

KERIS CLEANING DURING MUHARRAM

From PAUL'S KERIS PAGE

Muharram is the traditional time of the year in the Muslim calendar when keris collectors in South-East Asia would ritually clean their blades. Muharram is the first month of the Muslim year. In this regard, it is linked to new life or rejuvenation. In Java, Muharram coincides with Suro which is the Javanese keris cleaning month.

Cleaning a keris is not just a matter of maintenance. There is a mystical aspect behind the need to clean a keris. The idea is to rejuvenate the pamor and breathe new life into the keris. Many keris collectors believe that a keris has a spirit of its own and this spirit needs constant care and attention or its power will be depleted and lost. A ritual cleaning is one of the ways to rejuvenate the power of the keris. Hence some collectors bring their keris for cleaning even though they are rust free and their pamor in good shape.

In Singapore where I am, we used to have a simple cleaning ceremony conducted by the The Malay Art Gallery. This page illustrates the ceremony conducted here in 1996. The Malay Art Gallery now conducts its ritualised cleaning at its main shop in Johor Baru but you still can get your blades clean (without fuss) at their shop in Geylang Serai.

The ritualised process you will see below is based on the Javanese ritual but heavily moderated and simplified. I have not seen the Javanese Kraton ritual so I have no basis of comparison but I have been told that it is a very elaborate process ending with a ceremony of blessing the masses with the water used in the washing.

The ritual starts with a procession of the cleaners led by the owner of the shop Mr Hussien Aljunied, and flanked by a kompong (hand-drums) troupe. On entering the cleaning area, Mr Hussien blesses the cleaners and the proceedings with a recitation of some pertinent verses from the Koran.



Mr Hussien then proceeds to bless the cleaners and their respective stations with rose water. Here he is blessing the drying and oiling station.



The variety of keris sent for cleaning and carefully tagged and waiting their turn.



The process starts with the removal of the hilt and a gentle washing with a light detergent to remove oil and surface dirt and rust. Then its given the "acid treatment". The blade is cleaned with a variety of acidic fruits. Here the blade is stabbed into a local fruit called "monkey fruit". The fruit acid is mild and works at attacking the rust with little effect on the blade. Sometimes coconut water is used because of its acidity. Lime, however, is the preferred fruit in this stage of the cleaning process. For really persistent rust, the blade is soaked for about an hour or two in lime juice and the progress constantly checked. Its important to remove the rust off a blade before patinating it and reviving its pamor.



The blade is given a good scrub with a lime fruit. After the "acid treatment" the blade is washed and passed to the next stage.



The blade is then soaked in an arsenic and lime juice solution. Arsenic is used to patinate the blade and bring the pamor out as it blackens the iron and leaves the nickel in the pamor unaffected. Some blades react immediately and the pamor rises. Others need a longer soak and a bit of coaxing with light brushing or scrubbing.



The pamor of a Toraja parang rising after a short soak and brush in the arsenic solution.



After the soak in the arsenic, the blade is cleaned again in a mildy acidic solution. This process removes the arsenic from the blade. Some blades turn a solid black in the arsenic solution and the patination has to be reduced for the pamor to rise. This is done at this stage.

After this process is done, the blade is washed in water that is scented with essence of rose and jasmine, and filled with the petals of these flowers. Unfortunately I do not have a picture of this process...:(



The blade is then sent for drying and oiling. The blade is dried over a small stove of hot charcoals. Incense or kemenyan has been put into the charcoal to add its fragrance to the blade.



After the blade is thoroughly dried, it is oiled with a fragrant oil like sandalwood or a mixture of fragrant oils. This is one reason why some keris smell so good. The hilt is then reattached and the keris is returned to the owner who gives a small token of appreciation for the service rendered.