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From Majapahit to Putrajaya: the *kris* as a symptom of civilizational development and decline¹

Farish A. Noor

The *kris* is the legendary weapon of the Malay peoples, used throughout the archipelago. This paper examines the evolution of the *kris* over the centuries. The central argument is that in the development of the *kris* we can also trace the civilizational development of the Malays. The paper sets the evolution of the *kris* in the context of social-cultural and political change in the Malay archipelago from the fourteenth century to the present, focusing on, for example, the close association of the *kris* with the principal deities and heroes of Hinduism during the Hindu period of Malay history, the demystification of the *kris* as Islam came to the archipelago, and the marginalization of the *kris* under the impact of colonialism and modernity. The *kris* has again come full circle. What began as a knife has now been reduced to a knife – as *kris* tiepins, letter openers, and paper cutters litter handicraft centres and tourist shops.

Malay civilization, one of the most heterodox, hybrid, and ecumenical in the world, bears many traces of its early encounters with Hindu, Buddhist, Islamic, Western, and modern ideas and influences. From this highly complex and diverse civilization there appeared the ubiquitous *kris* – the legendary weapon of the Malay peoples which was used from Patani to the Philippines. Its use was widespread throughout the archipelago, as it made itself known in practically all arenas of life. It was seen in the *istanas* and *kratons*, as well as the *kampong* and on the fleets

¹ This paper is respectfully dedicated to the memory of Datin Kamariah Nuri. The author would like to express his heartfelt gratitude to those whose advice and opinions were of crucial importance in the writing of this paper. My thanks go to Nik Rashiddin Nik Hussein, Henry Brownrigg, Ian Brown, and Bashir Mohammed in particular for their instructive comments. This paper will look at socio-cultural and political developments in the Malay archipelago from the fourteenth century to the present. However, the focus of our critique, which comes later in the paper, will be on those developments that came to the fore in the Malay peninsula (Malaya, and later Malaysia) in particular from the mid-nineteenth century.

Setelah lebih empat puluh tahun merdeka, rakyat yang bertatahkan keris intan permata hanya segak kaku di muzium negara. Sarungnya telah hilang entah kemana. Tapi apakan daya, orang masih mahukannya. Keris tercacak disana sini, bandar dan desa, namun tiada ertinya kerana sudah hilang bisa. Rakyat yang memujanya, semakin derita (C.N. al-Afghani, *Rakyat Semakin Matang*. 1988:122).

Kalau kris sudah kau selitkan pada pinggangmu, kau akan berubah. Kau akan lebih mirip dengan leluhurm, lebih dekat pada asalmu (Pramoedya Ananta Toer, *Bumi Manusia*. 1990).

of Malay *war prahus*. *Krises* were even made especially for women and children, perhaps by far-sighted *pandai besis* and *empus* in anticipation of feminist critiques in the future.²

Here we propose to examine the manner in which the *kris* has evolved over the centuries. Our thesis is that in the development of the *kris* we can also trace the civilizational development of the Malays. Through an analysis of the historical evolution of the *kris*, we wish to investigate the ways in which its meanings and symbolism have changed and developed over time. It is our opinion that through a study of the changes in the meaning, use, and value of the *kris*, we can glean some understanding of the development of the Malays as a people.

The framework of our analysis will be the methodology left to us by the founder of modern sociology and civilizational studies, the North African scholar and historian of the fourteenth century, Abdul Rahman ibn Khaldun, as laid out in his work, *The Muqadimmah*.³ Khaldun's theory can be summarized as follows. His theory of civilizational development places man and human agency firmly at the centre of the universe. For Khaldun, man is the master of history, and it is man who charts his own future. Man is the architect of his own prosperity and success, as well as his decline and failure. But man, for Khaldun, is also a social animal. Khaldun argued that the solitary human being was quite useless and pathetic on his own. Even less intelligent creatures like horses

² The terms *pandai besi* and *empu* were honorific titles reserved for the makers of *krises*. They mean 'expert', or those knowledgeable in the art of kris-making, with all its esoteric lore, rites, and rituals. In Java the term *empu* is still favoured. In the Malay peninsula the term *pandai besi* is commonly used, which suggests a link with the Majapahit kingdom of Java which extended its influence over many parts of the Malay peninsula and Sumatra in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. In the southern Philippines, the Moro term *pande* is commonly used as well.

³ Khaldun, 1967.

and donkeys could pose a significant threat to the sole human being, who was quite incapable of defending himself against natural forces.

Human beings therefore need to come together and form communities.⁴ These communities may vary in form and structure according to a number of contingent factors. The environment may force them into a nomadic existence, or the climate may induce them to settle down and live a sedentary life. Those communities that settle down and opt for a sedentary existence eventually grow in both size and sophistication. As settled communities expand, their members tend to specialize in the work they do. Skills and professions begin to develop, and people slowly come to be identified by their work. This opens the way for a pluralistic economy, with specific professions and sectors emerging.⁵

Civilization, for Khaldun, really takes off when the members of that sedentary community have fulfilled most of their basic needs and requirements. Once those basic needs (food, shelter, security) have been met, human beings begin to have extra time to spend on other things. Artistry and skills begin to emerge in that community. Khaldun sees this as the first sign of civilizational development itself. For him, the obvious examples of early civilizational development are found when the practices and institutions of that community begin to develop into higher, more sophisticated forms. The architecture of civilized societies, for example, goes beyond its original utilitarian purpose: buildings, temples, and monuments are decorated and adorned with symbols and signs that bear meanings not found in their earlier forms. The same process of sophisticated development can be found elsewhere, as in the language, art, laws, economic system, governmental practices, and religious rituals of the community. In this respect, civilization is more like a carapace which is built on top of the original utilitarian social structures and institutions of the community. As a society becomes more settled, developed, and prosperous, its people will have more time, energy, opportunities, and desire to add more and more meanings to the social practices and institutions they have built around themselves.⁶

But civilization is also an ambiguous concept for Khaldun, as it is both the result of human development and the cause of the downfall of

⁴ Ibid., p. 46.

⁵ Ibid., pp. 91–95.

⁶ Khaldun argues that 'sedentary culture is merely a diversification of luxury and refined knowledge of the crafts employed for its diverse aspects and ways. . . . These increase in number with the variety of pleasures and amusements and ways and means to enjoy the life of luxury that the soul desires, and (with the growing number of) different things to which people get used' (Khaldun, 1967:138).

societies. Khaldun shared the worries of other Muslim scholars (like al-Ghazali), who thought that sophisticated civilizations were the result of physical satiation, and he anticipated the concerns of future philosophers like Voltaire and Nietzsche, when he argued that this was the most critical stage in the development of a people.⁷ For the fact that the basic needs of that society have been met also means that this society is now vulnerable to the charms of that nasty vice called 'luxury'. Luxury, according to Khaldun's spartan outlook, refers to all practices, ideas, values, and beliefs which are fundamentally superfluous, ethereal, fantastic, hedonistic, and wasteful. Like Nietzsche, who regarded the excessive trappings of civilization as deadly (that is, antithetical to authentic life), Khaldun also sees them as elements that weaken the moral and social fabric of the community. These elements may range from decadent poetry to pompous and superficial architectural adornments, to vainglorious court rituals, to excessive expenditure and corruption in the bureaucracy.

Khaldun regards luxury and all its attendant vices as axiomatic evils that invariably accompany the train of development. But he warns that these vices, if left unchecked, may well bring about the collapse of that civilization as well. The uncontrolled and unregulated overdevelopment of ideas, tastes, fads, and fashions also paves the way towards the slippery path of decline. Civilization becomes an overdetermined hermeneutic complex of ideas, symbols, and values, that are removed from the actual and authentic needs of existence.

Khaldun is never quite clear on the exact point at which a civilization begins the rapid descent into decrepitude and obsolescence: but this is probably because he was cognisant of the simple fact that no two civilizations are alike, and consequently there can be no mean rule to judge and grade their performances. However, we may surmise from the general thrust of his theory that a civilization begins to decline when the more superficial (not to mention tasteless) developments in its art, culture, and politics outweigh the productive, practical, and morally sound ones.

The end result of this sad chain of events is the final stage of civilizational collapse and debasement, when the community begins to experience the culture of decadence. Such civilizations will grow more

⁷ Al-Ghazali, for example, argued in his *Ihya Ulum al-Din* that refined civilization was the result of physical (more specifically, sexual) satiation and excess (see Mernisi, 1975:13). For a detailed discussion of Nietzsche's views on civilization and culture, see Nietzsche, 1969, 1980.

vulnerable to external influences and more dominant civilizations – dominant in more ways than one (political, economic, cultural).⁸ Under such conditions, these subjugated people will develop what Khaldun calls the ‘mentality of the colonized’. Khaldun argued that this mental outlook becomes inevitable once a civilization has lost all belief and confidence in itself and its capabilities, and turns outwards for ideas and inspiration.⁹ Such a decadent and mentally colonized people can no longer hope to revive its cultural and civilizational dynamics from within.

There are many other features of Khaldun’s problematic theory that merit serious thought and discussion – such as his view that history is fundamentally cyclical in nature, and that human society can be directly affected by external environmental factors. But, for now, we will concern ourselves only with the general framework that Khaldun has set, and attempt to see whether it offers any clues to understanding the process of civilizational development in the Malay world, and the development of the *kris* in particular.

From utility to luxury: the evolution of the *kris* as a cultural signifier

Superfluous excess is the enemy of necessity (Nietzsche, 1980:1)

Let us begin at the beginning. The *kris*, lest it be forgotten, is fundamentally a stabbing weapon. Although it comes in all shapes and sizes, with a myriad of configurations depending on its *dapor*, *prabot* and *pamor* types, it remains a personal instrument of offence and defence.¹⁰

⁸ Khaldun, 1967:118–19.

⁹ Ibid., pp. 116–17.

¹⁰ The terms *dapor*, *prabot*, and *pamor* are crucial to an understanding of the *kris* and the symbolism attached to it. The term *dapor* (which translates roughly as ‘exterior portion’ [of a house] in Malay) refers to the silhouette of the *kris*. There are hundreds of different *dapor*, each of which has a name of its own, very much in the same way that modern automobiles have different classifications. Some *dapor* are more popular than others, having associations with particular heroes or stories. The *dapor Pandawa*, for example, is a category of *kris* with five *lok* (curves), and the name Pandawa refers to the five Pandawa brothers in the Malay Hindu epic, the *Hikayat Pandawa Lima* taken from the *Mahabharatta*. *Pamor*, on the other hand, is a Malay word that can be roughly translated as ‘alloy’ or ‘mix’. It refers to the patterns made through the process of damascening the blade (*mata*). Because the metals used are of different qualities, some with higher nickel content or other metals, curious and attractive patterns can be made, either deliberately or accidentally, by the *kris*-smith in the process of forging. Over time, *kris*-makers have learned the art of making all kinds of different *pamor* designs, each with names and meanings of their own. The *pamor* known as *kulit semangka* (watermelon skin), for example,

Its origins and predecessors have been discussed at length by more authors, such as Hamzuri (1984), Frey (1986), Cato (1996), and Jensen (1998). The debate still rages whether the prototype *kris* was first introduced in Java, Champa, or the Malay peninsula.¹¹

Like most weapons, the *kris* has its forerunner in the primordial axe or knife. The axes and knives of the primitive peoples of the archipelago fulfilled their purpose without fuss, pomp, or ceremony. Like all primitive hacking, stabbing, and thrusting weapons, they achieved their objectives with expediency, and it is safe to say that the primitive proto-Malays of the archipelago probably had little complaint about them.

It was during this early period (around 1 A.D.) that a weapon resembling the *kris* first came into being. Now known as the Dong S'on proto-*kris*, this weapon made its appearance in the region around the Gulf of Tonkin in mainland South East Asia. Too little is known about the origin of this weapon and how widespread was its use, but some scholars, such as Sheppard (1972:124), have argued that in the Dong S'on dagger we find the prototype of the *kris*. It was only much later that the *kris* as we know it today was found in significant numbers in Java, Champa, and the north of the Malay peninsula.¹²

Within the framework of Khaldun's analysis of civilizational development, we might regard this as the most basic stage of societal evolution – where human beings come together in small social units, some agrarian and others nomadic, for the purpose of collective survival and self-preservation. Decorating homes and adorning weapons with intricate and fanciful designs were still some way off in the proto-Malay mindset.

is said to bring good fortune to the owner of the *kris*. Finally the term *prabot* (roughly translated as 'furnishings' in Malay) refers to the specific marks, indentations, curves, hooks, and shallows that are chiselled, hollow-ground, or carved onto the surface of the blade itself. There are a number of such features, although their combination is no mere accident. Each *dapor* has its own unique set of requirements as far as such furnishings are concerned.

¹¹ While not discounting the possibility of another origin for the prototype *kris*, we shall concentrate on the areas where *kris* production was undeniably more active, that is in Java, Sumatra, and the Malay peninsula.

¹² Sheppard notes that, while much of the literature on the *kris* has taken the view that it originated in Java, there is enough evidence to show that it could have been developed elsewhere as well. In particular he notes that the people of Champa (east of the Khmer kingdoms) were known to possess the *kris* as well: 'an historic gold kris of superlative workmanship was one of the most treasured heirlooms at the Cambodian capital. It may be of Cham origin, but there is a Khmer word for *kris* – *kroeus* – and a *kris* was worn in a Cambodian dance of considerable antiquity called *I Nav*' (Sheppard, 1972:124).

Things, however, were not to stay the same forever. With the process of social evolution, these primitive communities eventually began to develop value and belief systems that were couched in terms of their own localized phenomenology and framed within a cosmological outlook of their own. Belief in animal and natural spirits, the worship of the primal ancestor *Hyang* (whose faded presence is still manifest today in the Malay word for prayer, *sembahyang*, which literally means 'to worship Hyang'),¹³ and other rudimentary social rituals led to the emergence of ritual objects, and rites of association and passage for the community.

With the arrival of Hinduism and Buddhism in the Malay archipelago, we witness the development of complex socio-cultural rituals that encompass practically all areas of life, from politics and government to family law and interpersonal relations. The new religious system brought with it not only a unique credo but also transformed the mental, moral, aesthetic, and cultural universe of the archipelago. What appeared in the end was a rigid and highly ordered religio-political and social system that reflected the order of the cosmos, with the *raja* (king) occupying a pivotal position as the 'nail of the universe', and the *istana/kraton* (palace) serving as the stage on which the cosmic drama was played out. Thus the world of the Indon-Malay *kerajaan* was one where the affairs of gods, *dewas*, *rajas*, and men constantly overlapped and interpenetrated with promiscuous ease.¹⁴

But the development of the religio-political discourse of the pre-Islamic archipelago was a lopsided one. The Malay *rajas* were eager to embrace this new creed as it afforded them a means to legitimize and sacralize their rule on earth. As Helen Ibbitson Jessup notes, 'Brahman

¹³ This is why the word *sembahyang* is frowned upon by contemporary modern Muslims in the Malay world, who insist on using the Islamic-Arabic word *salat* instead, for fear of semantically transgressing into the realm of pagan ancestors once more.

¹⁴ The term *kerajaan* literally means 'a situation of having a raja' or 'living under the rule of a raja'. I prefer to use this meaning as it would be inaccurate to say that the pre-Islamic and Islamic kingdoms were comparable to the modern understanding of the state. This is simply because during both the pre-Islamic and Islamic eras, power was effectively centralized and personalized in the form of the *raja/sultan* (king) himself. It is significant that the term *kerajaan* is still used to this day to refer to the practice of government. This in itself is an indicator of the extent to which the practices and values of the feudal past continue to inform and shape the perceptions of politics and social government in the Malay world. Critics of this form of feudal and neo-feudal government have argued that the pattern of government and politics in the Malay world has not changed over the past two thousand years, thereby testifying to the strength and endurance of pre-Islamic values and norms in Malay political life: see also Muzaffar, 1979.

priests and scholars, their mysterious and exotic lore lending the aura of the supernatural to the ceremonies they conducted, enhanced the King's status. The divine sanction and superhuman powers thus invoked through ritual were crucial in the ruler's claim to legitimacy, particularly in times of changing and expanding political and economic development.' (Jessup, 1991:49)

Of even greater consequence for the relations between the rulers and their subjects was the former's tendency to incorporate selectively elements and ideas from Hindu and Buddhist discourse that could be adapted to suit the needs of their traditional *adat*-oriented systems of rule and government. The concept of *derhaka* (treason against the ruler), for example, was taken from the discourse of Hinduism and from Sanskrit, and recontextualized within the pre-existing social structure, after it had been imbued with sacral and supernatural connotations that invested it with far greater power.¹⁵

Evidence of the élite monopolization of Hindu-Buddhist discourse can be found in the remnants of the kingdoms themselves. The classical literature, art, and architecture that have been left behind all point to a particular élite Indonesian-Malay interpretation of Hinduism and Buddhism, mainly directed towards the deification and valorization of the monarchs. The lopsided 'Hinduized' *kerajaan* culture that developed thus suffered from an undue emphasis on the epic and romanticized interpretations of power and rule, while the subtleties of Hindu-Buddhist metaphysics and their traditions of critical thought and enquiry have been left neglected. Hinduized Malay court culture was thus necessarily *raja*-centric, court-oriented, exclusivist, and removed from society at large.

The multifarious array of beliefs, values, ideas, and symbols that made up the universe of the *kerajaan* gave the court artisans plenty of work to do and kept them occupied for hundreds of years. There was no end to the ways and means through which they could valorize the status and

¹⁵ Barbara and Leonard Andaya have noted that *derhaka*, a word found repeatedly in Srivijayan inscriptions and meaning 'treason towards the ruler', was adopted from Sanskrit to denote what became a heinous crime. The belief propagated by this Hinduized court culture was that treason and disloyalty to the king would be tantamount to challenging the universal order, and would bring calamity to the traitor as well as to the people. The gradual consolidation of these new belief-systems led to a court culture that became more and more restrictive and ritualistic. The Andayas note that 'So entrenched was this concept in Srivijayan statecraft that in the thirteenth century the Chinese customs official *Chau Ju-Kua* believed that the personal followers of the Maharaja commonly killed themselves after their master died.' (Andaya and Andaya, 1982:26)

role of their *dewarajas* in this cosmic drama of celestial proportions. It was also during this period when Hinduism held sway in the Indonesian–Malay court that the *kris* reached the peak of its development and importance in the societies of the archipelago. True to Khaldun’s view that ‘civilization’ manifests itself in the development of excess, luxury, and the overdetermination of meanings and values attached to aesthetic forms and styles, the *kris* enjoyed a pre-eminence unparalleled by any other object in the Indonesian–Malay world at that time, as the embodiment of all the elements that made up the heavenly world of the *kerajaan*.

The *kris* had been a prominent social instrument in the Malay Hindu–Buddhist world all along, but by then it had evolved far beyond a mere instrument of defence and offence. Thanks to the influx of ideas and beliefs from both the mainland (Champa, Lankasuka, Siam, Patani) and the islands (Java), the Malay world was exposed to Vishnuite and Sivaistic schools of Hindu thought and aesthetics. The *kris*, as the ritual object into which these new forms, ideas, and meanings had been invested, had become the living embodiment of the dominant Hindu cults of Siva and Vishnu, and it had penetrated deep into the popular imagination of the Indonesian–Malay peoples.¹⁶

¹⁶ The importance of the *kris* as a symbolic embodiment of the cardinal ideas and values imbedded within the Sivaistic and Vishnuite cults of Hinduism in the archipelago cannot be doubted. Archaeological evidence points to the association of the *kris* with the principal deities of popular Hinduism in the Malay world at the time. Sheppard (1972:128) argues that this is why there exist two different prototype hilt forms, the *Vishnu/Garuda* hilt and the *Raksaksa/Siva* hilt: ‘It was possible that the “steed of Vishnu” (*Garuda*) concept was introduced to Malay craftsmen from the Chams of the north while the guardian orge (*Raksaksa*) found greater favour among the kris-makers of Java and Bali.’ Frey (1986:5–6) refers to the sculptured stone images at the Candi Sukuh monument which depict a typical Malay forge scene with the deity Ganesh (the elephant-headed son of Siva) present during the forging of *kris* blades by the two Hindu epic heroes Bima and Arjuna. He also cites an illustration by Raffles which depicts the god Vishnu holding a *kris*-like blade while mounted on his steed, the *Garuda*. It is clear that during the Hindu period of Malay history, the *kris* was associated closely with the principal deities and heroes of Hinduism which include Vishnu, Siva, Ganesh, *Garuda*, and the Pandawa and Korawa brothers from the Mahabharatta epic, as well as Rama, Laksamana, and Hanuman from the Ramayana cycle. There are several obvious features that immediately point to the association between the typical fully-formed *kris* and the deity Siva, the god of destruction, death, and rebirth. The blade itself is phallic in its form, linking itself to the recurrent motif of the phallus (*lingam*) of Siva. The *belalai gajah* (elephant’s trunk), a feature found above the face (*gandik*) of the *kris*, is reminiscent of the trunk of Ganesh, the elephant-son of Siva himself, who also happens to be the god of strength, fortitude, and endurance, as well as the patron deity of scholars, priests, and academics in search of original ideas. The *kris* also performs two acts of ‘penetration’, when the blade ‘penetrates’ the sheath (*sarong*) and when the tang of the blade (*paksi*) penetrates its hilt (*hulu*). Both these acts of penetration once again

This leap in the evolution of the *kris* was registered in a number of ways. It was around this period that magical *kris*es began taking to the air and flying about in all directions – in the courtly epics and dramas that were being written by the scribes of the court for the entertainment of their patron-rulers. The legendary epics of the time give a vivid account of the skies of *Nusantara* being littered with hundreds of *kris*es, and in some parts of the archipelago the air traffic must have been heavy indeed, taking into consideration the proliferation of *kris*es and prominent *kris*-makers (*empus/pandai-besi*) during the Hindu–Buddhist era.

During the Hindu–Buddhist era, the *kris* also begins to play a more central role in the numerous panegyric courtly epics and histories (*babad/hikayat*) of the time. Hill (1956), among others, cites the legend of the Javanese–Hindu Prince Sakutram (later Raja Kajamoyojo) who was born with a *kris Pasopati* by his side, which presumably presented the royal midwife (not to mention the Queen, his mother) with all kinds of complications.¹⁷ The *kris* also makes numerous cameo appearances in the

reactivate the symbolic penetration of Siva's *lingam* into the feminine *yonin*, signalling the moment of copulation, birth, death, and rebirth. To make things even clearer, the profusion of *raksaksa* (demon) shaped hilts in the early Javanese *kris* (of the twelfth to the fifteenth century) point once again to the link between the *kris* and Siva, who, in the form of Siva Bhairava (the destructive Siva) was a popular image both in early Javanese Hindu architecture and in legends and myths as the god of demons (*raksaksa*). Jensen (1998:216) argues that these *raksaksa* figures represent either Siva Bhairava himself or *raksaksas* as *dravapalaes*, guardians of the Hindu (Sivaistic) faith, temples, *kratons*, holy places, and *kris*-bearers. They are often found in sitting or squatting positions (*pralambapada*, *lalitasana*, *rajalilasana*, or *maharajalilasana* respectively) that are the common postures of kings, gods, and demons. In other parts of the Malay archipelago, such as south Sumatra and the far west of Java, where Vishnu, the god of preservation, was a more popular deity, we can see evidence of Vishnuite influence in the *kris* hilts themselves, where the figure of the *Garuda* (the mythical mount of Vishnu) is clearly seen. At times the figures carved on these hilts would have had a small detail in the form of a *naga* (dragon-serpent) wrapped around the head of the *Garuda*, which reminds us of the tale of the battle between the *Garuda* and the army of *nagas*. The *kris* hilts of northern Malaysia, from the region of Patani, Kelantan, and Trengganu – heavily influenced by the art forms from the kingdoms of Srivijaya and Langkasuka – also show obvious similarities with the *Garuda* hilts of south Sumatra, particularly Lampung. This would not be surprising, since this region was closely linked to the Buddhist kingdom of Siam where Vishnu was also the most popular Hindu deity. The classic Patani hilt is sometimes said to be based on a *wayang* figure, but local experts I interviewed contend that it is actually a representation of a *dewa* (deity) which dates back to Langkasuka. The fact that the bulbous eyes and nose of the Patani figure are *kasar* (rough) in appearance would also suggest that it is based on the figure of a *raksaksa* (orge-demon) rather than a god.

¹⁷ Hill (1956:21) notes that *Pasopati* is also one of the names for Siva the Destroyer.

local *wayang* rendition of the Ramayana and Mahabharatta epics. Some of the more prominent stars of these stories came to be associated with famous *kris* types – such as the *kris Yuyu Rumping* (which made its appearance along with the demon-king Rawana's army when it destroyed the bridge between Ayodya and Halengka); the *kris dapor Pasopati* (which was given to the Pandawa prince Arjuna by the gods and is linked closely to Siva the Destroyer);¹⁸ the *kris dapor Karno Tinanding* (which was used in the duel between Karno and Arjuna); and the *kris dapor Bimo Krodo* (which was used by the enraged Bima upon hearing the news of the death of his son, Gatotkoco, at the hands of the Korawas) (Hamzuri, 1984:12, 14, 18, 24).

Kris production (and evolution) during the Hindu–Buddhist era was at its peak at the Hindu–Buddhist courts of Java, Bali, and southern Sumatra. During the Hindu era, the major powers of the region included Pajajaran, Majapahit, Demak, Padjang, and Mataram. In the annals of Pajajaran, we find numerous references to notable *empus/pandai-besi* who produced some of the most famous *kris dapors*, that exist until this day. These include pre-Pajajaran *dapors* such as the legendary *dapor Pasopati*, *dapor Tundung Mungsuh*, and *dapor Kyai Manglar*, as well as Pajajaran period *dapors* such as the *dapor Tilam Upih* and *dapor Kabolayer* (Hamzuri, 1984:4–7).

During the Majapahit era, *kris* production reached another peak. Hill (1956:29) argues that the first recorded example of a damascened *kris* (*kris berpamor*) was produced during this period – at Pajajaran under the rule of the second prince of Mahapahit. The famous Majapahit *kris* is well-known for a unique feature – having a hilt that is sculpted in the form of a squatting or sitting human figure, made as a part of the *kris* itself. (It has a further unique feature – its near-miraculous ability to withstand the hazards of time, and find its way into numerous bazaars all over South East Asia today in ridiculously large numbers.)

Not only were *kris*es then highly esteemed and even worshipped as sacred objects with spiritual power but the *kris*-makers themselves were regarded as being part of the élite of Javanese–Hindu society, along with the nobility and priests. Raffles (1830) noted that from the Pajajaran to Majapahit eras, the *kris*-makers of the realm were among the most valued and privileged members of Javanese society, and their role and

¹⁸ Harsrinuksmo (1988:126) argues that the *kris Pasopati* should not be confused with the actual weapon used by Arjuna in the Mahabharatta wars. The fame attached to this particular *dapor* has more to do with the fame attached to Arjuna and the name of his legendary weapon.

status were very much linked to the world of the *kraton*.¹⁹ Honoured and venerated by royals, nobles, and *rakyat* alike, the *empus* of the period were a class of their own, and were at the peak of their careers. The forges where they produced some of their best work were also ascribed sacred status, often decorated to appear as miniature temples (*kayon*).²⁰ However, the fact that these royal *kris*-makers were dedicated solely to the work of the court and the needs of their royal patrons also meant that they were liminal figures in Indonesian–Malay Hindu society, and they were particularly dependent upon the *kerajaan* and vulnerable to the vicissitudes of politics.

By the time the kingdoms of Demak and Pandjang arrive on the scene (late fifteenth century), the Hindu–Buddhist beliefs and values of the Indonesian–Malay peoples were already being challenged. (The impact of Islam on the evolution of the *kris* and its components will be discussed below.) But *kris* designs and *kris*-use remained true to the traditions and standards of the past, as the production of quality *kris*es was still firmly under the control of the royal houses and the spiritually-inclined royal *empus*. During this period, several important *dapors* made their appearance, such as the famous eleven-lok *dapor Sabuk Intan*, said to be designed by the *empu* Joko Supo, son of Prince Sedayu, on the order of Sunan Kalijaga (Hill, 1956:11). Another equally famous royal son who took to the anvil and hammer of the *kris* forge was *empu* Ki Joko Growah, also a son of Prince Sedayu.

Thus at the height of the Hindu era, shortly before Islam began to consolidate its hold on the coastal kingdoms of the archipelago, we find

¹⁹ In his study of the culture and history of Java and the Javanese people, Stamford Raffles noted that the *kris*-makers were highly-regarded artisans who were given enormous privileges and entitlements, including land and servants. Their work was directed solely towards the needs of their royal and priestly clients, and consequently they had little to do with the rest of Javanese–Hindu society. After the fall of the Pajajaran kingdom, the Pajajaran *empus/pandai-besis* migrated en masse to Majapahit where they were quickly absorbed by the Hindu court. Their honorific titles – *empu* or *pandai* (expert) – indicated the extent to which they were honoured in Javanese society by royals and subjects alike (Raffles, 1997:192–93).

²⁰ Hill (1956) notes that early *kris* forges were often decorated to look like primitive tribal temples or *kayons*. In and around these places of work were the symbols linked to the cults of pagan and Hindu deities, such as the tree of life, effigies of gods and *raksaksas*, and offerings to the gods themselves. Hill states that ‘when the *kris*-makers of Java performed their opening ceremonies they followed certain strict rules. The regulations of the ritual decoration [of the forge] and temple are exact enough to rule out any possibility of mistaken resemblance. In both, for instance, a small model of a tent called *tarub* had to be hung outside. It is significant that *tarub* is the technical name for the festive building used in *kris* ceremonies’ (Hill, 1956:32).

that *kris* production and *kris* use had reached their most sophisticated level. The *kris*es produced in the *kratons* were of the highest quality and workmanship, crafted not only by the royal *empus* but also by the poets from the special effects department of the court, who dressed them in all manner of overblown epic flourishes.

From a Khaldunian perspective one might conclude that this marked the civilizational peak of the world of the *kris*, as its overdetermined character had expanded its value, use, and meaning way beyond its original *raison d'être*. The hermeneutic investment that went into the *kris* ensured that it was no longer a mere dagger, and the *sarong* (sheath) that was so important in preserving the power of the *kris* (and protecting the rest of the world from its powerful influence) could barely contain the universe of meanings that had been invested in this singularly unique object. But Khaldun also warned of the dangers of civilization, and how its corrupting influence would inevitably bring about the downfall of the community that had brought it into existence. For Khaldun the peak of civilization is also the point at which human agency is most in danger of being misdirected, as it often leads to a culture of pomp and excess, ease and luxury. This was certainly true for the *kris*, for it is also in this period that we begin to see the *kris* turning into an object of luxury as well as a symbol of royal status and *kerajaan* power. The most elaborately decorated blades, intended for royal and noble patrons, were so beautifully and delicately worked that one wonders if they were ever used.

By the end of the Hindu era, some of the state *kris*es of the courts had become excessively-decorated affairs, bedecked with goldleaf, diamonds, rubies, and other trinkets and ornaments. Spoiled and pampered in their ritual perfumed-oil baths, these *kris*es seldom, if ever, performed the duties the state demanded of them. As change swept the landscape with the coming of Islam, the world of the Hindu-Buddhist *kraton* migrated to Bali, where the royal *kris*es were given another couple of hundred years to bask in their glory like retired divas.²¹ In the early twentieth century, they were forced out into the open for one final performance. When the invading Dutch forces were advancing from their bridgehead at Sanur towards Denpasar, the Balinese-Hindu nobles performed the act of heroic self-sacrifice (*puputan*) before the trained rifles of the Dutch

²¹ Islam began to take root in the Malay archipelago thanks to the activities of Muslim traders and Sufi mystics who travelled from India and the Arab world to China. It first came to prominence in the court of Demak, and then Padjang, after the demise of the Hindu power, Majapahit, in the late fifteenth century.

infantry.²² The *kris*es they wore were barely unsheathed before their masters were mown down, and it was the bullets of Dutch rifles that tore through the air instead of the *kris*es. Today they are found in the Tropen Museum, Amsterdam, relegated to the status of artefacts in antiquarian history. But long before the *kris* was reduced to a mute and lifeless totem, its aura of sacred unearthly power had been diminished by another force for change – Islam.

From luxury to weapon: the gradual demystification of the *kris* in the world of Islam

Islam not only displaced the gods, *dewas*, and *dewarajas* of the *ancien régime*, it also took over the copyright of the *kris*.

One of the earliest indicators of the coming of Islam to the Indonesian–Malay world is the gravestone of Sultan Malik as-Salih of Pasai (in north Sumatra) who died in 1297:²³ but itinerant Muslim traders and Sufi mystics had been travelling across the archipelago since the ninth century. One by one, the coastal Hindu kingdoms were converted to the new faith, and the Hindu-influenced courts retreated further inland. New Malay–Muslim powers, such as Aceh, Demak, Melaka, Riau, Minangkabau, Patani, and Kelantan, gradually came to the fore and replaced the kingdoms of the past.²⁴ With the arrival of Islam, the *dewarajas*

²² The Dutch invasion of Bali began in earnest in 1906, when Dutch forces laid siege to the cities of Denpasar, Pemecutan, and Tambanan. In 1908 they finally moved against the last bastion of Balinese-Hindu power, the royal capital of Klungkung. In all these encounters, the modern Dutch army found itself confronted by Balinese royal forces armed and trained according to traditional modes of indigenous warfare.

²³ Fatimi (1963) puts the date of the Sultan's death as 1307. There exists another piece of evidence – a similar gravestone of a Muslim woman, dated c.1082, which is to be found in east Java.

²⁴ The arrival and consolidation of Islam in the archipelago was a long drawn-out process that spanned several centuries and that witnessed the rise and fall of numerous Malay kingdoms. Among the last Hindu–Buddhist kingdoms that saw Islam's arrival were the Srivijayan empire based in Sumatra and the Malay peninsula, and the Hindu kingdom of Majapahit, based in Java. Sheppard (1959) notes that Islam first took root in Sumatra, and that one of the first Muslim Malay kingdoms was Minangkabau. By 1281 Minangkabau's envoys to China already had Muslim names. The Hindu empire of Majapahit responded to such challenges with an expansionist campaign that ended with the destruction of Palembang and the defeat and subjugation of a number of Malay powers, including Lankasuka, Kedah, Pahang, Kelantan, Trengganu, Klang, and Temasek. Nonetheless, the tide of Islam was too strong even for empires such as Majapahit to resist. By the late fourteenth century, the coastal kingdoms of Sumatra, the Malay peninsula, and Java were rapidly coming under the sway of the new faith. Around 1416 the Sumatran prince Parameswara, who had

found themselves reduced to kings, and the socio-political terrain which they once lorded over was altered for good.

Islam arrived on the shores of the Indonesian–Malay archipelago not clad in armour, but in the form of religious texts wrapped in the prayer mats and records of itinerant Muslim traders and humble Sufi mystics and scholars. At this point Islam had little need for the mysterious *kris* or any such weapon, for the simple reason that the Muslim traders knew a few tricks of their own – namely, business.

The process of socio-cultural change that was occasioned by Islam's arrival and *pénétration pacifique* was complex and far-reaching. On the surface at least, there was a universe of difference between the two belief systems. As Hill (1956:24) notes: 'between the followers of the Prophet and the worshippers of Siva there could be no compromise on religious doctrine'. But in the end it was Islam that emerged triumphant, as it was able to 'tolerate pagan survivals provided they did not transgress too blatantly its taboos and susceptibilities'. The centuries that followed witnessed the slow penetration of Islam into every aspect of the social and cultural life of the archipelago, while the conservative forces of Hinduism fought a close rearguard action, forever aware of the danger that it might find itself too exposed to the watchful eyes of the Muslim *Ulama* and *Imams*.²⁵

One of the most vivid examples of Islam's radical impact upon the Indonesian–Malay world emerges from a comparison of the cultural life at court during the Hindu and Islamic eras. The epics of the Hindu–Buddhist era, heavily coloured by the dye of romanticism and fantasy,

built his new kingdom in Melacca, embraced Islam and took the title of Sultan Iskandar Shah. Other Muslim kingdoms also experienced a degree of revival, and took to the seas to win over the peoples of the islands. By the late fifteenth century, the Hindu empire of Majapahit began to crumble and it was soon eclipsed by two major Muslim powers, Demak and Padjang. The Hindu court migrated further inland and ended up consolidating its hold on the island of Bali, which remains culturally Hindu till this day.

²⁵ Hill regards the *kris* as one of the most coveted and cherished of all social symbols from the Hindu era. He argues that the cult of the *kris*, with its mysticism deeply rooted in the complex cosmological and spiritual ideas and beliefs of Hinduism – that is, Sivaism and Vishnuism – was a key object to which the older generation of Hinduised élite clung as Islam grew more powerful and influential in the Malay world: 'For generations the new faith [Islam] did not run very deep among the former devotees of Hinduism, among the most fanatical of whom were the makers of weapons. Although the vanquished might respect the victor's God as more powerful than their own, many would cling to their old beliefs and seek vengeance. The ancient cult was modified but by no means stamped out. It was a dangerous time when anybody differing in religious thought was regarded as the enemy. The kris must have been the ideal weapon to carry about then.' (Hill, 1956:20)

gradually gave way to the drier prose of Muslim scholars whose paragons of chivalry and heroism tended to be more earthbound. These imported Muslim narratives furnished the Malay world of letters with new symbols, figures, and metaphors that were clearly foreign in origin. The Muslim missionaries and traders brought with them new stories with heroes such as Iskandar Dzulkarnain (Alexander the Great) who hailed from drier climes where *krises* were not widely found. Needless to say, in the most popular Malay–Muslim stories about the Prophet Muhammad and his companions (*sahaba*'), there was not a *kris* in sight either.

In many instances, the beleaguered establishment of the *kerajaan* tried its best to withstand the tide of change by attempting to keep alive the aura of the *kerajaan* of the past. In the pro-*kerajaan* narrative of the *Sejarah Melayu* (Malay Annals), for example, we read of fantastic *krises* such as Hang Tuah's *kris*, *Tameng Sari* (glorious shield)²⁶ which could perform all kinds of amazing feats, such as taking to the air in search of pirate fleets and enemies of the state (Ahmad, 1967). In some of the other Muslim *hikayat*, such as the *Babad Diponegoro*, we find attempts to weave together elements of the fantastic and magical with the affairs of the Muslim kingdoms.²⁷

But however hard the conservative scribes of the court attempted to delay the inevitable, in the end the *qalam* of the Imams and Sufis proved mightier than the divine *kris* of the ancient gods. In time, the ideas of such Malay–Muslim Sufi thinkers as Hamzah Fansuri, Shamsul-din Pasai, and Abdul-Rauf Singkel, couched in terms of Islamic metaphysics, would prove to be more powerful than all the divine *krises* mustered by the Indonesian–Malay *dewarajas*. For the appeal of Islam, as it was taught by the Sufis to their potential converts, lay in its claim that the goal of self-perfection, the ideal of *insanu 'l-kamil* – the perfect wholesome human

²⁶ The possible Javanese connection between the *kris*-producing areas of Java and the court of Melacca can be found in the story of the Melaccan hero, Hang Tuah, and his *kris*, *Tameng Sari*. According to some versions of the *Sejarah Melayu*, the *kris Tameng Sari* was taken by Hang Tuah from a Javanese warrior whom he had defeated. It is clear that this Melaccan *kris* at least was Javanese in origin (Nasir, Unpublished:2).

²⁷ In the *Babad Diponegoro*, which recalls the struggle of the Javanese prince Diponegoro against the Dutch, we read how the Muslim prince was inspired by the divine goddess of the mountain. Diponegoro's struggle against the Dutch takes on epic and magical proportions as the *Babad* recounts his Herculean feats against the infidel opponents. Frey (1986:13) recalls another story in which a Muslim general used his *kris* against his pagan/Hindu Javanese enemies. The general's *kris* could be used to release a swarm of hornets against his foes.

being – was something towards which peasant and ruler, *rakyat* and *raja* alike could strive, and on equal terms. Furthermore the Sufis taught that reason was universal, and that in this crucial respect, all Muslims were equal to each other and equal before God.

Islam's most radical blow to the grand cosmic world-view of the pre-Islamic era was the way in which it gradually (though not completely) demythologized the world of the Malays. Thus it was in the realm of ideas that Islam's arrival and impact was most keenly felt.²⁸ Through the reliance of the Sufis and *Ulamas* on *tasawwuf* (rational metaphysics), the fantastic and wonderful elements of Indonesian–Malay culture were all explained away. And where the Sufi's brand of rationality could not win over the audience, the Muslim poets and scholars managed to tie up the loose ends left by the Hindu–Buddhist scribes of the past – thereby making sure that all bases were covered by the new victors. In the end, the Muslim scholars, Sufis, poets, and historians managed to rewrite and reinvent the world-view of the Malays to such an extent that even the esoteric world of the *kris* was not spared their revisionist assault.

As Islamic ideas gained currency among the Indonesian–Malay peoples, the older beliefs in the sacred powers of god-kings, *dewas*, magical weapons, talismanic charms, and taboos gradually lost their hold. Allah had displaced the gods of Hinduism and Islamic history had been back-dated to infinity. The Indonesian–Malay world was being reinvented *in toto* from an Islamic perspective, along with all its symbols and markers of identity. For example, in the account in the *Hikayat Malim Dewa* of the arrival of the *kris* in the Malay world, the reader is left in no doubt about the Islamic origins of the *kris*.²⁹

²⁸ As Islam penetrated into the hearts and minds of the inhabitants of the archipelago, its teachings invariably came into conflict with the dominant world-view that had long prevailed at the behest of the rulers. Ismail Hamid concludes that 'Islam brought an end to the Hindu caste system of the Malays which had existed prior to the coming of Islam': 'in its place Islam had introduced a concept of "democracy"' that was based on the belief in the equality of all believers before God. This idea alone would have been sufficient a threat to the hierarchical order of society which the fragile sinews of *kerajaan* culture had long tried to preserve (Hamid, 1983:26).

²⁹ There are a number of examples of the attempt to re-inscribe Islamic credentials onto the history of the *kris*. Hill (1956:24) notes that 'in many old Malay tales about the kris the might of the Hindu Gods has been replaced by the power of Islam. [Kris were] said to have been made from metal left over from the forging of a bolt for the Ka'abah in Mecca. The same sanctified origin is claimed for the kris owned by Laksamana Hang Tuah, said to be made of twenty kinds of iron. Other kris are said to have been made from the steel of Khorasan'.

*Besi bukan sebarang besi,
Itulah nama besi khersani,
Besi yang asal diturun Allah.
Setahun Bugis berenang,
Riak ditikam mati juga,
Setahun musuh berjalan,
Bekas ditikam mati juga.³⁰*

The Hindu *empus* and *pandais* had claimed that their *kris*es were forged from meteorite iron, a gift from the heavens. But the Muslims replied that Allah had created the heavens, and all the meteorites flying around the heavens were his property as well. The Hindu deities may have been present during the forging of the primordial *kris*, but had not Allah created the raw materials? These discursive skirmishes continued for generations: and in the midst of this process of social transformation, the station and role of the *kris* within the complex cosmological framework of Indonesian–Malay society suffered a radical demotion. For with the consolidation of Islam's hold on the Malay world, the squadrons of magical flying *kris*es were finally grounded.

The socio-cultural changes brought about by the arrival of Islam had several important consequences for societal relations within the traditional Indonesian–Malay kingdoms. First, the standardization of knowledge and education through a more accessible medium contributed to the breaking down of the monopoly on knowledge once enjoyed by the *kerajaan* élite and the sacral intelligentsia. The most radical change was the expansion of knowledge and expertise among the people who were once kept in thrall by the esoteric discourse of the semi-divine élite.³¹ With this expansion of knowledge, there also occurred the expansion of skills, local technologies, and pseudo-sciences that were once the privileged space of court artisans and craftsmen. The impact on the development of the *kris*, particularly in the post-Mataram era (from the eighteenth century), was considerable.

With the consolidation of Islam and the changes in societal relations

³⁰ 'This iron is no mere iron, For 'tis the iron of Khorasan, 'Tis the iron bestowed by Allah. The Bugis can swim for a year, Should he be stabbed, it will kill him too. Your enemy may flee for a year, Should you stab him, it will kill him too.'

³¹ Ismail Hamid argues that the coming of Islam invariably had an impact on the writing of Malay courtly texts and royal historiographies, in that they became embellished with the trappings of Islamic discourse. But the teaching of Islam also promoted reading and writing among the public, which was thus finally given access to a discourse of power and government. Literacy was raised long before the arrival of Western colonialism (Hamid, 1983:217–19).

in the Malay–Muslim world, *kris*-making became more commonplace, and eventually spilled beyond the confines of court and temple. Hamzuri notes that from the Mataram period, *kris* production became a more popular enterprise. By the Yogyakarta-Solo era (after the Treaty of Giyanti in 1755), ‘*kris*-making was almost universal; that is, it was no longer a monopoly of the court *empus*, [and] it had become a folk craft’ in Java (Hamzuri, 1984:14). This was also the case in the rest of the archipelago, thanks to the proliferation of *empus/pandai besis* who had left Java and migrated to such areas as Sumatra and the Malay peninsula due to worsening political and social conditions in Java itself. By the seventeenth century, *kris*-making had spread throughout the Malay world, with production centres in Aceh, Patani, Kelantan, Melacca, Minangkabau, Palembang, Bantam, Demak, Jogjakarta, Surakarta, Bali, Makassar, Goa, Banjarmasin, Mindanao, and the Sulu islands.

As a result of the social changes occasioned by the arrival of this new creed, new social groups and classes came to the fore, such as landed merchants, traders, and the Muslim clerics. This ‘bottom-up’ process of conversion also led to a ‘bottom-up’ appreciation of the *kris* as it became available to the new social groups and constituencies. Consequently the *kris* enjoyed new patronage and custom from these new groups – but also became popularized and vulgarized, much to the horror of the traditional ruling classes.

Second, Islam’s influence in the fields of knowledge and arts also had a profound effect on the culture of the courts. As Chandra Muzaffar (1979) points out, the arrival of Islam also meant that many of the age-old practices and ideas of *kerajaan* ideology had lost their validity and legitimacy.³² Islam’s influence was seen most visibly in the attempts to curb and condemn the cultural excesses in courtly literature, art, architecture, and élite lifestyle in general. This, in turn, had a profound effect on the reproduction of courtly culture and its attendant symbols and ornaments. Thus Islam introduced not only new forms, symbols, and motifs, but also new standards and criteria of aesthetics which spilled over into all areas of artistic and cultural production, including the world of the *kris*.

And third, the arrival of Islam meant that the geopolitical universe of the Malay world had to be reconstructed on a radical scale. Gone was

³² ‘It should be clear . . . that neither the idea of *Daulat* nor the punishment suffered by its transgressors who were sometimes victims of royal injustice was acceptable to Islam. Indeed the whole notion of unquestioning loyalty to the *Sultan* was in conflict with Islamic values’ (Muzaffar, 1979:30).

the cosmology of the past, in which the affairs of the world were directly affected by the manipulations and whims of the gods and cosmic forces. Membership to this new religious community also meant that the Malay–Muslims were now forced to face a new gallery of foes – for the Muslim missionaries and traders brought with them not only a new creed but also new enemies, namely the *Ferenggi* (Christian Franks)³³ who were hot on their heels, in a global crusade against Islam.³⁴ To survive in this new environment, the Malay–Muslim had less need for pompous over-decorated weapons and more need for armaments that would persuade his infidel enemy of the righteousness of his cause.³⁵

Thus during the Islamic era, the evolution of the *kris* took a different turn. From sacred symbol and object of luxury and status, it found itself reduced to the level of a profane weapon of deadly seriousness. This change in status and use was understandable considering the other changes that took place with the arrival of Islam. As the Malay archipelago came into the orbit of the Muslim world, new technologies, including armaments, ballistics, and armour were introduced into the region from India and the Arab world.³⁶ The *kris* had no choice but to compete with the

³³ The term *Ferenggi* is a corruption of the term ‘Frank’. It was first introduced into South East Asia by Arab, Indian, and Persian traders and embassies who used it as a general reference to all Europeans.

³⁴ The accounts left by the earliest European travellers to the Malay world are laden with references to Malay–Muslims as ‘Moors’ or ‘Saracens’. In the accounts left by both Pigafetta (who followed Magellan’s expedition to Borneo and the Philippines) and the son of Alfonso de Albuquerque (who later invaded Melacca in 1511), the Malay–Muslims are repeatedly referred to as the enemies of the European Christian powers. During the invasion of Melacca, the city was bombarded non-stop for eight days by the Portuguese fleet. After that attack, the town was assaulted and all Malay–Muslims (women and children included) were put to the sword. Albuquerque then proposed to the King of Siam that the Siamese should establish a settlement in the region to prevent the re-emergence there of a Muslim power.

³⁵ That the discourse of Islam was zealously taken up by the Indonesian–Malay *rajas* as an ideological tool both justifying and encouraging conquest is made clear in both the vainglorious historical records left by their dynasties as well as the ruins left by their marauding armies. Much has already been written by scholars on this subject, but Reid deserves to be quoted, for he sums up the process of incorporation most succinctly: ‘Islam proved to be a powerful weapon for those who sought to extend royal power, less because of its essential doctrines than because it represented a new, external source of legitimacy at a time of expanding commerce and military innovation. Because its claims were universal, it helped to invalidate the legitimacy of non-Muslim rivals and of the oaths and contracts which had governed relations with them. In positive terms Islam provided an honourable motive for conquest, and a set of international allies ready to fight in its name.’ (Reid:90–91, emphasis added)

³⁶ Gardner (1936) notes that the use of shields and suits of armour had become more popular by the seventeenth and eighteenth century. The suits of armour that can be found in the Malay world (*Baju Lamina*) are based on the suits of chain mail worn

weapons brought by both the Arab and Indian Muslims as well as their enemies, the *Ferengi*. Such innovations and modifications (for example, the longer *Kris Sundang* of the Moros from the southern Philippines, and the rapier-like *Kris Bahari* from Sumatra) were the order of the day.³⁷

Apart from the development of the form and figure of the *kris* blade (*mata kris*), the evolution of the *hulu* (hilt) also took a different turn. Hill notes that 'devout Muslims objected to the actual representation of Hindu divinities in the shadow-play [*wayang*] and on kris-hilts. But they were willing to compromise by altering the form to a grotesque caricature' (Hill, 1956:25). The evolution of more Islamized hilts was accompanied by a semantic revision in which pre-Islamic hilts were given more Islamic names. Thus the Garuda found himself reduced from the steed of Vishnu to the status of a kingfisher (*pekaka*).³⁸ Then the

by the early crusaders and travellers from Europe who began to make an appearance in the archipelago around the sixteenth century. The use of shields can also be traced to influences from India and the Arab world. In Sumatra in particular, we still come across examples of round wooden or rattan shields called *Perisais* or *Tamengs* that are loosely based on rattan and wooden shields commonly found in the Islamic world from India to Turkey. It must also be remembered that one of the main suppliers of arms and armament technology was Ottoman Turkey, which had resumed the role of guardian of the Caliphate from Sultan Selim I's invasion of Egypt in 1517. The Ottoman Porte continued to supply Malay-Muslim kingdoms such as Aceh with arms and advisors up to the eighteenth century.

³⁷ Robert Cato (1996) puts forward the thesis that the Sulu *Kris Sundang* was developed by the Moros in order to counter the weapons used by the crusaders from Spain and Portugal in the sixteenth century. Although it carries with it a number of conventional motifs and symbols found on earlier *kris*es of the Hindu era, such as the *Naga* motif, it clearly marks a departure from *kris*es elsewhere in the Malay world by virtue of its length, weight, and size. Cato argued that these changes were forced on the Moros by the competitive advantage enjoyed by the Europeans who had longer weapons. As a result, 'the Moros noted the combat weakness of the Malayan/Indonesian *kris*es, and set about to rectify them. To accomplish this, the Muslim Filipino *pandaes* made several alterations. To begin with they enlarged the weapon considerably. This newly-expanded kris naturally carried more weight, which served to improve its ability to cut in battle. As this development progressed, less and less emphasis was placed on the sharpened point. In the hands of Moro warriors, stabbing effectiveness was no longer the forte of the kris. The value of the sword was now measured by its capacity to slice and cleave with merciless efficiency.' (Cato, 1996:62–63)

³⁸ With the spread of Islamic influence in the Malay world, a number of *kris* hilt designs were renamed by the newly-converted Malay peoples. Thus the Garuda-hilt that was prominent in Vishnuite regions was not only redesigned to appear as a man crouching, but was also renamed the *Jawa Demam* (fevered Javanese) hilt. A revised and Islamized account of the origin of the *Jawa Deman* hilt appears in the *Hikayat Sejarah Melayu*. The account records the visit to Java by the two warriors of Melacca, Hang Tuah and Hang Jebat. In the course of their travels, they encounter a Javanese who is squatting by the roadside. Hang Jebat notices that the Javanese has his sarong wrapped around him, and suspects that they are about to be attacked. The assailant leaps at both of them, *kris* in hand, but is killed by Jebat. The incident

sculpted figures of the gods and demons of the past were gradually submerged beneath a carpet of arabesques, floral tapestries, and geometric patterns that anticipated the ‘greening’ of the Malay archipelago under Islam in the centuries to come. Some hilt variations were ultimately reduced to completely abstract geometric affairs, almost modern in their conception and execution (Figures 1 and 2), while in others what little remained of the symbolism of the Hindu past was almost entirely covered by floral or vegetal motifs, to the point at which only the vaguest trace of the ancient gods could be seen. In areas such as Patani and Kelantan where the cult of Vishnu–Garuda was too strong to be fully erased, the figure of Garuda was modified to the point at which it took the form of a crouching/squatting humanoid figure with its wings effaced altogether (Figures 3 and 4). Thus not only were the *kris*es grounded with the arrival of Islam, but Garuda himself had his wings clipped for good.

The changes in the shape, form, and use of the *kris* during the Islamic era were also reflected in extensive changes in the mode of *kris* production. While during the Hindu–Buddhist era, the pseudo-scientific mode of *kris* production was heavily influenced by elements of the religious and the occult, *kris* production during the Islamic period involved the introduction of a vast range of new terms, phrases, talismanic codes, formulae, and taboos that were used by the Muslim *empus/pandai besis*. Contrary to the claims of contemporary Islamists, who state categorically that the arrival of Islam eradicated the myths and superstitions of the pre-Islamic era, there is ample evidence that Islam’s arrival in the Malay world simply contributed another layer of belief to the already overcrowded and overdetermined cosmos of the Malays. It was during this period that Malay–Muslim *empus* and *pandais* came up with new talismanic utterances and incantations (*jampis*) that were more Islamic in character. One of these *jampis* was used when the *kris* was having its hilt (*hulu*) attached and reads thus:

*Hai keris semata keris,
Kerismu asal dari besi khursani,
Hai seru senjata seru,
Seru suara guru berasal,*

inspires them to design a hilt called the ‘fevered Javanese’ (*Jawa Demam*). Note that all reference to the Hindu origins of, and traces on, the hilt has been erased from the narrative (Nasir, Unpublished:6–7). The hilt is also known by other names – *hulu Anak Ayam sejuk*, *hulu Pipit Teleng*, *hulu Telunjuk*. The *hulu Tajung* from Lankasuka (Patani, Kelantan, and Trengganu) was subsequently called the *hulu Pekaka* – a serious mistake which endures till this day – while the *hulu Krishna* was re-named the *hulu Tapak Kuda* or *hulu Ekor Itek*.



Figure 1. A late 18th-century Bugis (Sulawesi) hilt in which the Islamic influence can clearly be seen. The hilt is decorated with abstract geometric designs in the form of squares, chevrons and crosses. The back of the hilt is decorated with several hollow-carved crosses filled with white metal, possibly lead or nickel. The purpose of this rare form of decoration is unknown, as it is not a usual feature of *kris* hilts. The central portion of the hilt is decorated with a medallion on which the word *Allah* is carved in bold relief eight times. Kemuning wood and metal. (Author's collection.)

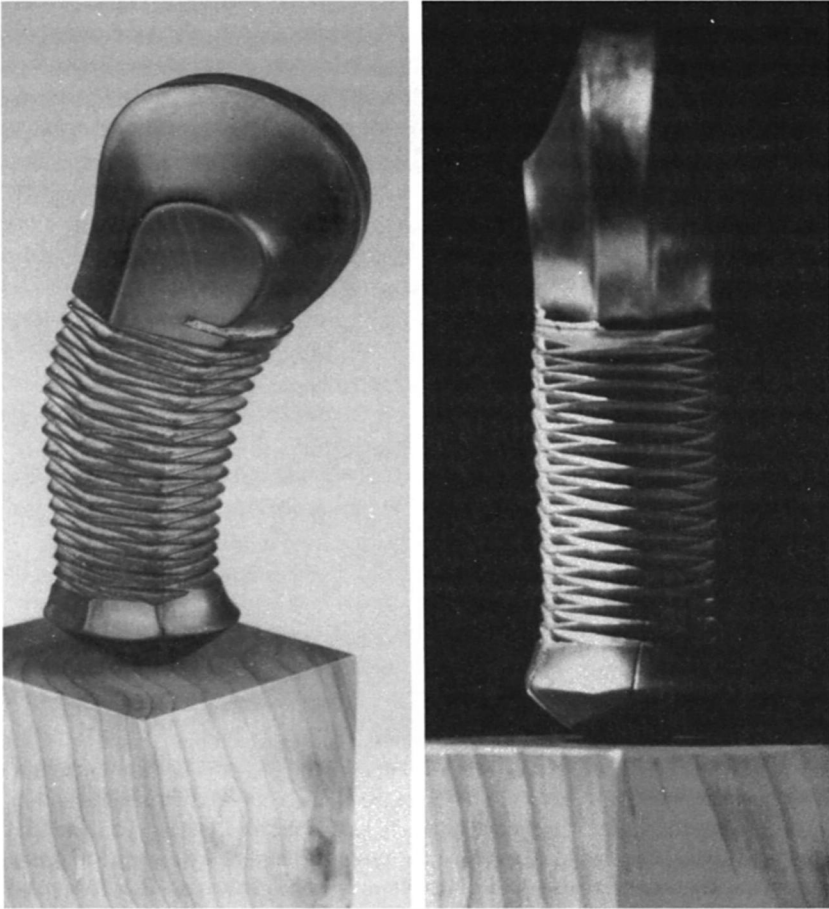


Figure 2. A 19th century Balinese ‘Cubist’ or *Belombongan* hilt. These abstract Balinese hilts are somewhat similar to the Islamic-influenced *Nunggak Semi* hilts of Java. Unlike the anthropomorphic Hindu-influenced hilts of Bali, Java and Madura which feature Hindu deities or heroes like Siva, Arjuna or Bima, such abstract hilts seem to represent a conscious rejection of Hindu influence. The carving on this hilt is of particularly superior quality and finer than most. Ebony wood. (Author’s collection.)



Figure 3. An early 18th century Patani/Kelantan *Bangsa Agong* hilt. The squatting figure of the *Dewa/Garuda* is still apparent. Wood. (Author's collection.)



Figure 4. A mid-19th century Patani/Kelantan 'Tajong' hilt. Here the figure of the *Dewa/Garuda* has been further effaced. Note the profusion of flowery arabesques that hide the form of the figure itself. Only the features of the face remain. Wood. (Author's collection.)

*Hai hulu setongkak hulu,
Hulumu besi gambang kenanga,
Gambak nak ekor nak satu,
Teguh tegak rahim dipakai,
Berkat doa
Laa Illaha Illallah,
Muhammada Rasullullah.*

Another *jampi* was used when the *kris* was first inserted into its specially made *sarong* (sheath):

*Hai keris semata keris,
Tenggekan hulu segenting tegak,
Tegak semangat, tegak setia,
Tegak seperti kata Tok Guru,
Kus naning semangat kupakai,
Setia terpacak keris disarung,
Taat menikam kepada Tuan,
Buang menikun nala di depan,
Berhak engkau kepada aku,
Berhak engkau kepada Allah,
Berkat doa
Laa Illaha Illallah
Muhammada Rasullullah.*

In both *jampis* we find an amalgam of influences – Islam, Hinduism, and pagan Malay folk beliefs. But the fact that both *jampis* end with the formula of the Muslim *Kalimah*, or declaration of faith (‘There is no God but God, and Muhammad is the Messenger of God’) shows that the Islamic influence is dominant and decisive (Badin, 1999:98).

The arrival of Islam in the Malay archipelago was therefore an encounter that was laden with many consequences for the development of Malay civilization. Malay society experienced a transformation that was gradual yet far-reaching, and it proved to be a dynamic process which radically challenged and, in many ways, altered the socio-cultural terrain left behind by the Hindu era.

From a Khaldunian perspective, the Islamic era between the fifteenth and twentieth century could be read as a stage in which the civilizational development of the Malays experienced a contraction of sorts. For during this stage the form of (*Shafie, Sunni*) Islam as practised by the Malays, with its legalistic and rationalist tendencies, diminished the fantastic

and mythological dimensions of the Indonesian–Malay universe.³⁹ While it is true that the Muslim missionaries had also introduced other mythologies, cosmologies, hermeneutic codes, and spiritual economies to the already complex world of the archipelago, it was evident that the cardinal virtues of rationality and the necessity of living in a profane world were paramount. Islam had not explained away the world of gods, *dewarajas*, *raksaksas*, and *semangats* entirely. Instead it introduced a new world in which this cosmic riot was corralled under the unifying rule of a single God with centralizing propensities, Allah.

The combined effect of the socio-cultural changes cited above had, in the end, serious implications for the continued use of the *kris* in the Malay world. Having demythologized, popularized, and ‘secularized’ the *kris*, the weapon was then made to serve the ends of war in an age of rapid modernization and innovation. However, it must be remembered that although Islam may have grounded the magical *kris*, it did not deliver the killing blow which reduced it to the status of a common knife. That came about only after the Malay world’s encounter with an even more devastating force – modernity.

From weapon to *stigmata*: the fate of the kris in the age of modernity

The vanquished always want to imitate the victor in his distinctive characteristics, his dress, his occupation, and in all his other conditions and customs. [They] consider the victor perfect, either because they are impressed by the respect they have for him, or because they erroneously assume that their own subservience is not due to the nature of their defeat but to the victor’s perfection. If that erroneous assumption fixes itself, it becomes a firm belief. The vanquished then adopt all the manners of the victor and assimilate themselves to him. . . . This, then, is imitation. (Khalidun, 1967:116)

What follows is an episode from the seventeenth century chronicle, the *Hikayat Patani*.

After their ill-fated attempt to conquer the kingdom of Ayudhya [Siam], the ruler of Patani, Sultan Mudaffar Shah, and his brother, Sultan Manzur Shah, had to choose between fighting to maintain control of the besieged capital or to flee. The elder brother opted to stand his ground, but ordered his younger sibling to return to Patani with the rest of the invading

³⁹ It must be remembered that the dominant school of Islamic thought that eventually took root in the Malay world was the *Shaf’ie* school, with its strong emphasis on *fiqh*, *tauhid*, and Islamic legalism.

fleet. As the boats of Patani took to the sea, the soldiers saw the ships of the Siamese fleet bearing down on them. With the Siamese fleet closing in on him, Sultan Manzur Shah knew he was running out of options: his men were weak and tired after their campaign, and to engage the Siamese in close combat would have been suicide. Sultan Manzur, who was in the main ship of the fleet, then turned to the cannon that was mounted at its bow and proclaimed:

*Hai Nang Liu-Liu, jikalau engkau lepaskan aku selamat sampai ke Patani maka akan ku tabalkan engkau selama tujuh hari.*⁴⁰

Nang Liu-Liu – for that was the name of the cannon – promptly complied with the Sultan's homicidal request and blasted the Siamese fleet out of the water. When he finally reached the safety of his kingdom, Sultan Manzur kept his promise, and commanded his court to perform the ritual of *pertabalan* for the faithful cannon, before he himself underwent the rite under the gilded royal parapluie and was crowned Sultan of Patani.⁴¹

The *Hikayat Patani* is full of such wonderful praises for the ballistic weapons that were the stars of the Patani royal arsenal. Apart from the trusty Nang Liu-Liu, the chronicle records the names of other famous cannons, *Seri Negeri* and *Tuk Buk*.⁴² The *Hikayat* also mentions the deeds performed by other weapons of smaller calibre, such as the *bedil*

⁴⁰ 'Hai Nang Liu-Liu, if you deliver me from this disaster and to the shores of Patani I promise that I shall have you inaugurated for seven days.' (*Hikayat Patani*:16)

⁴¹ The *pertabalan* ritual is a necessary rite of passage for all rulers before they assume the title of king. In the case of the court of Patani, the rite included having to sit under the royal golden parapluie for a number of days and having to accept prayers of goodwill from all the members of the court and all subjects, as well as offerings from followers and courtiers. The cannon Nang Liu-Liu was conferred all these honours as if it were a human being. The *Hikayat Patani* records that the cannon was placed on the throne and under the royal parapluie for three days and nights, and offerings were made to it by the members of the court and royal subjects. (*Hikayat Patani*:17–18)

⁴² The *Hikayat* recounts in detail the story behind the creation of these cannons. Soon after the founding of the kingdom, there arrived from China a merchant who brought with him gifts for Sultan Ismail Shah of Patani. One of these gifts was a round shot from a Chinese cannon that was clearly of greater calibre than any of the ballistic weapons in Patani. The Sultan was shocked to see such a large projectile, and realised how weak his army was and how inferior the cannons in the royal arsenal. He immediately ordered larger cannons to be forged, three of them to be posted near the royal palace for the defence of the Istana and the use of the King himself. These were the cannons *Seri Negeri*, *Nang Liu-Liu*, and *Tuk Buk*. Nang Liu-Liu was taken by the Patani forces on their ill-fated campaign against Ayudhaya. (*Hikayat Patani*:8–9)

istinggar (flintlock musket) that felled the Yang Dipertuan from his elephant (*Hikayat Patani*:54). *Krises*, in contrast, are given a different treatment altogether. While the *Hikayat* mentions the gold- and silver-mounted *krises* and spears as part of the regalia of the Patani court, there are also numerous references to nefarious deeds performed by a crew of villains with *kris* in hand.⁴³ Far from being an awesome symbol of status worthy of respect, the *kris* is presented as an insidious weapon, or a weapon of last resort.⁴⁴ It is clear that by the time the *Hikayat Patani* was written, the *kris* had lost much of its appeal, and its fortune had taken a turn for the worse.⁴⁵

By the time the *Hikayat Patani* was written, the Malay archipelago had come within the orbit of two different worlds – Western colonialism and Islamic revivalism. Like the Muslim traders and missionaries who came before them, the Western colonialists who had arrived in numbers by the sixteenth century had little need for the *kris*. They came fully equipped with new weapons of their own which were more than a match for the weapons in the Malay world. As these Western adventurers and conquerors hacked their way across the Malay world, they built new settlements and monuments dedicated first to their faith and, later, to their commercial interests.⁴⁶

⁴³ *Hikayat Patani*:62. In the *Hikayat Patani* there are numerous murders and assassinations carried out by members of the court and the nobility. Many were killed in ambushes, and their ends were secured with the deadly *kris*. Raja Bima kills Sultan Bahadur with a *kris* at the gates of the palace, for example (28). In another episode, the Queen of Patani, Phra Cau (Raja Hijau) orders the *Imam* of the court, the *Khatib*, to kill Sri Aman Pahlawan with his *kris* in revenge for the deaths of Raja Bima and Sultan Bahadur (32).

⁴⁴ The *Hikayat* recounts an episode in which the rebellious Bendehara Kayu Kelat openly declares rebellion against Queen Phra Cau. The Bendehara and his forces entered the compound of the palace and demanded a meeting with the Queen. When the Queen appeared on the verandah of the palace, the Bendahara unsheathed his *kris* in a threatening manner. The Queen responded by undoing her shawl (*selandang*) and surrendering it to the Bendahara, who then wound it around his head as a turban. This was explained later as a gesture of defeat and acquiescence on the part of the Queen (*Hikayat Patani*:30). In another episode, the *Hikayat* describes how the rebellious Raja Lela was forced to go about with the *kris* perpetually on his person, even when he was performing his toilet (47–48).

⁴⁵ The *Hikayat Patani* was written in the late seventeenth century. It was probably a collaborative work between several authors.

⁴⁶ A good example of this transformation is the way in which the Portuguese fort of *A Famosa* in Melacca was hegemonically incorporated by the Dutch and later the British. The Dutch had inherited it from the Portuguese whom they ousted and, as Winstedt puts it, they proceeded to colonize the settlement with their own values and goals in mind: 'The bastions of the *A Famosa* were given new names: St. Domingo became Victoria, Madre Dios was changed to Emilia, the Eleven Thousand Virgins gave

Western colonial rule drastically challenged the world-view of the Malays and forced on them the agenda for change. What made matters worse for the self-esteem of the Malay peoples was the fact that these infidels had defeated them by using techniques, skills, and technologies that were alien to them. The British and Dutch had introduced new modes of production, transport, agriculture, and warfare which had been hitherto unknown to the Malays. In his autobiography, the *Hikayat Abdullah* of 1840, the Muslim writer Munshi Abdullah Abdul Kadir described how the British managed to destroy the fortifications of the Dutch with the use of modern explosives.⁴⁷ Abdullah's admiration for this feat of spectacular destruction is clear in his writing. He had witnessed how more than a century of history could be wiped out in an instant.

The British, the latest in a number of Western powers that had come to the region, had demonstrated their ability to make and unmake history in no uncertain terms. The world which Abdullah knew had changed before his eyes, not by a miracle performed by a *dewaraja* but thanks to the English *Raja* Farquhar and the power of modern technology which the Malays themselves did not possess or command. Elsewhere in the *Hikayat*, Abdullah describes the meticulous attention to detail and the organizational skills of the British in their day-to-day management of the colony and as they prepared for the invasion of Java (Kadir, 1947:72–73, 76). He was amazed by the achievements of the British in writing and printing, medicine and healthcare, and government and law enforcement. Such spectacles seriously challenged the confidence of the Malays in their own skills and abilities, and contributed to the perception that they had more to learn from the colonial power than the colonial power from them.

As the process of colonization continued, the Malay world was opened up, studied, categorized, and finally quarantined within the colonizer's order of knowledge. Raffles, Brooke, Hurgronje, Swettenham, Clifford, and other colonial administrators took to the task of regulating and

place to Henriette Louise. . . . The bastions no longer bore witness to the glories of God, but to the glory of the sponsors of unmitigated trade, and the walls of the *A Famosa*, ceasing to breathe the enchantment of Rome and the Middle Ages, became a stronghold for ledgers.' (Winstedt, 1950:49)

⁴⁷ The Resident of the British Settlement, Colonel William Farquhar, declared one day that the fortifications left by the Dutch East India Company would be demolished. Rather than risk losing the settlement of Melacca and conceding the fort as a prize to an enemy, Colonel Farquhar had decided to pre-empt that possibility by destroying the fort himself. This news was greeted by many of the people of Melacca with surprise, for, as Abdullah himself noted, the fortifications built by the Dutch were deemed impossible to destroy.

compartmentalizing the Malay world within their own ethnocentric and Eurocentric world-view – which necessarily placed the native, his culture, beliefs, and symbols on an inferior, subjugated register.⁴⁸

Colonial rule reconfigured the world of the colonized in every respect. The religio-political environment of the Malays was split in two: the rational and governable realm of the state; and the darker world of Malay beliefs and religion, into which was thrown the ubiquitous *kris*. This epistemic arrest of the Malay world ensured that every element was neatly labelled and placed within its own appointed space. The *kris* was eventually put in the same ignominious group of Malay clichés as *amok*, *latah*, and the world of *hantu punitanak*, *jembalang*, *bomohs*, and *pukaus*.⁴⁹

With the epistemic arrest of the Malays, they were easily disarmed and put to rationalized, productive work. Swettenham, who never allowed objectivity to get in the way of self-praise, wrote of this achievement:

In 1874, every Malay had as many weapons as he could carry: say, two daggers in his belt, two spears in his hand, a gun over his shoulder and a long sword under his arm. The boys were usually content with two or three weapons. Now, the men carry umbrellas, and the boys slates and books. (Swettenham, 1908:135)

It goes without saying that only the sepoys of the British colonial forces were allowed to bear arms, while those Malays who had the temerity to hold on to the weapons of their ancestors were classified as pirates, religious fanatics, or murderers.

Modernization – as it was introduced by the Western colonial powers – had created a world in which the circulation of arms was not entirely removed from society but policed instead. The fact that Malaya was

⁴⁸ Hugh Clifford's view of the cultural backwardness of the Malay race was typical of the prejudices and perceptions held by colonial scholars and administrators of the late nineteenth century. In his writings, he presents the Malays as being not only backward but living centuries behind the colonial present: 'One cannot but sympathise with the Malays, who are suddenly and violently translated from the point to which they had attained in the natural development of their race, and are now required to live up to the standards of a people who are six centuries ahead of them.' (Clifford, 1896:74)

⁴⁹ *Amok* and *latah* are two particular forms of behaviour that Western Orientalist scholars have identified with the Malays. Over the centuries that followed, they came to be regarded as essential features of the Malay character and were seen as proof of the inherent backwardness and instability of the Malay race. *Hantu pontianak* and *jembalang* are two common types of Malay evil spirit, the former being somewhat similar to the Western vampire. *Bomoh* and *pukau* are the Malay terms for Shaman and witchdoctors.

now also a modern colony meant that the circulation of arms was policed along ethnic and cultural lines that demarcated the frontier between colonizer and colonial subject. Having defeated the colonial subject and deprived him of his political rights, the colonizer then proceeded to relegate his culture and its attendant symbols to the vaults of the colonial memory.⁵⁰ The *kris* of the gods now found itself locked up in the museums of the new colonial masters – though one did manage to slip out in the middle of the night to slay the odd victim or two.⁵¹

But it was not just the modernizing Europeans who were determined to marginalize the *kris*: the Malay–Muslim reformers and modernists played their part as well. The emergence of modern schools of Islamic thought came about through the integration of the Malay kingdoms into global pan-Islamism. The modernist trend within Islamic thought manifested itself in the reformist and revivalist movements that borrowed extensively from the tradition of modernity in the West while rejecting the West's beliefs and values. In the end it became almost an inverted image of the modern tradition itself. It was this factor that eventually contributed to the local rejection and marginalization of the *kris* in Malay society.

By the nineteenth century, the Malay world was in closer contact with the rest of the Islamic world than ever before.⁵² The modernist and reformist trends of Islam within the Malay world were much inspired by developments elsewhere in the Muslim world, such as the emergence of the conservative *Wahabbi* and *Deobandi* traditions and the modernist schools of al-Azhar and Aligarh.⁵³ The plans of the new Muslim revivalists (*Mujaddid*) for the revival (*tajdid*) of Islam was often linked to the goal of purifying it of pre-Islamic elements that were regarded as

⁵⁰ For an extensive discussion of the role played by the colonial museum in the logic of colonial relations and patterns of colonial dominance, see Anderson, 1990:chapter 6.

⁵¹ Hill (1956), Frey (1986), and others have made reference to the famous *kris berhantu* (haunted *kris*) of the Taiping Museum in Perak, which was said to have escaped from its sheath many times and flown out of the museum in the middle of the night in search of blood.

⁵² This is not to suggest that the earlier generations of Muslim missionaries and mystics were out of touch with the rest of the Islamic world and the developments there. Malay Sufi teachers such as Hamzah Fansuri were educated at Mecca and other centres of Islamic teaching. But by the end of the nineteenth century (and particularly after the opening of the Suez Canal), many more Malays were travelling to the Arab world and back, thus exposing their societies to new ideas and developments.

⁵³ The *Deobandi* school refers to the *Wahhabi*-influenced ideas developed at the Dar-ul Ulum seminary in the town of Deoband in India. It produced some of the most prominent conservative reformists and revivalists within Islam who, by the late nineteenth century, were worried about the influence of Hindu culture and practices on contemporary Muslim life in India.

khurafat (un-Islamic) or *syirik* (idolatrous).⁵⁴ Consequently new Malay-Muslim scholars such as Sheikh Nuruddin al-Raniri, Sheikh Buchara al-Jauhari, Munshi Abdullah Abdul Kadir, Shaykh Mohammad Tahir Jalaluddin, Syed Sheikh Ahmad Al-Hadi, Haji Abbas Mohammad Tahar, and Shaykh Mohammad Salim Al-Kalili emerged to challenge not only the traditional *kerajaan* establishment but also the secular colonial regimes installed by the British and the Dutch in the Malay world.⁵⁵

These modern Islamic thinkers and the movements they led were particularly concerned about the plight of the Malay peoples, whom they regarded as victims of the twin evils of modern colonialism and traditionalist obscurantism.⁵⁶ In their crusade to lift up the Malays and drag them into the modern age, they fired their polemical broadsides in both directions – against the secular evils of modern colonialism and against the ancient evils of the pagan pre-Islamic traditions that were still evident in Malay-Muslim culture.

In these respects, the predominant mindset of these modern Islamic movements (such as the *Sarekat Islam*) was a world apart from such early Muslim missionaries and mystics as Hamzah Fansuri, Abdul-Rauf Singkel, and Shamsul-din Pasai of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. While earlier generations of Sufi thinkers were able to adapt the symbols of the Hindu past to the discursive terrain of their own Islamic cosmology,⁵⁷ the Muslim modernists of the nineteenth and twentieth

⁵⁴ One of the most prominent figures in the revivalist movement within Islam was Abul A'la Maudoodi, whose campaign to modernize, reform, and revive Islam in the Indian subcontinent was predicated on the need to purify Islam of Hindu influences. Maudoodi's ideas were typical of those gaining currency in the Muslim world at the end of the nineteenth century, as were other schools of thought, such as the *Wahabbis* of the Arabian Peninsula and the *Deobandis* of the subcontinent. Maudoodi's influence reached as far as the Malay world by the mid-twentieth century. For further discussion of the concept of *tajdid* in Islam, see Maudoodi, 1963.

⁵⁵ This new generation of Malay-Muslim reformists managed to insert their ideas deep into the Malay world through new modes of communication such as the vernacular press. In 1876, a newspaper, *Jawi Peranakan*, was launched in Singapore by a number of prominent Indian-Muslims. In 1906, another Muslim paper, *Al-Imam*, was launched in Singapore. *Al-Imam* was started by a number of prominent Malay-Muslim reformers such as Shaykh Mohammad Tahir Jalaluddin, Syed Sheikh Ahmad Al-Hadi, Haji Abbas Mohammad Tahar, and Shaykh Mohammad Salim Al-Kalili.

⁵⁶ Muslim newspapers such as *Jawi Peranakan* and *Al-Imam* in particular were concerned about the corrupting and weakening influence of pre-Islamic rites and rituals in Malay society, which, they argued, had kept back the Malay-Muslims in the race for development.

⁵⁷ Jensen (1998:216) notes that the Sufis of the northern Malay peninsula easily re-interpreted the Garuda-form of the Patani hilt as representing man's heavenward flight from this world to the spiritual world beyond.

centuries proved to be less open-minded when dealing with the symbols and symptoms of the pre-Islamic past.

The Malay–Muslim reformers feared the pre-Islamic past not because it was so different from the world of the present but because it was so similar. Thus their focus was directed towards introducing and maintaining the sartorial and behavioural distinctions between the Malay–Muslim of the present and his Hindu–Buddhist ancestor. To them, the private space of Muslim life was more often than not an esoteric realm (*khalwat* or *khas*) where the Muslim’s psyche and spirituality (*batin*) was most in danger of contamination from dubious elements within the occult or pre-Islamic past. Their modernist and reformist agendas ensured that the policing of discursive, behavioural, and sartorial frontiers remained a paramount objective. Fearful of returning to the days when the discursive economies of Islam and Hindu–Buddhism co-mingled and interpenetrated with promiscuous ease, they were desperately concerned to rid Malay Islam of the traces of pagan pre-Islamic influence.

While the new modernist and reformist *Ulama* and *Imam* were issuing their *fatwa du jour* against all that was un-Islamic, they created the popular impression that many traditional elements of Malay culture were an obstacle to the fulfilment and completion of the Islamic project. The generation of modern Malay–Muslim thinkers and scholars of the late nineteenth century who made up the *Kaum Muda*⁵⁸ attacked many cultural practices, such as the traditional Malay wedding ceremony (*bersanding*), the hair-shaving ceremony (*cukur rambut*) for babies, the burial rites of Malays, and the Malay practice of *puja laut*⁵⁹ as being pagan or Hindu in origin. The cult of the *kris* was similarly to suffer, as it was branded as yet another embarrassing reminder of the days when Malays were not sufficiently Islamic according to contemporary standards. These *Mujaddid* of the nineteenth century were more inclined to

⁵⁸ The generation of younger Malay–Muslim activists and nationalists known as the *Kaum Muda* was made up mostly of urban-based Malay and Indian Muslim traders, teachers, religious scholars, and Hajis, and found in the Straits Settlements of Singapore, Melacca, and Penang. As such, for much of the nineteenth century they lived as colonial subjects under British rule. Their resentment against living under a non-Muslim power was aggravated by the realization that life in the Malay–Muslim sultanates was much worse. In particular, they were incensed by the corrupt ways of the Malay rulers and nobles, and felt that many of their courtly practices and culture were responsible for the decline of the Malay–Muslim powers in the archipelago. Consequently, their political agenda was to modernize the Malays so that they could compete with the non-Malays. But this could be achieved, they felt, only if the pre-Islamic courtly culture of the *kerajaan* could first be eradicated.

⁵⁹ *Puja Laut* is the ceremony of paying homage to the goddess of the sea. It was openly practised by many Malay fishing communities until the 1960s.

fight the *Jihad* against the forces of ignorance with the pen and the co-operative bank: and if weapons were necessary, then the guns and cannons of Muslim India and Turkey were more to their taste than the ancient blade of Siva.

The modern era that took off in the mid-nineteenth century can be read in many ways, but from a Khaldunian perspective one might conclude that this was when Malay civilization really began to decline. It was clear that by the middle of the nineteenth century, the innate genius of the Malay peoples was being outshone by the waves of new ideas, trends, values, and lifestyle that broke in from abroad. Malay society became increasingly fragmented, as there emerged new social classes and constituencies that were shaped by modern ideas and values – either from secular modernist thought or from the modernist Islamic movement. Caught in the middle and rendered powerless through economic, political, and military pressure, the traditionalist élite could do little but focus on such areas as traditional customs and practices, social rituals, and the reproduction of a cultural identity now rejected by the modern social movement. As this local genius was eclipsed, modernization via imitation became the order of the day. The Malay world had finally been hegemonically incorporated into the modern global mainstream, and the Malay mind colonized at last.

In the end, the combined weight of modernization and religious reformism spelt the end of the cult of the *kris*. Rationality and orthodoxy proved to be stronger than tradition and ritual. There only remains for us the task of writing the epitaph for this weapon that once embodied the living spirit of gods, and men who aspired to become gods.

The *kris* as an artefact of monumental history

Then a new era began for them. Little by little they lost their ancient traditions, the memory of their past. They forgot their writings, their songs, their poems, their laws; in order to learn by rote alien teachings they did not understand. They went into decline, belittling themselves in their own eyes. They became ashamed of what was their own and their nation's in order to admire whatever was foreign and unintelligible. Their spirit became dejected and they surrendered. (Rizal, 1889)

The Malaysian 50-ringgit note once bore the image of a *Kris Tajong*. Now it carries the image of a Petronas oil rig.

The *kris* in the modern age has become a maligned and misunderstood phenomenon. The state attempts to valorize the *kris* by constructing

huge monuments in its honour, ignorant of the fact that its discreet charm and beauty lay in its subtlety and finesse, its *kehalusan*.⁶⁰ Art galleries and museums continue to feature this curious exhibit from the remote past as some kind of emissary from an age of superstition and irrationality. Popular authors continue to weave tales around this fetish, warning their readers of its awesome powers and bloody history.⁶¹ Art and antique dealers close a sale by telling the customer that the *kris* with the 'best bargain' tag once belonged to a powerful *raja* who performed wondrous deeds with it. To the denizen of the modern metropole, alienated and domesticated, the *kris* is the magic key that opens the door to fantastic and unrealizable possibilities.

The sad fate that has befallen the *kris* is merely symptomatic of the evolution of the Malay peoples into the modern age. Caught in the manifold vices of modernity, trapped between the religious pharisees who condemn the evils of the pagan past and the equally unremitting fervour of the fundamentalists of modernization, the Malay of the present has precious little to remind him of the age when the *kris* was meaningful and relevant to his life. Living in a thoroughly modern world, he cannot help but share the prejudices and fears of the modern age. Beguiled by the charms of modernity he places faith in science and rationality, hoping that they will shed light on the darkness within. A convert to positivism, he looks ever forward to the future, certain that it will bring

⁶⁰ A recent controversy involved a huge steel sculpture of a *kris* that was made in Europe and finally exhibited outside the new national stadium at Bukit Jalil, Selangor. Conservative *kris*-fanciers were appalled by the structure, arguing that it was an exorbitant monument (it cost nine million ringgit) with little artistic merit. Others pointed out that it was constructed with little regard for *kris* protocol: it was in the form of a naked blade (most *kris*es should be seen sheathed) and it was pointing heavenwards (which was seen as an aggressive gesture, almost offensive in the eyes of many Muslims who felt this was an affront to God). Other *kris* monuments dot the landscape of Kuala Lumpur, Selangor, Shah Alam, and Kelang. For the Commonwealth Games in 1998, a number of *kris* monuments were commissioned (though many were not completed). These took the form of a *kris* sheath (minus the blade and hilt) planted at an angle into the ground and made of steel sheets. These monuments also incurred the disapproval of many local *kris* collectors and experts.

⁶¹ *Kris*es feature prominently in the pulp fiction and pseudo-journalistic reportage that are common in Malaysia and Indonesia today. Literally thousands of stories appear every year about the powers of the *kris* and about magical *kris*es that find their way into the hands of unsuspecting collectors. In a recent issue of the popular magazine *Suria Pernama*, for example, there are stories about *kris*es that fell to earth from the heavens above Pahang and were promptly handed over to the museum authorities in Pekan. Another story tells of a man who was told in a dream to look for a Majapahit *kris* that was buried near polo fields in Kuantan. (The author draws the conclusion that this mysterious *kris* was probably left there by some Javanese spirits, as there was once a Javanese settlement close to the polo grounds.) See Mukhlis, 1999.

him closer to enlightenment and safety. His dialectical approach to all that is Other ensures that he can view the past only as a dark world full of irrational and incomprehensible forces. He regards all that goes against his modern Islamic values as *khurafat*, *syirik*, inferior, bizarre, chaotic, irrational, and/or contaminating.⁶²

Standing before this mysterious object, the modern Malay cannot help but see the *kris* as an object of blind reverence, through the prism of romanticism and folklore, the cults of warriors, *silat* comic books, or, worse still, the lens of modern-day Malay cinema, populated by heroes who cannot even unsheath their *kris* with dignity and panache. The modern Malay sticks the *kris* on the walls of his house, to remind him (and his neighbours) that he belongs to that race of people once called the Malays. But on his wedding day he wore a *kris* rented from the tailors, a crude caricature of the real, bought from the market place or tourist shop like some worthless memento. Others have become so

⁶² Contemporary developments in the world of Malay-Islam in Malaysia strongly suggest that the cult of the *kris* will be marginalized, if not expelled altogether, from the record of Malay history. Contemporary *Imam* and *Ulama* (from both the state religious authorities and the opposition Islamic movement and parties) condemn the cult of the *kris* on the grounds that it is tainted with many *khurafat* un-Islamic influences which are contrary to the central tenets of Islam – the principle of *tauhid* (unity of God) and the *aqidah* (proper conduct and internalization of values). In particular they are offended by certain *kris*-related practices, such as the *kris*-washing and oiling rite, the use of incense in cleaning the *kris* (on the grounds that the smoke from the incense (*kemeyan*) is the favourite food of evil *djinn*), and the use of the *kris* by *bomohs* (traditional healers) as well as fortune hunters who believe that lucky *kris*es can lead one to buried treasure. In his paper during a conference on the *kris* organized by the National Handicrafts Association of Malaysia in Kuala Lumpur, Haji Zaabar Yusof of the Research Department of the Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia (JAKIM) argued that while the possession and use of weapons is *sunnah* in Islam, most of the practices and beliefs associated with the *kris* are un-Islamic and should be eradicated, leaving a weapon that can be used only for self-defence. In his own words: *Penggunaan senjata diluar dari maksud yang biasa, iaitu untuk mempertahankan diri atau kegunaan harian yang lazim adalah dilarang. Lebih-lebih lagi jika digunakan untuk memusuhi dan menceroboh sesama manusia tanpa sebab yang diharuskan syarak. . . . Masyarakat kita telah terjebak dengan amalan-malan yang membawa kepada keruntuhan akidah. Prinsip akidah Islam amat jelas sekali dimana kita percaya hanya ada dua unsur iaitu Allah dan makhluk. Allah itu bersifat Qadim dan makhluk itu bersifat Hadith. Hanya Allah sahaja yang boleh dipuja, disembah dan menjadi tempat memohon segala hajat dan pertolongan. Jika kita meminta atau menyandarkan kepada objek yang lain selain dari Allah, maka ia dikatakan syirik. Dosa syirik tidak boleh diampun oleh Allah, melainkan dengan bertaubat. Gejala syirik amat merbahaya dan boleh menyebabkan orang itu murtad. Amat dibimbangi ialah mereka yang terlalu mengagungkan keris ini terlupa bahawa bendu itu makhluk Allah juga, iaitu sama dengan benda-benda lain. Tiada apa-apa kuasa yang ada padanya, hanya sekadar sebatang besi yang boleh memberi kesan apabila digerakkan oleh manusia, dengan izin Allah.* (Yusof, Unpublished:10–11)



Figure 5. A hybrid 'modern' *kris* from the comic book *Geng Si Tuah*. Note the shape and form of the blade and hilt, which bear only the slightest resemblance to traditional *krises*. Today more and more unorthodox and non-traditional hilt forms are being produced by local craftsmen to suit local tastes. Older blade styles and hilt forms that bear traces of the pre-Islamic past are increasingly frowned upon.

worried about being contaminated by the ancient past of the *kris* that they have opted for new forms and styles. Today there are more and more examples of contemporary *kris* hilts that are completely divorced from history (Figure 5).⁶³

⁶³ Abdullah (unpublished:5–6) notes that there are now hilt variations that have never been seen before. These include the 'parrot's head' (*Kakatu*) hilt that has no precedent and no symbolic meaning. These changes have made it possible for the *kris* to be worn by anyone and everyone, and the distinctions of the past are no longer taken seriously.

The evolution of the *kris* has come full cycle. What began as a knife has now been reduced to a knife – as *kris* tiepins, letter openers, and paper cutters litter handicraft centres and tourist shops.⁶⁴ The *kris* was what it was only as long as the beliefs, practices, and values attached to it were there as well, and fed into the world-view of those for whom the *kris* made sense. The cult of the *kris* was a social phenomenon that extended beyond the object itself. Once these beliefs and values began to wane, the world of the *kris* was diminished and all that was left was a knife. With its rise and fall we chart the ascent and subsequent degeneration of Malay civilization as it looks for its way on the stage of human agency, otherwise known as history.

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⁶⁴ With the increased demand for *kris*es as tourist items, there is now a plethora of fake *kris*es of varying quality on the market. Kassim (unpublished:4) notes that, since the 1980s, *kris*es with hilts made of fibreglass, resin, and chemical plastics have appeared. Fake ivory has also become a common feature, as well as new ivory stained (usually with tea) to look old. There are also ceremonial or decorative *kris*es made of crystal or pewter, solely for the tourist market.

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