

# My Date with an Empu

By Darlene D Kasten



Forging a keris from billet to finished blade. Photos by Darlene Kasten

Almost immediately after moving to Singapore from South Africa in early 2016, I began my training to become an FOM docent at the Malay Heritage Centre. It was the first time this American had ever heard of a *keris*. I learned that the *keris*, a dagger often recognised by its distinctive serpent-like curves, is the most revered weapon known to the Malays, the ethnocultural group that shares ancestry in the Southeast Asian Malay Archipelago. I learned that perhaps even more than its being a weapon, the *keris* is a spiritual object, a talisman reputed to have magical powers and to provide protection to the wearer. They are accessories

for ceremonial dress, an indicator of social status, heirlooms and a recognisable symbol of ethnic identity.

*Keris* are forged from iron and nickel. It is thought that Malays discovered the nickel-iron combination in metal from meteorites, as nickel is otherwise very scarce in the region. It is known that a meteorite which fell to earth in central Java in the 18<sup>th</sup> century was used for *keris* that are closely connected to the courts of Yogyakarta. Perhaps it was the discovery of this material that dropped from the heavens which gave rise to the *keris's* spiritual reputation. Today it remains a ceremonial and ritual item of dress, such as for traditional weddings when the groom's *keris* is worn tucked into his waistband.

The *keris* is crafted by a specialised bladesmith called an *empu*, a highly respected artisan with knowledge of the rituals and mythology handed down by generations of *empu* before him. Part blacksmith and part spiritual leader, the *empu* forges



Sparks fly when forging layers of iron and nickel. Photo by Nick Kasten



Darlene Kasten with Ki Empu Sungkowo Harumbrodjo outside the forge. Photo by Vincent Kasten

the blade, folding together the layers of black iron and silvery nickel to create the *pamor* – the pattern on the blade, of which there is an amazing number of variants – and the *dapur*, or shape of the blade, which may be wavy with an odd number of waves (*luk*), or may be straight (*lurus*).

Learning about the Malays and the legendary *keris* was new and exciting to me. Little did I know that my American husband Vince had been fascinated by it from childhood. With the additional information I had about the history of the *keris* in the region, my husband decided to go to the source and learn more about these legendary weapons and in the process, commission a *keris* for himself and our two grown sons.



Vince Kasten in Madura with Empu Taufik Rahman holding a *keris luk 39*. Photo by Achmad Hariska

The first challenge was to track down an active *empu*. Honoured *empus* who produce the traditional *keris* can still be found in the Malay Archipelago, but they are a scarce and dwindling fraternity. They don't advertise; they are not popular attractions on TripAdvisor and they typically do not speak English. It took significant effort to piece together information from multiple sources for Vince to find out what he needed. This led ultimately to him engaging Haris, an English-speaking guide who is knowledgeable about the *keris* and also *empus*.

Vince made the trip to visit Empu Taufik Rahman in Aeng Tong Tong Village on Madura Island in February without me. Travelling to Madura is a commitment – from Singapore, one must fly into Surabaya on the East Java mainland and then transfer by ferry and automobile to the remote island village. Haris became a gateway to other active *empus*, which is how in June, while accompanying my husband and our younger son who was visiting from Japan, I came to have my date with Ki Empu Sungkowo Harumbrodjo, more conveniently located on a quiet suburban street in Yogyakarta.

We visited the *empu* during Ramadan, which we were told is an auspicious time to commission a *keris*. Part of the *empu's* ritual in creating a *keris* involves fasting, offerings and prayer, which of course is a normal part of Ramadan observance. The *empu* fasts for three days before forging a *keris*, which can only be done on certain prescribed days of the week.

When we arrived at Empu Harumbrodjo's combined home and working forge, we found him still in morning prayer. After he finished, he showed us around his workshop. We saw a large portrait of his father under whose tutelage he had learned the craft of *keris*-making, and he showed us some of his many awards and prize-winning *keris*. The most interesting piece of history was a framed chronology showing an unbroken line of 17 generations of *empus*, which began during the Majapahit empire, led to his father and finally to him.

Later, we were privileged to see *keris*-making in action. Two assistants in the forge were hard at work heating

and forge-welding a billet made up of layers of iron and nickel. According to the Malays, the *keris* contains all the elements of nature plus one: earth is represented by metal in the form of the iron and nickel and wood in the form of charcoal used to fuel the forge. The fire is energised by the wind, delivered by a Southeast Asian traditional bellows consisting of two bamboo cylinders each fitted with a piston on a long rod that is pumped by hand by one of the two assistants. (This is the very method portrayed in relief on the 15<sup>th</sup> century Candi Sukoh in Central Java which is reputed to show the earliest known example of traditional *keris* forging). Water is used to cool the blade down after forging and last, but certainly not least, the *keris* is imbued by another element of nature, the spirit of the soul or *aku*, imparted by the *empu's* ritual.

I must admit that I hadn't really known what to expect from my visit. My plan was to merely share in the experience and witness the making of a *keris*. But that's not what happened. After some time spent getting to know each other, the *empu* was willing to show us some special, certified masterpieces he had created. I was immediately drawn to one, a *keris lurus* with a red lacquer sheath. Vince and our son Nick also felt an immediate connection with two of the other *keris*. We decided to choose another *keris*, one that we deemed appropriate for our older son Alex in the USA and with that, conclude our visit.



Top - our *keris*, a *keris lurus*. Bottom, L to R, *keris luk 3*, *keris lurus*, *keris luk 11*. Photo by Darlene Kasten

A final note regarding importing *keris* to Singapore: Now that we had ours, we had to get them back to Singapore, a straightforward process. A *keris* is a controlled item here and a permit from the Singapore Police Force (SPF) is required for any *keris* with blade length exceeding 30 centimetres. For a regular person (that is, not a dealer), the permit process starts at the airport where we declared the knives with the Immigration and Checkpoints Authority of Singapore (ICA), who inventoried and impounded the knives. ICA referred the matter to the SPF Licensing & Regulatory Department (SPC) who then assessed the *keris* and notified us via email to make the licence application online. A fee of \$22 per knife gets the permit and a trip to SPF's Cantonment Complex gets the knives.

---

**Darlene D Kasten** is an FOM docent at the Asian Civilisations Museum and the Malay Heritage Centre.

---