, it is probable that the blade, hilt and sheath of an old kris did not start life together.

The sheath or *sarung* of a kris has three parts:

- A cross-piece or *wrangka* usually made of high-quality wood with patterns in the grain, but also produced from



Yogyakarta kris

ivory, bone and other materials. The *wrangka* comes in two forms in Java: a kidney shape or an abstract boat shape. In Bali, there is also a popular hatchet-shaped cross piece as well as the kidney shape.

- The stem or *gandar* is made of wood and, if not covered by a panel, has a highly decorative pattern. In some krites, the *wrangka* and *gandar* are made from a single piece of wood that is much more highly prized.
- The stem, called a *pendok*, is often covered by a silver or gold panel on either or both sides. *Pendoks* are usually decorated with a variety of incised or *repoussé* floral or animal designs.

What is the status of the kris today?

In Groneman's era, 100 years ago, the kris was already in decline owing to the lack of nickel and the Dutch ban on wearing the kris in public. In recent times, it was believed that kris-making had died out completely, but this has proved to be inaccurate as a small number of kris smiths still work around Yogyakarta and in Bali. There is

also a renewed interest in collecting krites, especially by Indonesians. In some families, the heirloom kris, *pusaka*, is still revered by family members and is given special offerings and a position of respect in the home.

The kris is a fascinating subject because of its high craftsmanship and the quality of its materials, its long history and the magic and mythologies surrounding it.

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All photos by Peter Paul Tan