

Jorge Caravana Collection



THE KRIS

Dr. Jorge Caravana

“A knife is a knife, a dagger is a dagger.

But a Kris is *tosan aji* or precious iron with a soul and a spirit and a character”

Anis Rachwartono

The *Kris* is a kind of double edged dagger, exclusive to the Malay world, entwined with its culture and way of life. It is common throughout the whole of Indonesia, Malaysia, some areas of Cambodia and southern Thailand and the Philippines.

Its origin is surrounded by myths and legends, it is assumed that the present form was the result of a long evolution due to studies made of sculpted reproductions and in basse-reliefs in Southeast Asian temples, the most famous being Borobudur and Candi Prambanan, built in the period corresponding to the powerful kingdom of Majapahit (1292 C.E. – beginning of the 14th century), to the East of the island of Java.

In Malay culture, the Kris is considered more than a mere combat weapon, as in its diverse forms it is imbued with significance and mystical symbols which from ancient times give it magical powers, making it a revered object.

It is passed from parents to sons as the greatest relic, being one of the most valuable dowries. It can even, in a marriage ceremony, replace the groom himself.

Three Kris can be worn at the same time, in the following way: one’s own at the left, the deceased father’s one on the right and lastly a third one at the back which would have belonged to an ancestor or obtained through

dowry, with the objective of protecting against the “evil eye” and treacherous attacks.

Due to the rules of good manners one never goes into a friend’s house with a Kris at the waist, at least the one which is removable and which corresponds to the one on the left.

There are specific supports for Kris at the house’s door, where these should be placed always in a vertical position, respecting all the symbolic charge that they represent. In case it is placed in a horizontal position it is believed that the Kris “gains life of its own and can pierce, by flying, anyone with bad thoughts or who is an enemy of its owner”.

In a not so distant past it was even allowed for a nobleman, when exiting the *empu*’s workshop, to test his Kris, piercing the first plebeian he would meet.

The Kris is made in accordance to the personality and the social status of the *empu* (swordsmith). For this reason there are no two identical Kris with the exception of those which are made to be sold in handcraft shops.

The blade is made up of an upper zone (*ganja*) and a lower zone (*pesi*) and may present several kinds of shapes: completely straight (*dapur*), or in the shape of the holy serpent (*dapur bener*), waved or moving serpent shape (*dapur lu*), or even a mixed shape.

The number of curves (*luk*) is directly related to the psychological profile of its commissioner, in the same way as the look of the pattern (*pamor*), although here there are two great divisions: the pre-planned (*pamor rekam*) and the unplanned (*pamor tiban*).

As a result of the different proportions of iron, nickel and acid, the shape and the number of times the metal is folded and hammered, there are different patterns on the blades. These get some creative names: rice grain, watermelon, palm leaf, gold rain, among many others.

All the contours and veins of the blade have their own names and significance. Because of this complexity the *empu* (swordsmith) may take months making them, waiting for the best moon or astral conjunction.

The hilt (*ukurian*) is also made with differing forms, almost always related to the geographical area of origin, several types of materials being used, which include bone, ivory, silver and even fossilised mammoth molar among others.

The ring that connects the hilt to the blade (*mendak*), usually made of metal (silver, gold, brass), is almost always decorated with gems.

The scabbard appears at the top in the shape of a boat (*wrangka*): Chinese junk, Portuguese Nau or, in most cases, kidney shaped and it is made from precious woods and very rarely from silver or ivory. In this last case its use depends on the area where it is manufactured.

The lower area of the scabbard consists of a wooden part (*gandar*), covered by an external decorated cape (*pendok*), and which may be made of wood, brass, copper, silver or gold, appearing many times with incrustrated gems and coloured, thus defining the social status of its owner. In the case of the red colour, for example, it was reserved for the use of high dignitaries of the court.

The scabbard's tip is known by the term *buntut*.