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MICHAEL HITCHCOCK

THE BIMANESE KRIS: AESTHETICS AND SOCIAL VALUE

Introduction

Forged by armourers gathered around the courts of nobles and princes, the kris was the paramount prestige weapon of pre-independence Indonesia. In societies where status was often inherited, these prized heirlooms, made to the highest aesthetic standards, were visual symbols of genealogy. Many daggers were attributed with magical powers and individual personalities, and craftsmen took care to ensure that weapons matched the temperaments of their owners, an especially meaningful consideration in societies where the kris was deeply associated with the male qualities of life. Indeed, the masculine character of the kris appears to be as much a recurring theme in the Indonesian world view as the 'femaleness' of the textile (cf. Adams 1975:27; Du Bois 1960:60; and Gittinger 1976:20), and this weapon may rightly be regarded as one of the archipelago's foremost cultural artefacts.¹

In republican Indonesia the demand for ceremonial weaponry declined along with the power of the courts, and since the new leaders increasingly preferred international status symbols, the armourer's art suffered accordingly. Yet, despite the change in values and the decline in kris production, these weapons, albeit on a diminished scale, have remained culturally significant. Because of its ancient associations with the male, the dagger is, for example, still worn as part of the groom's wedding costume in many regions of Indonesia, and it is kris of this kind that have often been inherited in the time-honoured fashion. Interestingly, some modern bureaucrats and businessmen have acquired an antiquarian's taste for these weapons and are enthusiastic collectors – the art of kris appreciation is still extant.²

It is the purpose here to examine aspects of the contemporary significance of the kris among an eastern Indonesian people, the Bimane of Sumbawa island.³ Of particular interest is the transformation of the

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dagger from object of public display to item of private contemplation, possibly a consequence of the social and political changes that have taken place since the foundation of the modern republic. The social basis, particularly with regard to the old Biman class system, of aesthetic appreciation will be an important consideration. Since both of these concerns are historical, a diachronic perspective largely based on oral accounts has been incorporated into an essentially ethnographic paper.

The article is based on fieldwork carried out in the Rasanaé district between 1980 and 1982, many of the details concerning the production and use of kris in the sultanate of Bima having been supplied by elderly informants. The term 'Bimanese' is used here to refer to the majority population of the regency of Bima who speak an Austronesian language belonging to the Bima/Sumba/Flores group (cf. Esser 1938). When speaking Indonesian, these people call themselves 'Orang Bima', but on using the local language they change to the term 'Dou Mbojo', a linguistic switch that may be attributed to the western Indonesian origins of the name 'Bima'.⁴ Being acceptable to the people themselves and more widely known than *Mbojo*, the term 'Bimanese' will be used here.

Living in villages of between 1,500 and 4,000 inhabitants, the Bimanese depend on paddy rice for their staple diet; swidden cultivation is, however, found on the upper slopes of this mountainous regency, and on the arid northern and eastern coastal plains animal husbandry is important. Inshore fishing also provides a livelihood for some villagers, and trade, especially with the other eastern islands, has long been a mainstay of the Biman economy. Handicrafts, which include weaving, pottery, basketry and metal smithing, are found throughout the regency. Some villages specialize in particular crafts, and of interest in this respect is the large cluster of settlements in west Rasanaé that comprises the old capital (also known as Bima), since this was once the foremost craft producing centre.

The armourer's craft

The Bimanese kris (known as *sampari*) is similar to daggers from other parts of the archipelago. Its blade may be straight or wavy and the handle, which has to be held like the butt of a pistol, is set at an angle to the central axis of the weapon, a feature that gives the kris, according to Gardner (1936:9), a longer reach in proportion to its length than more conventional daggers. Although the power of a thrust with the kris, when compared to straight-handled daggers, is not high, this is compensated by the precision manner in which it is used. In other words, it is a piercing weapon that is well adapted to fighting in the kinds of confined spaces that are encountered in Indonesia: on board a ship, beside a forest trail and in a densely populated village.

The most prized characteristics of the kris are the tracery patterns, *pamu*⁵, on the blade, popularly referred to as damascening, which are

made by a process called pattern welding (cf. Maryan 1960:25). Rods of low-carbon steel and nickle-rich iron are forged on either side of a central member, the blows of the hammer causing distortion. When the surface of the blade is etched, a contoured pattern, or damascene, is revealed. In the past, iron was brought to Bima from Kalimantan; today, however, blacksmiths obtain it from salvaged automobile parts, the steel suspension springs being especially valued. In the forge, charcoal, a by-product of the pottery industry, is burned in a crucible hollowed out of the clay bench that forms the working surface, and oxygen is supplied by piston bellows.

While the blade is red-hot, curves may be added by beating it over cylindrical anvils, a technique that is still used today for shaping agricultural tools. At this heat, patterns may also be chiselled through the

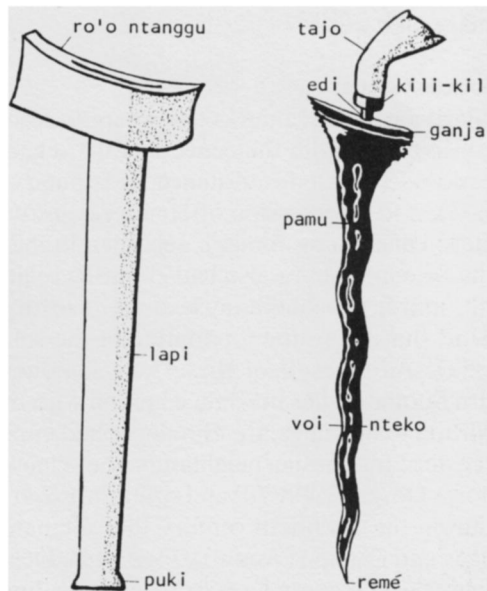


Fig. 1. The Bimanese kris (*sampari*) and scabbard (*wata*).

edge of the blade where it spreads out near the tang (*edi*) (fig. 1), and while still hot, the tang is slotted into a blank handle of either wood, horn, bone or ivory, which is later richly carved. A metal ring also helps to keep the hand grip in place; the slimness of the tang, however, renders the blade unsuitable for a lateral cutting action (Maryan 1960:32) without impairing its performance as a stabbing weapon.

Kris are usually furnished with a sheath made from two strips of wood bound and glued together, which takes the long slim portion of the blade. To accommodate the broad upper section of the kris, a single block of

wood with a slot cut through it is added to the top of the sheath. This section is carved with a curve on one side and a sharp angle on the other (similar to the northern Malay and Bugis types described by Gardner, 1936:31) and is one of the prominent decorative features of the kris by which Indonesians and Malays are able to provenance weapons (Gardner 1936:33-35). Sheets of precious metal which have been embellished by cold working processes, such as sinking and raising, are often used to decorate the sheaths. The fine details are usually picked out by chasing with a punch and hammer, and because these metals may become brittle when worked, they are annealed with a mouth-operated blowtorch, a process by which heat is used to realign the crystalline structure. Lost-wax techniques may also have been known in sultanate Bima for casting kris hilts but, unlike the other metal-working methods, they are not used today. Although I did not see any new kris made in the regency, many of the basic metallurgical skills are used to repair old weapons and their scabbards.⁶

The sultanate social system

The formal similarities of the Biman kris to weapons from other culture areas may be considered within the context of the regency's trade and political connections. It was, for instance, a tributary of Majapahit (Pigeaud 1962:33), and a succession of Hindu rajahs, descended from the legendary hero called Sang Bima, is recorded in the lineage of the royal family. The Bimanese have also had enduring relations with polities to the north, and it was Makasarese support for a Biman prince, called Abdulkahir, that led to the foundation of the sultanate in 1640 (Damsté 1941:55). As a result of these long-standing contacts, the culture of eastern Sumbawa has much in common with that of southern Sulawesi. In addition to language, the Bimanese had important political links with their eastern Indonesian neighbours: they claimed sovereignty over western Flores (Jasper 1908:70) and suzerainty over Sumba (Keers 1948:5), and during the twentieth century the sultanate succeeded in absorbing Sanggar and Dompu (Amin 1971:10-11). Despite these connections, however, the Bimanese have a distinctive culture in which the kris is one of the most significant elements.

In order to appreciate much of the value of the kris, one has to refer to the social conditions of the sultanate of Bima. This kingdom enjoyed considerable local autonomy, despite its incorporation into the Netherlands East Indies in 1905 (Couvreur 1917:2) and, with the exception of three years of Japanese occupation in World War II, survived until its accession to the Republic of Indonesia in 1950 (Sahidu 1973:5). Political authority in this period was not vested solely in the sovereign, there being a threefold division of power, a symbolic expression of which can be seen in the eastern palace of Bima town. Behind a carved *naga* head above the main entrance lies a ridge-pole that extends the whole

length of the first chamber of the building. This pole, which symbolizes the backbone or body of the consort of Sang Bima, is supported by three decorated pillars, representing: *sara* (administration), *hukum* (Islamic law) and *adat* (customary law).

The first of these divisions was controlled by a prime minister who, although characterized as the Sultan's younger brother, was usually a noble who had risen to the position with the approval of his peers. His palace, which lay to the east of the Sultan's and almost rivalled it in size, was the administrative heart of the kingdom. It was there, using the room directly after the one with the symbolic pillars, that the ministers sat in council, and on these occasions the prime minister would be placed west of the group, the direction of both Mecca and the ancestral home of Sang Bima.

In contrast, the two other divisions were more concerned with religious and legal matters than management. One, which was based at the grand mosque, a building strategically located between the two palaces, was concerned with Islamic jurisprudence, whereas the other division, located in the village of Dara, was headed by the leading expert in customary law. The task of mediating between these three sections fell upon the Sultan, who was deemed to be ritually pure and therefore incapable of wrongdoing. As a sign of his authority he bore, on ceremonial occasions, the royal kris of Bima, a symbol of the unity of the state. Another weapon that is also worthy of mention here is a curved knife with a highly elaborate blade. Known as *nggunti ranté*, it was sometimes carried around council meetings on a plate and was said to be able to indicate the presence of traitors by shaking.

Because craftsmen involved in high-quality kris work came under the auspices of the prime minister, it is the first division which is of interest here. This section was divided into occupational units known as *dari* whose officials were awarded the use of irrigated rice fields belonging to the sultanate in lieu of payment; but, because many *dari* possessed some land independently of the government, they were not completely dependent on the administration for their livelihoods. The three *dari* most concerned with the production of kris were the blacksmiths, precious metal smiths and carpenters, and, in common with other occupational groups, each was based on a specific sector of the capital. In this respect the settlement occupied by the precious metal smiths is especially noteworthy, since it lay close to the north gate in the perimeter wall of the Sultan's palace. These smiths were charged with providing guards for what was considered to be the most discreet entrance to the palace, a responsibility that was said to have fallen upon them because of an ancient hereditary link between the smiths and one of the Sultan's female forebears. Another noteworthy location was that of a workshop which may have been used for the lost-wax method of casting. It was on the main road leading east out of town and, unlike the other crafts, this

specialist activity appears to have been administered by a military commander known as the *Anan Guru Ova*, whose title includes the Biman term (*ova*) for smelting precious metal. Although the reasons behind this irregularity are not explicit, they may be symptomatic of the martial aspects of kris production.⁷

During the sultanate period, Biman society was divided into three hierarchical classes, and though these distinctions were, in theory, abandoned during the early republican period, many people still informally reckon social status in terms of this old system. At the pinnacle of the social order was the ruling family, who generally eschewed taking local spouses and forged wider political links by judicious marriages with the members of royal families from other Indonesian kingdoms. Below the rulers was a large class of people who may be referred to by the term 'nobles'. They would seek marriage partners at their own social level or with the wealthiest members of the lowest class – the commoners, the latter group being further sub-divided into upper and lower halves. The bottom rung of society was occupied by slaves.

Land tenure was (and remains) one of the major sources of social differentiation, with holdings ranging from the large estates of the ruling family to the small plots of the poor peasantry. Nobles and higher commoners usually had ample holdings, whereas many of the poorer people were landless and had to survive by share-cropping and wage-labouring. Paupers had the right under customary law to use land belonging to wealthier villages after the second rice crop had been harvested in order to raise a third crop, usually maize, from the exhausted soil.

In the sultanate period there was a variety of means by which membership of a specific social tier could be expressed. Probably one of the most important of these was the Bimanese language itself, which, in common with other Indonesian tongues, made use of a graded vocabulary that communicated the relative status of speaker and listener. Significantly, much of the hierarchical character of the language is still detectable in contemporary Biman speech, particularly in personal address forms, although the old royal and noble titles have largely fallen into disuse. The use of social space also served as a barometer for class distinction. In the royal capital, for example, the homes of the nobility were usually found in the more prestigious neighbourhoods, and during large social gatherings, such as religious festivals, seating patterns helped reinforce status. After the parades that took place during *Maulud*, for instance, the Sultan would sit in state on the verandah of the main palace, facing three rows of high-ranking officials. On the northern side were the prime minister and his council, in the middle the mosque officials and to the south the head of customary law and the nobility. Sitting cross-legged in an upright posture with his hands on either side, the Sultan would discuss affairs of state with individual courtiers. When replying, the lower ranking person would place his hands in his lap, avert his eyes

and incline his head – negative answers to the monarch's questions would, apparently, not be tolerated, the nearest possible response being 'not yet'. Material culture, particularly costume, was especially significant in this milieu, textiles and kris being two of the most meaningful social symbols (cf. Rassers 1940:558).

Status of kris makers

As in other Indonesian societies, artisans are not accorded low social status in Bima, and it is clear from oral histories and personal accounts that some members of the royal family were skilled practitioners. While the heads of the sultanate departments were expected to be nobles, an able commoner might ascend to fill a vacancy when a suitably qualified person of the right social background was unavailable to take up the post – the possession of craft skills was an aid to social mobility.⁸

Recruitment to the craft departments was not invariably urban, and in some noteworthy cases experts were drawn from the furthest reaches of the kingdom. The highland areas of Wawo and Donggo were both important in this respect, the former supplying silversmiths and the latter blacksmiths. Residents of the village of Paruga, to the north of the Sultan's palace, still recall forebears from those regions and today both highland areas retain reputations in these skills.

Although there is no tradition of signing or otherwise placing makers' marks on products, good craftsmen do become widely known throughout the regency and the names of highly skilled kris makers may be passed on orally. Gifted craftsmen may, according to Biman experts, be identified by their grasp of both technical ability, *pandé*, and knowledge, *vitua*. Although the former concept can be easily rendered in English, the latter needs some clarification. *Vitua* literally means 'old knowledge' and is used as a widely embracing term, including both Muslim and locally derived concepts. In the first place the devotional aspects of Islam are emphasized, prayers being used as meditative aids before commencing work. Secondly, because mystical means of harming others can involve the failure of mechanical parts, it behoves a craftsman to be conversant with this area of knowledge. Third, since it is considered desirable to match the product to the temperament of the customer, the craftsman should be a good judge of character. With regard to the kris, which is sometimes credited with human-like characteristics, this is an especially meaningful consideration. In order to achieve the right balance, it is held that a man with a personality described as 'hot' (irascible) should be equipped with a 'cool' (phlegmatic) weapon, and vice versa, and it is said that in the past there were armourers who could determine the character of a kris by talking to it.

The significance of knowledge in craft expertise is also demonstrated at a popular level in a children's finger game, in which the digits take on specific personae. During play, children call the index finger 'the crafts-

man', and when asked why this finger has been selected, they demonstrate that it is the premier grasping digit and therefore the most important in handicraft. In the game, the thumb is called the 'old man', and parents tell their children that, should a craftsman wish to work, he must co-operate with the thumb, the point being illustrated by a gripping action in which the index finger is said to bow to seniority and knowledge (Hitchcock 1985:41).

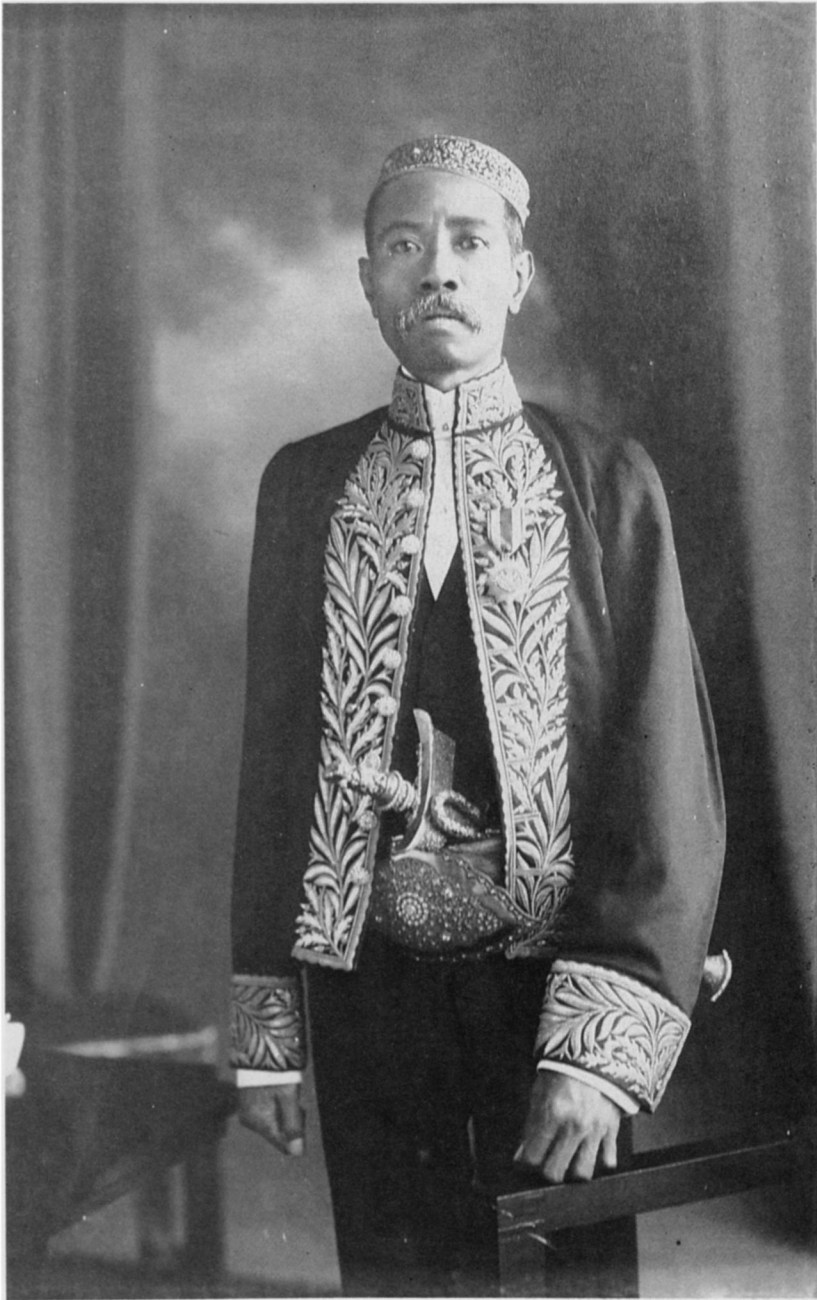
Social use of kris

The Bimanese acknowledge two uses of kris: war and inheritance. Idrus Yahya, a skilled craftsman from Paruga, suggested that in the past, different weights of kris were used to fulfil these different functions, the heavy ones only being reserved for war. This assertion is almost impossible to corroborate, because most owners of heirloom kris hold that their particular weapons were used in battle, whether light or heavy, and stories of past triumphs are an important aspect of kris appreciation.⁹ Whatever the case, it is certain that the kris is an effective thrusting weapon, a use recalled in a palace dance that is still performed today and which may once have been used to train Biman troops. As a weapon the kris is still regarded with some caution, as evidenced by the ban on wearing them to the official reception that was held in honour of the presidential visit of 1981.

The accumulation of kris is a means of storing wealth and, although valued as heirlooms, they may be purchased. Ideally, however, it is the inheritance of kris through one's forebears which is the source of the greatest pride. According to custom, all Biman males, with the exception of slaves, could possess kris, though in practice many poorer people could not afford them. Kris have never been items of everyday wear, and were reserved, as they still are, for special occasions such as weddings, when the groom wears an heirloom kris as part of his costume. Apparently, the only people to have borne these daggers on a regular basis in the past were the palace guards.

When worn in public, the kris is tucked into a sash or silver belt worn around the waist and, in accordance with local etiquette, the hilt is placed close to the navel, with the scabbard projecting outwards over the left hip (fig. 2). A small textile, usually pink in colour and embroidered or couched with silver ribbon, is often folded carefully around the hilt of the kris. Virtually all scabbards are equipped with a knob (*puki*) at the tip that, according to the local explanation, makes it difficult to slip the weapon under the sarong (cf. Skeat 1900:33); and the only people permitted to use the knobless scabbards, known as *sarunggi*, were trusted officials, especially high-born military personnel, who wore them tucked into the back of the waist-cloth. Similar scabbards, known as *tata rapa*, were reserved for the royal family.

On public occasions in sultanate Bima it was possible to identify a



**Fig. 2. Sultan Ibrahim (c. 1905) wearing the Biman royal kris.
(Published with the kind permission of the royal family of Bima.)**

person's social status by the hilt and scabbard of the kris that they wore. One Biman rule-of-thumb holds that the royal family had gold-covered scabbards (called *cori-cori*), the nobility silver and the commoners wood. The Sultan's own kris, which symbolized the unity of the kingdom, could be identified by the gem-studded loops and tassels (*bata gemala*) on the outside of the scabbard. This kris was also distinguished by its hilt (*ta taro po*), cast in the shape of a prince, which is said to be a representation of Sang Bima (fig. 3).¹⁰ Another markedly unusual kris is one with a solid iron hilt of the type that has been characterized in the literature as a *kris majapahit* (cf. Gardner 1936:24). The hilt is shaped as a grotesque figure, known to the Bimanese as *na watu ka waja* (fig. 4).¹¹ It belongs to the descendants of the last head of customary law, and what is interesting is the association of a kris of this kind with the village because it was at Dara that the sons of Sang Bima were said to have made their first appearance on the island. One recent theory, common among local historians, holds that Sang Bima actually was an historical figure and possibly an envoy of the empire of Majapahit. Other vestiges of Bima's Hindu past, such as the rock temple near the mouth of Bima Bay, may be evidence of contact with the Javanese empire.¹²



Fig. 3. Hilt representing Sang Bima (after a photograph by Karl Muller).



Fig. 4. *Kris Majapahit* from the village of Dara.

Two other occasions when kris are seen by persons other than the immediate family of the owner are when they are cleaned or brought out specially to show, and perhaps impress, visitors to the home. On the former occasions the blades, wrapped in cloths soaked in citrus-juice, are left outside in bamboo segments, after which they are rubbed vigorously with a cloth to remove any rust and then oiled with coconut-juice (cf. Skeat 1900:528; and Rassers 1940:524), activities which may attract the attention and comment of passers-by. The latter occasions may require a degree of showmanship, with the owner bringing out his weapons one at a time from a chest in the interior of the house, heightening the atmosphere of anticipation. Despite the informality of these gatherings, kris

etiquette is observed and the weapon is usually held respectfully with both hands, and when drawn from the scabbard the blade is held point upwards in a salute in front of the forehead, while a brief incantation is uttered.

In conversation, the owner may supply some details of the history of each kris, such as the names of campaigns in which it is believed to have been used, as well as some observations on its formal qualities (to be discussed later). Socially accomplished visitors usually participate in these discussions, demonstrating their grasp of the specialist kris vocabulary.

Kris evaluation

The most valued features of the kris are the intricate contours (*pamu*) created by pattern-welding. Indeed, there are straight-bladed daggers, known as *sapupaka*, that are highly valued on account of the quality of these patterns, the waves (*nteko*) being marginally less important. There are also a small number of kris with blades that have a succession of smooth hollows. These are said to have been made in the past by craftsmen from Donggo, and some people argue that the blades were squeezed into shape with the fingers while the metal was still hot, a technique which, according to Gardner (1936:45), may once have been practised by blacksmiths who coated their calloused hands with oil.

With the exception of the uncommon broad-bladed weapons known as *sapuka*, kris are usually slim, only spreading out near the guard strip (*ganja*). Because of the slightly off-centre deep grooves cut into both faces of the blade, the strip has a figure-of-eight appearance in cross-section. At the top of the cutting-edge that is closest to the groove there is often a decorative curl, which may have been developed as a device for catching an opponent's weapon (Gardner 1936:8) and is now an aesthetically valued feature. The asymmetry of the groove is further emphasized by the comparatively gentle incline of the blade opposite the curl. This edge does not taper quite as sharply as the other side, a characteristic that is especially pronounced on straight-bladed kris, the edge being known as *voi sempadi*. Waves normally appear on kris in numbers of three, seven and nine, although blades with twelve of them are greatly appreciated, especially when combined with intricate pattern-welding.¹³

Kris may also be discussed in terms of their colour and are usually classified as being either red, yellow, green or white. Generally speaking, the red ones are the least prized, and this evaluation may have a practical foundation, since lower grades of steel may be discoloured by oxidation. Blades with a green or yellow sheen are of equal status, and white ones are regarded as the best, an evaluation which may also be based on the quality of the metal, since kris with a high content of the rare and aesthetically valued nickel iron tend to have a lighter hue.

Even though scabbards, being elaborately decorated, are the most

publicly visible aspects of the kris, they are slightly lower in the aesthetic hierarchy than blades. Complex embellishments are not immediately accorded a higher value, since, for example, a simply carved and polished wooden sheath and handle may be equally admired.¹⁴ When intricate details are incorporated, they are, in accordance with Muslim proscriptions on idolatry, usually of a geometric or botanical inspiration, one of the most popular designs being based on the creeping stropanthus vine. Some of the patterns (*toho bunga*) are said to be representations of living animals; but the skill in interpreting them has been lost.

In addition to the above means of evaluating kris, which deal with specific details, more generalized terms can be used. When viewed in this manner, the overall impact of each kris is assessed, particularly with regard to the expertise exhibited in its manufacture. In evaluating these attributes, an implicit sliding scale is used to rank kris into three hierarchical categories. This elusive scale, which can also be used to refer to other equally important aspects of the material culture, is neither the subject of extensive critical debate nor defined with a fixed vocabulary (Hitchcock 1985:40-41).

Items of the most prosaic kind are characterized by a degree of proficiency known as *loa pandé* (*loa* = know, *pandé* = able). A greater degree of workmanship distinguishes the middle category, *caha ni* (*caha* = industrious, *ni* = good enough), from the commonplace goods, whereas the highest category, *caha tingi* (*tingi* = clever), is reserved for kris that combine the finest craftsmanship with the most aesthetically pleasing materials. Goods in the latter category would have been made, in the sultanate period, by the specialist departments, and it was this level that was translated by an ex-sultanate minister as 'kunst'.

This expert also provided another way of evaluating the material culture when he used a linguistic analogue of the production process as a means of distinguishing the highest from the lowest goods. At the most basic level the three stages that translate thought into deed were designated as follows: 1. *nggahi* = to speak, 2. *ravi* = to make, 3. *pa'u* = to use. This was contrasted with the highest level of production for which the following, more expressive language was used: 1. *renta ba rera* = to utter with the tongue, 2. *kapoda ba adé* = to use truth, 3. *karavi ba vek* = to bring into operation.

Craftsmen also use analogues to distinguish the very best from the simply proficient, and one carpenter, for instance, claimed that when working he bore in mind the example of Islamic prophets. Ibrahim is of particular relevance here because he is admired for his honesty, practical ability and piety, which satisfy the basic requirements of all craftwork. It is Daud, however, who stimulates the aesthetic sensibilities, since it is recalled that his singing was so remarkable that even the birds of the air were attracted by it. The latter example is in itself interesting, because it corresponds with parallels between music and aesthetics that can be

found elsewhere in Biman thought, especially with regard to the use of the Indonesian word *kesenian*. Echols and Shadily (1980:329) have translated this term as 'art' (literally 'art of . . .') in its broadest sense, whereas most Bimanese, when speaking the national language, use it in a more restricted way to refer to the arts of dance and music.

Discussion

Although it is not quite certain when the Biman kris was technologically superseded as a weapon, oral histories suggest that it did not remain militarily significant much beyond the extension of the Netherlands colonial empire in 1905, when it was used in skirmishes by local resistance fighters. For much of this century, therefore, it is the kris's aesthetic and symbolic values rather than its martial qualities that have been most significant, and it is possible that different weights of the weapon were made for different uses: many of the excellent pieces one admires today owe as much to peace-time development as to the military might of the Bimanese.

In the post-war period the use of the kris as a means of expressing social status appears to have been modified further, the emphasis today being on the private practice of kris appreciation. Although the dagger is worn openly as part of the groom's costume, its importance as a badge of rank on these occasions seems secondary to its use as a symbol of masculine identity. When combined with other distinctive aspects of Biman material culture, such as textiles, the kris may also serve as a visual signifier of regional identity, in what is an avowedly multi-ethnic state.

While the symbolism of the kris can be described ethnographically, the aesthetic value of such a culturally significant artefact may be difficult to capture by means of a European vocabulary. This is largely because languages themselves tend to be culturally specific, even apparently universalistic ones such as English, and may therefore incorporate notions that are not widely applicable. In most of western European concepts such as 'art' are, for example, essential to the aesthetic language, and therefore it has to be asked how far the Bimanese means of evaluating their material culture can be rendered in these terms.

What is interesting is that for at least one Bimanese conversant with a European language it was possible to translate some of the local categories as 'art' (ignoring for the sake of convenience the question of the mutability of the Dutch and English vocabulary). An examination of the Biman phrases reveals concepts such as 'skill' and 'knowledge', the highest being expressed as 'hard work and intelligence' – concerns that are not alien to the broadest dictionary definition of 'art'.¹⁵ It would appear that the use of the word in its widest sense is suitable in this context. In the interests of focusing discussion, however, the English word 'art' is often qualified (e.g. fine art, decorative art and folk art); but

since these ideas are derived from very different historical and cultural circumstances, there appear to be no grounds for applying them to the Biman ethnography. The kris's clear practical and social functions render it an unsuitable candidate for 'fine art', while its mystical and symbolic qualities defy classification in purely decorative terms. As a royal prestige weapon the dagger can hardly be regarded as 'folk art', and, indeed, armourers in Bima were not 'folk artists' in the sense of non-professional countrymen (cf. Bernal 1973:75), since craftsmen, even in the rural areas, were usually specialists.

The Biman kris, therefore, has to be interpreted with reference to its cultural context, and what is interesting in this respect is the tripartite division of both the class system and the aesthetic hierarchy. Rules-of-thumb link sheath types to social status and an elusive scale is used to grade the material culture; these models, however, only serve as a rough guide, since the art of kris appreciation is in practice more complex and employs gestalt-like concepts similar to notions of *udawana* that are found in Java (cf. Solyom and Solyom 1978:15). A dagger with a wooden sheath and hilt is not invariably confined to the lowest tier in accordance with the simple rules, and may, if it combines superb craftsmanship with fascinating materials, be more highly regarded than a kris embellished with more expensive precious metals. Likewise the class system was not entirely inflexible, there being both social mobility and a division of power in sultanate Bima. Yet, in spite of this variety, the art of kris appreciation is founded upon widely shared principles that have their roots in the Biman social system: order, although often ambiguous, is an essential ingredient in the evaluation of aesthetics.

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NOTES

- 1 Rassers noted that the Bimane, along with the Makasarese and Buginese, considered the kris as the '... inseparable brother of man' (Rassers 1940:525), and although I never heard this particular expression used in Bima, it would appear to correspond with the local ideology.
- 2 Over fifty years ago Gardner wrote regretting the transformation of the kris from sacred and royal weapon to '... mere curio' (Gardner 1936:63).

- 3 The island has no local name and is simply referred to in terms of its three regencies: Sumbawa, Dompu and Bima.
- 4 In western Indonesia Bima is widely-known as the bravest of the five Pendawa brothers in the *wayang*; but the *Mahabharata* is not part of the heritage of eastern Sumbawa, where the name is usually associated with the legendary hero known as Sang Bima. In the story concerning the origins of the kingdom, Sang Bima is said to have been voyaging from the west when he was shipwrecked on the Island of Satonda. While marooned, he had two sons by a golden *naga* who lived on the island, and it was the children of this union who finally completed the journey to Bima, where they founded the kingdom.
- 5 Although some of the Biman kris vocabulary, such as *pamu* (*pamor* in Malay), may show exogenous influence, many of the terms are distinctively local.
- 6 Despite the fact that kris makers were said to be almost non-existent in Java, Garrett Solyom managed to commission a dagger, and a full account of the method of production is provided in his book (Solyom and Solyom 1978:7).
- 7 The metal-smithing village also had a meeting-hall that was used in times of trouble for councils of war (*paruga suba*).
- 8 Raffles reported on the esteem in which armourers were held in ancient Java (Raffles 1817:172); Rassers pointed out, however, that although the kris maker might be an honoured person on account of his mystical abilities, the job was essentially a humble one (Rassers 1940:506). What is interesting in Bima is that craftsmen who were promoted to top government posts might later assume the noble title of *bumi* if they did not already have one, the head of metalworking being known as the *Bumi Ndedé*.
- 9 Massir Q. Abdullah, the honorary curator of the palace collections, owns a kris that is said to have been used in the eighteenth-century campaigns in Flores.
- 10 A parallel can perhaps be drawn with Java, where the five Pandawas are represented on some of the oldest *pamor* motifs (Rassers 1940:518).
- 11 The name literally means 'an ancient one of tempered steel' (*na* = the past, *watu* = direction of, *ka* = from, *waja* = tempered steel).
- 12 The inscribed stone in Donggo that has as yet not been fully documented may also be evidence of contact with *Majapahit*. The text is not written in a local script and the illustration shows a figure (possibly a ruler) seated beneath what may be an umbrella, the top of the boulder having been eroded.
- 13 In Java, Rassers reported that kris usually have odd numbers of undulations, between three and thirteen, although twelve was appreciated as an expression of completeness (Rassers 1940:518).
- 14 Sandalwood and *kemuning* are two highly regarded woods in Bima that are also used by Javanese armourers (Solyom and Solyom 1978:64), the former being thought able to protect the blade from rust (Solyom and Solyom 1978:46).
- 15 'Skill, esp. human skill as opposed to nature; (ability in) skilful execution as an object in itself; cunning; imitative or imaginative skill applied to design, as in paintings, architecture, etc. . . .' (*Oxford Dictionary* 1978:52).

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