

Zeitschrift: Ethnologica Helvetica
Herausgeber: Schweizerische Ethnologische Gesellschaft
Band: 10 (1985)

Artikel: Some notes on the hilt of the Kris
Autor: Schneeberg, Werner F.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1007662>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 08.07.2025

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

Werner F. Schneeberger

Some Notes on the Hilt of the Kěris

Introduction

There exists a voluminous literature on the *kěris* of Indonesia and Malaya, and it seems at first sight that hardly any basically new ideas could be offered on the subject. However, while collecting ethnographica, as a side-line to geological work, in Sumatra, Kalimantan, parts of Java, Sabah and the Malay Peninsula, it appeared to the present author that the existing *kěris* literature rather unilaterally advocates the Hindu-Javanese aspect of the *kěris*-hilt to the disadvantage of an ancient, Indonesid one.

In the following chapters it will be elaborated that, apart from the clearly Hindu-Javanese *kěris*-hilt forms, which have their roots in the Hinduistic pantheon, there exists a wide variety of forms representing ancestral person-ages, either in a more natualistic or in a more abstract way.

Because the discussion centers on the *kěris*-hilt, no effort is made to go into morphological details of the other parts of the *kěris*, which, besides, has been amply covered by others.

The notes are of a preliminary nature and are not intended to cover the entire range of the subject, which the present author has to leave to a younger generation, a most promising field, though, for the mythologist.

The Prototype

In 1934 I acquired from Haji Mahmut ben Saleh of Samarinda Sebrang, the Buginese colony near the mouth of the Mahakam River in East Kalimantan, the *kěris* depicted in figures 1 to 5. It is a comparatively small weapon, 34 cm long overall, of which 7.5 cm are the hilt (*ulu*), 1.5 cm are the ornamental cup (*pěndongkok*) plus tang (*paksi*); 25 cm fall on the sheath (*sampir* + *sarong* + *buntut*). The blade (*mata*) itself is 24 cm long. It has five waves (*lok*). The crosspiece (*ganja*) is separate from the blade (*ganja měnumpang*). There is no *pamur*. The *sampir* is of an unidentified wood with black finish. It shows in the typical Bugis manner a boat with angular form and high stern. The *sarong* is of coarse-grained *měranti*, and the square-knobbed, ornamented *buntut* of *kěmuning*.

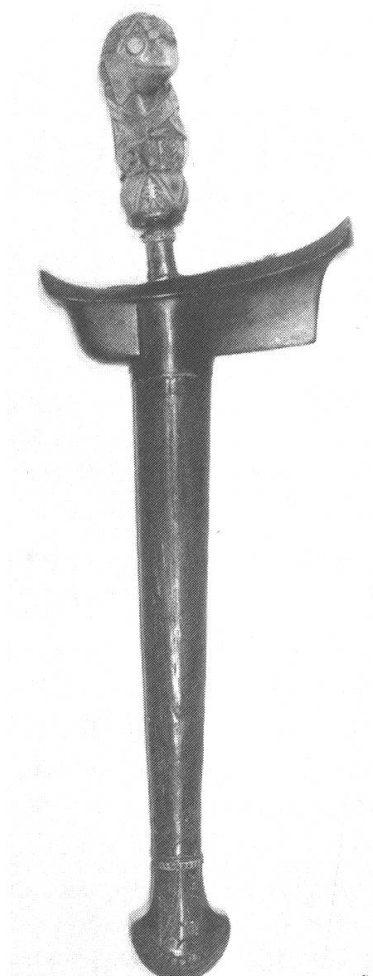


Fig. 1 Prototype, ivory hilt in form of hocker-figure; sheath (*sarong*) consisting of boat-like *sampir*, sarong proper and ornamented *buntut*. Coll. WFS.”

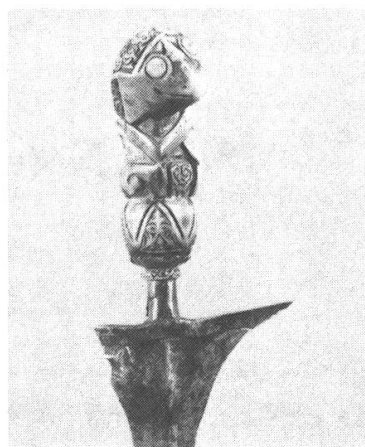


Fig. 2 Hilt of 1, front view



Fig. 3 Hilt of 1, view from left



Fig. 4 Hilt of 1, view from back

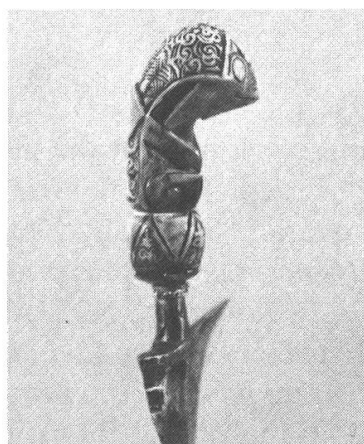


Fig. 5 Hilt of 1, view from right

The most remarkable part, though, is its hilt (*figures 2–5*). It is of ivory (*gading*) with a deep-yellow patina. On a basal sphere, ornamented with four *tumpal*, sits in typical hocker-position a human figure with the face of a bird. Both legs are bent at the knees, the right thigh and hip ending in a spiral, which for the left thigh is only faintly indicated. Both elbows rest on the knees. The right arm crosses the breast, and its hand (not shown) is pulling the edge of a cape it wears on its back, over its left shoulder. The left arm is sharply bent at the elbow and the hand is pressed against the neck, just behind the left cheek-bone.

The figure wears an ornamented loin-cloth (*cawat*) slightly below the navel and on its back a richly ornamented cape, reaching well below the small of the back. At about shoulder-height a lozenge-shaped dorsal shield is attached to the cape. What appears to be a floral design just below the lozenge could also be a human figure with raised arms and bent knees, its extremities completely dissolved into a spiral-and tendril-pattern, similar to figures in the Kayan-Kenyah style in Central Kalimantan (Covarrubias, 1954 : 38). In this case the lozenge would be the head of the human figure (fig. 6).



Fig. 6 Hocker-figure after Covarrubias

- °MVB = Museum für Völkerkunde in Basel
- SVB = Sammlung für Völkerkunde in Burgdorf
- WFS = Collection W.F. Schneeberger

The upper part of the cape shows a criss-cross pattern, suggesting a plaited mat rather than a woven textile. The head is covered with curly hair. The frontal hairline is marked by a transversal ridge. The face shows two large, circular eyes separated by an arrow-shaped nasal ornament; it ends in a blunt bird's beak. The mouth is indicated by two incised lines ending below the eyes in an upward bend, which imparts the impression of a sardonic sneer.

The general impression of the hilt-figure is that of a chthonic, mystic personage of a timid character, embryonic aspect, with human body, but bird-like face. The conical beak is that typical for the finch family of birds and not for a bird of prey.

The Derivative Forms of the Kěris Hilt

The following is not new. Woolley (1949 : 85) as well as Hill (1956 : 26) show sequences of variants of *kěris* hilts without, however, including our prototype, which may have been unknown to them. A simplified, slightly varied form of our prototype is called by Woolley (loc. cit : 73) "*Jawa dēmam*", i.e., "fever-stricken Javanese", but which my informants invariably called "*sakit di rantau*" which means "sick in a foreign land" or simply "homesick". The type may be Bugis in origin, but is to be found in Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula. Figure 7, collected in Langkat, North Sumatra, is now in the



Fig. 7 *Jawa dēmam* or *sakit di rantau* type of kěris hilt. Coll WFS/MVB.

Museum für Völkerkunde in Basel (MVB). It has a straight blade, a Peninsular type sheath and a hilt of *kěmuning* wood, depicting a figure with slightly bent head, no eyes, and a blunt bird's beak. Its right arm reaches across its breast to the left shoulder, similar to our prototype. Its left arm, however, is bent across its torso as if to hug itself. The lower extremities are not shown, but the figure appears to be a typical "hocker", sitting on a sphere. Thus, the four elements of the prototype, sphere, torso, head, and bird's beak, are still clearly recognizable.

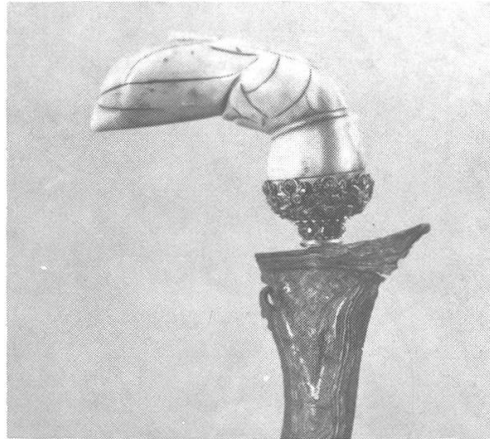


Fig. 8 Bugis ivory hilt, derivative form. Coll. WFS.

Figure 8 is a specimen from the Bugis colony of Samarinda Sebrang in East Kalimantan, the same place as that for the prototype. On a blade with *pamur* and *ganja měnumpang* sits an ivory hilt with richly ornamented *pěndongkok*. However, in lieu of the arms across the torso (Woolley's *Jawa dēmam*) there are ornamental lines marking the contours of the cape, the dorsal lozenge, now a triangle, possibly the arms and in front, a kind of a breast-plate. Although the main elements are still recognizable, the figure gives the impression that the meaning of the original has entirely been lost.

Figures 9 and 10 are Sumatran types of which the first one is slightly less conventionalized than the second one. In both specimes, though, sphere, torso, elongated head, and bird's beak are still recognizable, but the human form has been lost and the dorsal shield has become a triangular ridge.

Number 11 is an ancient Javanese specimen acquired in Banjarmasin, South Kalimantan. The blade, strongly corroded, shows floral designs and was originally gold-incrusted. A *naga* forms the central ridge of the blade. There is a *ganja měnumpang*, but the *pěndongkok* is missing. The hilt of ivory with nearly black patina is completely covered by floral designs, the various fields of which are separated by narrow ridges, one of them outlining the cape. The bird's beak is enhanced by fine hatching. The bird-man's

figure, though, is completely obliterated by the floral design. It is interesting to note that this genuinely Javanese *kĕris* blade is housed in a typical Peninsular sheath with broad *sampir* and square ivory *buntut*.



Fig. 9 Sumatran hilt, derivative form. Coll. WFS.

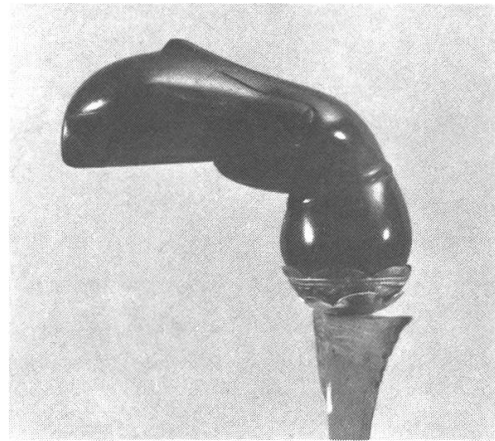


Fig. 10 Sumatran hilt, derivative form. Coll. WFS.

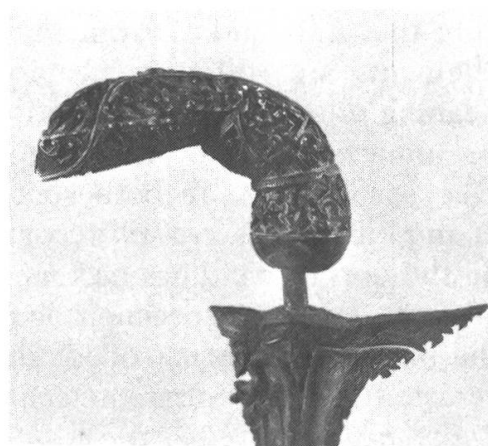


Fig. 11 Javanese floral type, derivative form. Coll. WFS.

The Garuda Theory

In his important treatise “Über Kris-Griffe und ihre mythischen Grundlagen” Heine-Geldern (1932) describes six *kěris* hilts of the von der Heydt Collection and depicts them in his plate 38 as figures 8a–c and 9a–c. He groups them into three types and postulates that they are representations of *garuda*, the mythical bird of the Hindu-Javanese pantheon who is carrying Vishnu through the air. He in particular describes the two specimens 8a and 8c as follows: “According to Moens (his consultant on *kěris* classification WFS) they belong to West Java. The *garuda*, an almost entirely human figure, presents itself here as a droll, gnome-like manikin (“ein possierliches, gnomhaftes Männchen”). Only the protruding eyes suggest its basically demonic character and the strongly protruding nose that of a bird’s beak. The hands rest on the knees”, fig. 12.

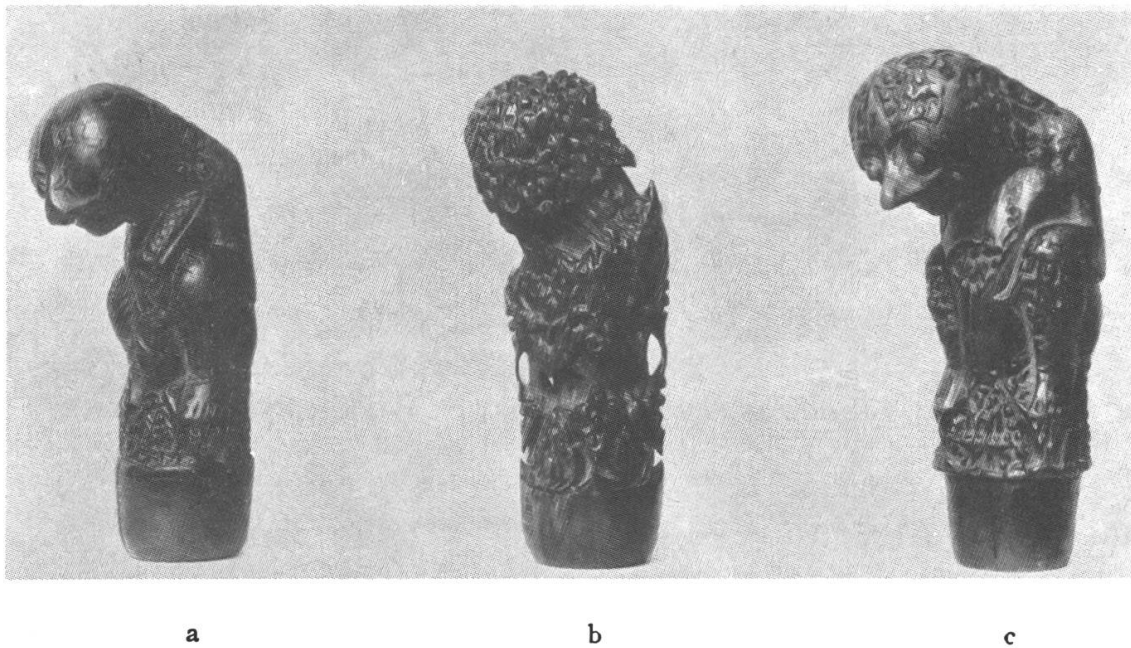


Fig. 12 West-Javanese *kěris* hilts after Heine-Geldern

In our opinion, though, the two figures 8a and 8c, apart from their ornamental style and the position of their hands, resemble our Bugis prototype so closely, that there can be little doubt as to their relationship. They both are hocker-figures with tilted heads, of a timid demeanour, far from being demonic in character.

In the Hindu-Javanese iconological canon, the holy bird *garuda* appears either as a stately bird of prey with spread wings and tail, or as partly human, partly bird-like form, either carrying Vishnu on its back or without it (Ramseyer, 1977 : 118, 233, 367 and fig. 13).



Fig. 13 *Garuda* as devourer of snakes. Wood-carving, Bali.
Coll. WFS : 1928/SVB.

In Javanese *batik* the bird *garuda* is depicted either as a powerful, strutting bird with gorgeous plumage, spread wings, open, toothed beak and strong legs and claws (fig. 14) or in its courtly form as a graceful, highly stylized bird with symmetrically spread wings and tail, as a pair of wings or, as a single wing. This is the *lar* motive (Adam, 1935 : 33c), figure 15.

In its purely demonic aspect, however, *garuda* is a wingless, half human, half animal creature with snarling mouth and sharp teeth, as shown in figure 16.

As there is not a trace of such demonic features, neither in our prototype, nor in Heine-Geldern's figures 8a and 8c, those figures cannot represent *garuda*, neither can his figures 9a and 9c, which belong to our derivated forms.



Fig. 14 *Garuda* in a Javanese *batik*, according to Adam.

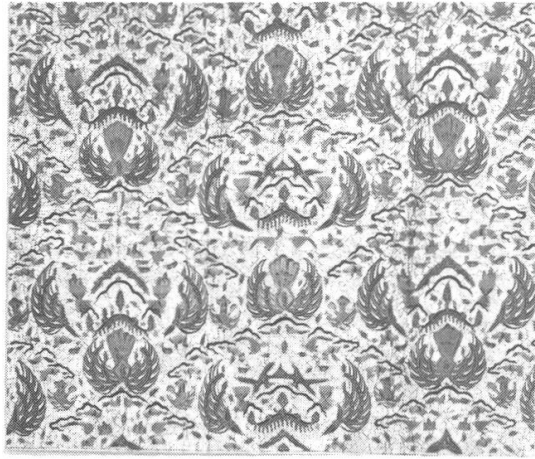


Fig. 15 *Garuda* and *lar* motives in a *batik* from the Kraton of Yogyakarta. Coll. WFS:1928.



Fig. 16 Javanese hilt and *sampir*. Coll. WFS/MVB.

For the same reason we also doubt the validity of Heine-Geldern's comparison of the hilts 8a and 8c with a sculpture of a 14th century East Javanese temple representing *garuda* (loc. cit. : 268). On the side there is a leptosome, earth-bound, timid "hocker", on the other side a half-kneeling, athletic, corpulent, selfassertive figure, two entirely incompatible characters.

Apart from Heine-Geldern's figures 8a and 8c from West Java, we are inclined to include in our category of stylized human forms also the most prevalent Javanese type as depicted by Raffles (1844) in his coloured plates and in our figures 17 and 17a. This is a very pure and simple form, the upper end (head) of which is slightly bent forward. Inside this bend and near the lower end of the hilt there occur two carvings (*ukiran*) which according to Jasper (1930 : 189) represent "below the bend, eyes, nose and mouth, and below, the belly and genitals". The human character, therefore, is assured, the bird's beak, though, is missing.

We exclude from our consideration *garuda*, *raksasa*, *hanuman*, etc, i.e., all characters which are clearly part of the Hindu-Javanese pantheon and which are amply illustrated by Šolc (1958), and ably described by Solyom (1978).

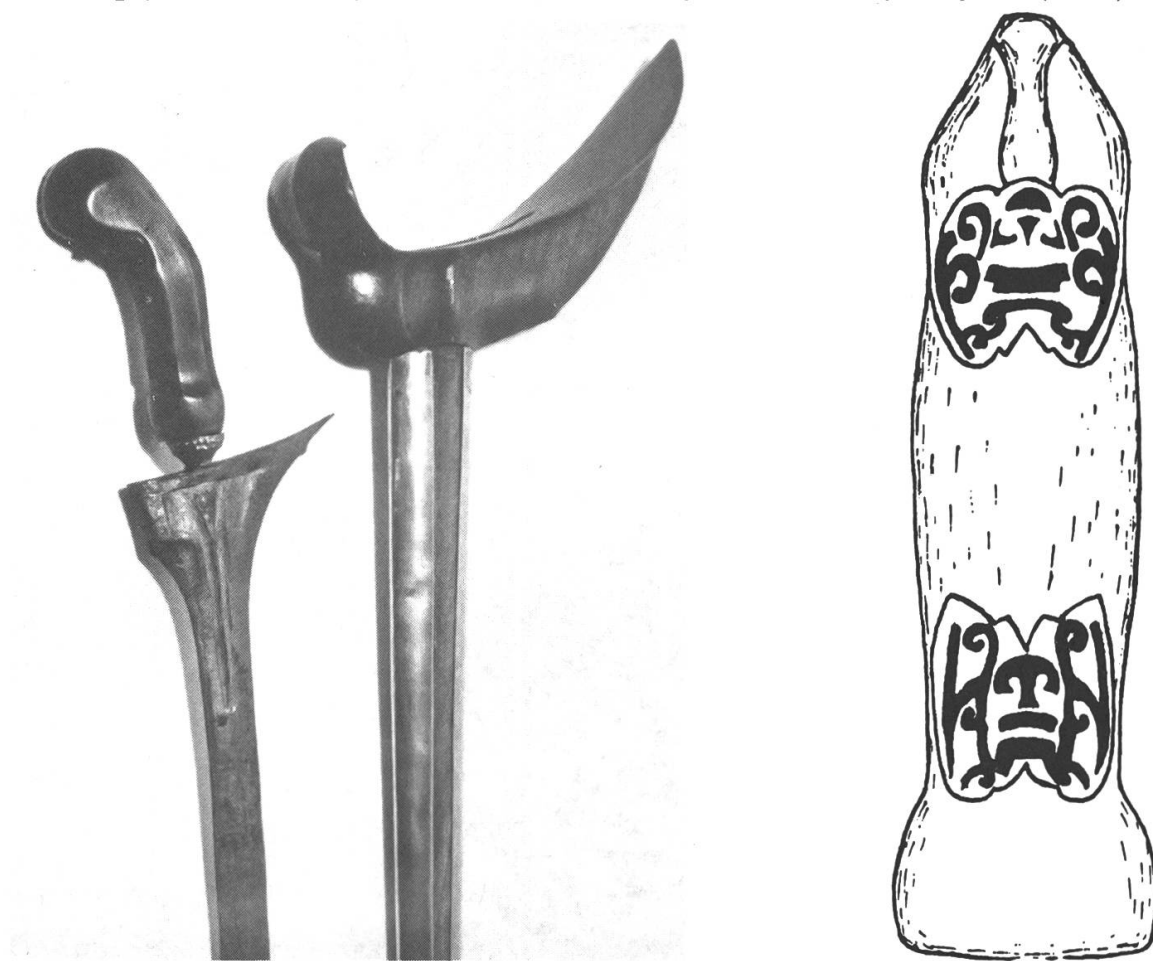


Fig. 17 Hilt of Javanese *kēris* with *ukiran*, after Woolley.

Ulu and Sampir

There is little doubt that the discerning observer can see a connection between the two, i.e., the partly human figure of the *ulu* riding on the ship-shaped *sampir*. Hill (loc. cit. : 14–15) writes on the *kěris* sheath as follows: “Among the *kěris* sheaths the Javanese type with its high-rearing sweep, giving the shape of a boat, is particularly striking. In the mythology of Java the tribal hero Panji always comes sailing home from the seas. Among the gifts which are ritually exchanged between bridegroom and bride at the time of their marriage a *kěris* is always prominent. Dr. Rassers (1931 and 1942) says that is meant to represent Panji appearing in his *kěris* form as the tribal ancestor. The broad mouth piece of the Javanese (but also the Bugis and Malay *kěris* WFS) always shows the shape of an old-fashioned boat. The design has no practical purpose. It may indicate the normal presence of the tribal hero for the boat as a dwelling place”.

In a Madurese specimen and a *kěris sulu*, scrolls at the fore-end and at the water-line indicate waves, enhancing the idea of the *sampir* being really a boat (the author's collection).

In the mythology of the Nad'a of Flores or Ende Island there are several tales of ancestors, that had come from overseas by boat, at times in the shape of menhir (Arndt, 1932 : 43). One song goes as follows: “Kodzu Meze came by boat across the sea, landed here, and crawled from here and climbed into the *b'aga* (ancestral pavillion WFS) of all people”.

In another legend (loc. cit. : 43–44) the old Vavo Gaë (*vavo*=above), *gaë*=mistress) had died. The people were digging a grave for her, but when it was ready, the body had disappeared and a stone of human shape was laid in the grave instead. A month later Vavo's children went to the coast to attend some of their deceased mother's fields. After they had been weeping for two days and two nights, they saw a boat sailing from the west, i.e., from Vico Island (Sumba). When it had come to the beach, it came on land by itself. It had a menhir in it. When they awoke in the morning, the boat was still there, but the stone had disappeared. There follow several episodes when the stone disappeared and reappeared, at times in the shape of their mother, until finally, according to mother's instructions, it was erected as a menhir with all the necessary ceremonies.

In another story (loc. cit. : 48) a boat brings a megalith (menhir) from overseas to the coast of Ende. There were no people on board excepting a stone, which was then carried inland by the strong man D'ake.

Oba, the progenitor of all Nad'a, whose name Arndt derives from the Malay word *ombak* (wave), had himself come to Ende from overseas. There are also instances when Oba is connected with boats (loc. cit. : 55). The topic of a tribal ancestor and his arrival in a boat from overseas, in some cases in the shape of a menhir, is evident in these legends.

While working in the Sultanate of Kota Waringin, South Kalimantan, Haji Idris of Kumai, who acted as a guide in my travels there, pointed out to me a rock in the Lamandau River, the first outcrop of solid rock after tens of miles of alluvial plain, as the place where according to tradition his ancestors had moored their boats on their arrival from overseas. Haji Idris said, that at very low tide the iron mooring rings were still visible. But at the time of their arrival, the rock was standing at the seashore and not many miles up-river as it is now. It is obvious, that the event must have taken place many centuries ago, which is consistent with the morphological history of southern Kalimantan, where large-scale rising of the land has been proved. Although the function of the boat (*prahu*) as conveyance for the dead on their way into the other world is well documented for Indonesia (Steinmann, 1939), its function as carrier for ancestors arriving at the islands from overseas is, to our knowledge, not as well known.



Fig. 18 Ancestor boat, Babar Island, after Musée Rath, Genève.

It is, therefore, most encouraging to find a picture of an ancestor-carrying boat in a recent publication (Musée Rath, 1981 : 94). In the section on the Lesser Sunda Islands and Moluccas, plate 94 represents a hocker-figure from Babar Island, sitting on a boat, elbows on its knees and holding a vessel between its palms (fig. 18). Behind it are two wooden pieces, one shorter and thicker than the other. Their significance is unknown, except that in plate 95 another hocker sits in front of a similar curved, but carved post in form of a ship's stern-post.

The explanatory text says that "the base on which the figure sits is possibly a barge, a funeral vehicle or, it can be likened to the ships which carry ancestors from afar."

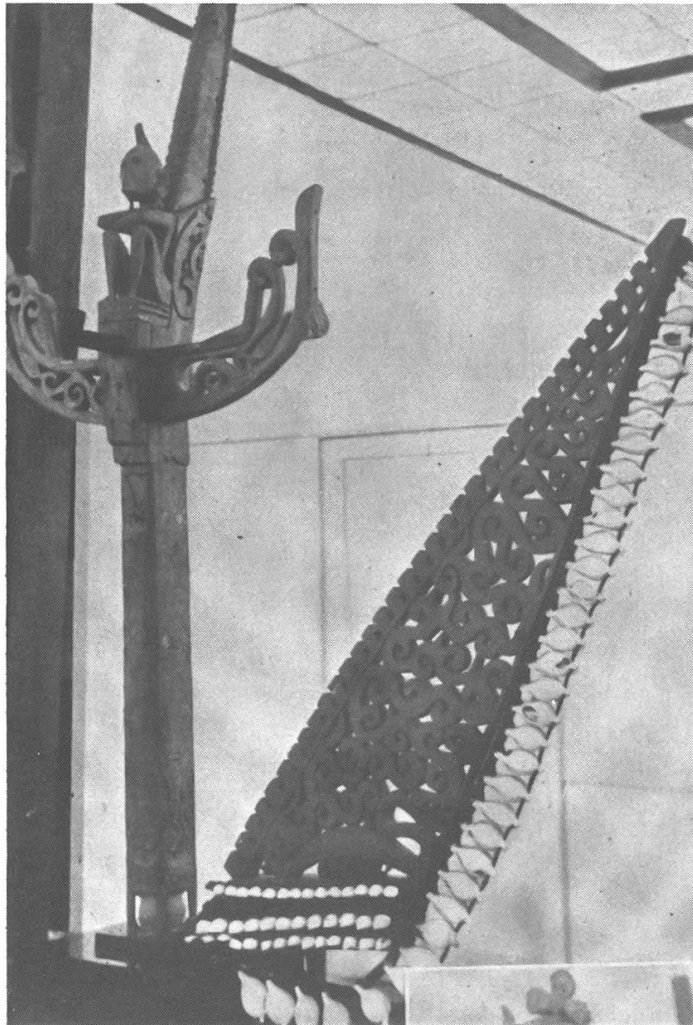


Fig. 19 Stern-post of *prahu* with ancestor figure. Tanimbar Island, after Actueel Wereld Nieuws, Oct. 1932, Amsterdam.

In the present writer's opinion, though, there is no doubt that it is a boat and that it is especially an ancestor-carrying boat. The reasons for this contention are firstly, that it has the shape of a *prahu* and secondly, that it is, as figure 7, page 125 shows, standing on a platform off cobbles and slabs, a structure which in the Lesser Sunda Islands is closely connected with ancestor worship. This is supported by figure 2, page 122 of the same publication, showing a forked, wooden, sacrificial post or *nad'u* from the Manggarai, West Flores, to which buffaloes to be sacrificed are tethered, surrounded, and that is the crucial point, by ancestral effigies, the whole on a circular, megalithic platform.



Fig. 20 Ancestor effigy from a stern-post, Babar Island, Musée Rath.

Further connection between ancestral effigies and boats was found by the author in a photograph published in the Dutch magazine “Actueel Wereld Nieuws”, October 1932. As our figure 19 shows it represents the stern part of a sailing *prahu* from the Southeastern Islands, presumably Tanimbar, with its typical tail-end plank, ornamented with double-spirals and adorned with snail shells of the *Fusus* family (compare with plate 96 Musée Rath, 1981).

In front of this plank stands the stern-post of the boat, a square, sturdy piece of timber. Two carved wooden wings below its top serve as support for the gaff and boom of the sail, when the boat rides at anchor or is beached. On the socle just above the wings sits a hocker-figure with crossed arms resting on drawn-up knees. It wears a peaked cap and leans lightly against the tapering extension of the stern-post. The figure looks straight ahead to the bow of the boat.

Our figure 20 is a reproduction of plate 95 (lit. cit.) from Babar Island. Socle and tapering stern-post are ornamented with doublespirals. In its posture the effigy is identical with that of our figure 19, even to the peaked cap. There is little doubt that it too had originally been part of the stern-post of a *prahu*.

We therefore assume that the two figurines 19 and 20 represent ancestors who by their supreme seamanship had safely brought the clan from overseas to their new homeland. By their spiritual presence they still protect their descendants against the perils of the sea.

What transpires from these, far from being complete, legends and effigies, is the fact that there still exists among the peoples of the Indonesian Archipelago a tradition of the arrival of ancestral personages in boats (*prahu*) from overseas. The *kēris* is a weapon with an aura of magical power. Its *ulu* represents an enigmatic personage sitting on the *prahu*-shaped *sampir*. We therefore suggest that he really is an ancestor (*nenek-moyang*) asailing in his *sampir* from overseas. He has his roots not in the Hindu-Javanese culture, but in a remote Indonesid substratum.

Acknowledgement

The author greatly appreciates the help given him in various ways by the following persons:

Dr. Georg Budmiger in Berne, Dr. iur. Georg W. Hirtz in Breitenbrunn, Burgenland, Frau Paula Lotmar in Kilchberg, Prof. Dr. Wolfgang Marschall in Berne, Dr. Urs Ramseyer of the MVB in Basle, Herr Walter Staub of the SVB in Burgdorf.

Last but not least he wishes to thank all his many Indonesian friends who with great willingness let him participate in their fascinating culture, alas, all of them have long since joined their *nenek-moyang*.

Abstract

The present paper deals with kēris hilts of non-Hindu-Javanese origin. The conclusion is that hilts under discussion represent ancestral personages and as such, belong to an ancient Indonesid substratum.

Zusammenfassung

Die vorliegende Arbeit befasst sich mit Kris-Griffen von nicht hindu-javanischer Herkunft. Die Schlussfolgerung ist, dass diese Griffe Vorfahren darstellen, und daher einem alten, indonesiden Substratum angehören.

Selected Bibliography

- Adam, Tassilo
1935 The Art of Batik in Java.
Needle & Bobbin Club (New York) 18 : 1–74.
- Arndt, P.
1932 Die Megalithen-Kultur der Nad'a auf Flores.
Anthropos. Unpublished translation by WFS for Musée
Barbier-Muller, Geneve.
- Covarrubias, Miguel
1954 The Eagle, the Jaguar, and the Serpent. Art of the Americas.
New York : Knopf.
- Evans, I.H.N.
1929 Types of kēris sampir and hilts in the Malay States, Java and
Celebes.
Journal FMS Museum (Kuala Lumpur) 12 : 171–3.
- Gardner, G.B.
1936 Kēris and other Malay weapons.
Singapore : Progressive Publishing Company.
- Heine-Geldern, Robert
1932 Über Kris-Griffe und ihre mythischen Grundlagen.
Ostasiatische Zeitschrift 18 : 256–292.
- Hill, A.H.
1956 The kēris and other Malayx weapons.
Journal Malayan Branch Royal Asiatic Soc. 29 : 7–98.
- Jasper, J.E. & Mas Pirngadie
1912–30 De Inlandsche Kunstnijverheid in Nederlandsch Indie,
Bd. 5.
Den Haag : Mouton.
- Musée Rath
1981 Art des Indonésiens archaïques.
Geneve : Musée Rath.
- Raffles, Th.S.
1844 Antiquarian, Architectural, and Landscape
Illustrations of the History of Java.
London : Bohn.
- Ramseyer, Urs
1977 Kultur und Volkskunst in Bali.
Zürich : Atlantis.

- Šolc, Vaclav
1958 Schwerter und Dolche Indonesiens.
 Prag : Artia.
- Solyom, Garrett & Bronwen
1978 The World of the Javanese Këris.
 Honolulu : East-West Center.
- Steinmann, Alfred
1939 Das kultische Schiff in Indonesien.
 Zürich : Universität.
- Woolley, G.C.
1947 The Malay Keris : its origin and development.
 Journal Malayan Branch Royal Asiatic Society
 20 : 60–103.