

by Guru Scott McQuaid

"If a sword is always sheathed, it will become rusty and so will its owner."

The long knife blade known as the 'keris' is the weapon best associated with silat, the fighting systems of South East Asia, particularly in Indonesia and Malaysia.

This double-edged asymmetrical dagger originates from Java and it is both a weapon and a ritual object loaded with spiritual significance.

The modern keris origins can be dated to at least the mid 14th century where it was developed in East Java from an earlier form known as the *'keris buda'*. But sculptures of the keris can be traced back to more than 400 years in central Java's Chandi Borobudur where it is known as *'kujang'*
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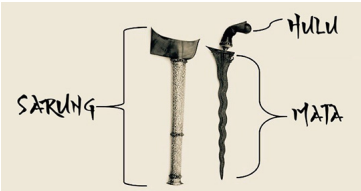
The influence of the keris spread through Southeast Asia during the Majapahit Empire and in the Cham areas of Cambodia who are heirs to the ancient Shiva-Buddha religion that once spanned all of Southeast Asia. It also appeared in the Dong-Son culture of Vietnam as early as 300 BC.

There are two kinds of keris design, straight and meandering. There are approximately 200 kinds of straight keris and 250 kinds of meandering keris. The older types of keris from before the Majapahit era have straight blades, but the most popular and recognizable shape is the wavy *'mata'*, or blade, known as *'Sarpa Lumuka'*, the snake in motion. The Javanese refer to

the keris as *tosan Aji*, or magic metal, and to test a blade its owner would sleep with the keris under their pillow. Depending on whether their dreams are good or bad, they would then know if the blade is right for them.

A silat practitioner is required to conduct special ceremonies to retain the weapon's powers within the keris. They have to wash the keris on the first Javanese lunar year with offerings consisting of flowers and incense. Neglect of the keris may cause the guardian spirit to depart, leaving the keris powerless. For this is a dagger shrouded in mythology, with tales of the keris that could move of their own volition and kill enemies at will. Other such folk law range from a keris that will stand upright when its real name is called by its master, and being able to cause death to a person by simply stabbing the knife into their footprints.

The Javanese believe that a keris may bring good or bad luck to its owner, so one test they would perform would be through a series of cuts on a leaf. Based on the blade width this could determine if the keris was good or bad for its owner.



A keris maker is called *'empu'*. This blade smith makes the knife in layers of different iron ores and meteorite nickel. The blade's surface usually bears a pattern called *pamor* which is produced during the forging process and made visible by etching. Pamor patterns have specific meanings and names which indicate the mythical properties they are believed to impart. There are around 60 recognized pamor variants.

The empu believed the meteorite materials would add a cosmic universal power to the knife which adds to the mystic and spiritual connotations surrounding the blade, so if the blade contains meteoric metals, it is considered more powerful. Blending of metals from the earth and sky are supposed to result in a particularly powerful weapon and through its dhapur (style) and pamor (mix of metals) the keris should complement the owner's personality.

In the more high quality keris knives, the metal is folded dozens or hundreds of times with care and extreme precision. The empu craftsmen would also carry out old rituals which are said to infuse the blade with mystical powers. The Pande tribe in Bali continue the old traditional occupation of keris making and the old ways of maintaining the blade using limes. The acidic in the lime eats away any rust. Another cleaning method would be to thrust the keris several times into the supporting log of a banana tree which would also clean the keris and strip it of any rust or chips to the blade. The dagger would also be doused in oils of a coconut to help preserve the blade.

The number of curves, or *'luk'*, on the blade is always odd - from luk 3 up to luk 13 - which is traditionally the maximum number of waves in a keris blade. A keris with five waves was generally considered a *'pendekar'* or warriors dagger.

How you carry a keris upon your person matters. It is proper to wear it thrust through a sash with the sheath on the left side and handle grip on the right side. The hilt grip, or *'aring'*, should be carried downward facing towards the body which signifies peace. But should the carrier turn the handle grip upwards facing out, this would be a declaration of challenge.

When a kris is drawn from its *'sarung'*, or sheath casing, it is kissed by its handler as a blessing for the dagger will protect its master in battle and respect must be shown.

The keris was also once used as a tool for execution. The executioner stood behind the condemned person, placing the blade over the left shoulder. Upon signal, they would plunge the blade downwards past the collarbone into the victims heart. The Sultan's quadrangle in Jogjakarta was the scene that played host to many of these criminal executions.

The *'hulu'*, or hilt, is often carved in meticulous details and made from various materials: precious woods, ivory and gold. They often show animal figures, spiritual beings and deities, although this became less common with the introduction of Islam, especially in Malaysia.

The hilt of the blade can also represent family lineage, be it a kingdom or village tribe. In Bali, the kris handle represents a demonic like creature whereas in Java and Sumatra the handle has

a stylized representation of a human. The Minangkabau tribes hilt design generally depicted a squatting figurine with arms hugging their body, known as *'jawa demam'*, or fevered Javanese.

The hilt is not always affixed to the blade instead it is secured by a strip of cloth, string or sometimes even hair which is wrapped around the tang commonly known as the pin and inserted into the hilt. The advantage of this loose fit allows the hilt to be turned to match the shape of the warriors hand as well as giving the option of interchangeable handles.

The keris commonly has a curved pistol-grip handle that aids in the stabbing motion. This allows the handler's palm to add pressure to the blade while stabbing. A keris offers minimal protection for the hand by its broad blade at the hilt. The practicality of the keris in combat is limited, it is more to do with the practitioner's skill behind the blade and the strategy adopted. For this knife was considered a gentlemen's weapon, much like the fencing sword of France.

The strength of a keris lies within its stabbing motion. The long sleek blade easily punctures through the body vitals such as the kidneys, lungs and even the sternum, directly to the heart. The blade's shape makes a vortex into the body, clearing an opening upon entry.

The keris is not as effective in slashing or cutting. This weapon is only as good as its handler and was generally used in combat against another keris. If contested against longer, stronger weapons such as sticks, staffs and swords, its efficiency is in great question.

The keris is not utilized in a blocking or fending off motion due to the blades weak metal, but it is used to parry and manipulate the arms of your opponent.



In West Sumatra, the Minangkabau silat tribes capitalized on the keris metal's weakness by forging their keris blades to become even more brittle. This tactic was to stab and snap the blade off while it was still in their opponent's body. The weapon would also be soaked in *'waran gam'*
which is a type of arsenic - a poison.

The arrival of the keris to the Minangkabau region came relatively late in comparison to other silat styles around Indonesia. The Minang warriors favoured the more practical *Recong* blade as the keris was recognized as a gentlemen's weapon among the soldiers of a Sultan. It played little part in the brutal jungle warfare among the Minangkabau clans. However, the dagger was adopted into their existing Minang
'adat'
, or cultural traditions, mostly ignoring the spiritual trappings of the keris that had previously been put into place by the Javanese.

In dueling with a keris, pesilats would stand a minimum of six feet away from each other as the extension of their arm plus the keris knife's length would keep their adversary on the very tip of their blade.

Keris fighting is a multi-faceted discipline and is specific in its movements in distance, stabbing and range. The keris is not a weapon that is used in multiple strikes; it is all about precision and hitting your target on the first attack which is the reason why most silat practitioners hold this blade in the highest regard among all weapons used in silat.

The keris plays an essential part in silat history as a weapon on the battlefield as well as its cultural and spiritual elements. It is still worn today for various customs such as weddings, dances and tribal meetings. It has also become a part of prestigious attire for heads of state in Indonesia and Malaysia and is often a symbol of power and strength featured on state flags, police and army badges, with ties to religious symbolism.

It is a knife that continues to thrive in its cultural roots while influencing and intriguing those that come across it.

Published exclusively for Black Triangle Silat 2021.