

## The Meaning of Symbols on Keris as a Depiction of the Identity and Character of Nusantara Society

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### ABSTRACT

This study aims to reveal the meaning of symbols on the keris that depicts the identity and character of the Nusantara society. Keris as one of Indonesia's original cultural products in the field of *tosan aji* has multiple functions. Keris leaves its function as a weapon and puts forward a message language for certain conditions and situations. Keris is a part of the heritage of the ancestors of the Indonesian society filled with knowledge. The knowledge in keris that stands out is the symbol system that is also present in it. This knowledge is a form of thinking of the people of the archipelago in implying their culture. The approach used in this research is the Nusantara Aesthetic approach which states that every work presented, especially in the Archipelago, always prioritises the aspects of *guidance* and *spectacle*. Keris as a cultural work of the archipelago does not only prioritise the aspect of beauty (*spectacle*) but also becomes a cultural work full of teachings and outlook on life (*guidance*) through the symbol language system presented. The symbol system in the keris then becomes a form of culture that is passed down from generation to generation as a depiction of the identity and character of the Nusantara society.

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## INTRODUCTION

The need for weapons is a form of culture that has existed since the existence of the first humans on Earth. Weapons are an important part of the journey of human life. Weapons are used to protect ourselves from threats, used to survive, find food and so on. In the course of human life, it gradually affects the thinking power it has. Humans believe that the weapons commonly used in supporting daily life have a divine power that controls them, humans believe that with the existence of these divine powers the weapons used have helped in their journey of life. This is what then follows the development of the presence of weapons in human life, so that the presence of weapons is made with visuals that are as beautiful as possible so that the divine forces in it always accompany the steps of their life journey. The belief in the divine powers that accompany the presence of a weapon then continues to develop, starting from those made of stone to those made of metal and reaching its peak called the keris.

Keris is a part of the relics of the past in which it is full of meaning (guidance) that is packaged so beautifully (spectacle). Keris sourced from Java in the process of its development then spread throughout the archipelago. Because this makes keris come with a variety of shapes and styles that are adapted to the customs and culture of the user community. Keris has become the pinnacle of the cultural journey of metal forging art and became the most prominent work of *tosan aji*. Keris is very different from other *tosan aji* works (traditional weapons) in the archipelago. In the process of its creation, keris involves multi material, multi skills by considering multi-functional which is very beautifully packaged. When studied more deeply, keris abandons its function as a weapon but rather prioritizes aesthetic functions, social functions and spiritual functions presented through symbol language.

## THEORETICAL REVIEW

Its multi-functional presence makes keris an important part of people's lives, especially in Java. Keris is always present in every aspect of the journey of Javanese people from birth to death. There is an expression believed by Javanese and Balinese people from ancient times until now, that a man is considered a perfect man if he already has *Guesthouse* (home) *woman* (wife), *Turangga* (horse/vehicle), *Kukila* (Birds, here are meant fun or hobbies. In Javanese culture it is called *Kelangenan*), and the last one is *suspicious* (Keris). The various meanings and language of symbols present in keris culture make keris a part of the wearer and even considered as his second self. Therefore, the presence of keris makes the wearer more confident (Yuwono 2011a).

Keris has a distinctive and unique shape, so it is different from culture *Tosan Aji* Other. The shape of the keris is in the form of an asymmetrical short piercing weapon that has 2 main parts, namely the blade and *marijuana* which is the embodiment of phallus and yoni (symbol of fertility). There is a Javanese expression that keris is referred to as "*landhep for warangka and carving*", Which means that the keris as a whole can be said to be a keris if there are blades, warangka (keris sheath) and hulu (keris handle). The distinctive shape of the keris equipped with warangka and upstream makes the keris have no end, no

base, no front and no back. The typology of keris shapes is generally divided into 3, namely straight keris, luk keris, and mixed keris. Another aspect that makes keris a distinctive tosan aji culture is the existence of a prestige motif, which is an ornamental decoration found on the keris blade resulting from the forging process between keris making materials in the form of iron, steel and nickel. The prestige on the keris blade also illustrates the union between mother earth and father space, namely the concept of fertility (Haryono 2006).

Based on the aspects described above, this is exactly what the general public, especially modern generations, should understand about what a keris actually is. Keris comes with a distinctive form and is different from other traditional weapons, and in it there is an expression of messages through the language of symbols presented. However, there are many phenomena that make it difficult for keris to be present in the lives of the general public. One of them is that the keris has been misused by people who do not fully understand the keris, even the keris is converted not in accordance with its proper function. Kerises are used in shamanic practices that make people's understanding of kerises biased. Keris is considered a culture that is not in accordance with the teachings of the religion they adhere to, and keris is considered an object that is closely related to mystical things. This phenomenon is still being fought for by the people who control the keris culture to be straightened out.

The lack of people in the current era who understand what a keris really is, and the public's belief in keris that keris is a culture that is not in accordance with religious teachings is gradually drowning out the essence of the real keris, which is a cultural product that contains many learning messages about life through the language of symbols it presents, and through the message of the symbol language reflects how the character of the archipelago's people.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Research on keris as a depiction of the identity and character of the people of the archipelago is to analyze the role and function of keris in the life of the people of the archipelago. Therefore, in addition to library data, there is a need for empirical data obtained in the field. The method used in this study is a qualitative method that produces descriptive data analysis. Qualitative research was conducted to understand how far the function and role of keris through the symbol system presented in Nusantara society so as to describe the identity and character of the people of the archipelago. (Mathew B. Miles and Huberman 1992).

From an epistemological point of view, keris can show the knowledge contained in it that has become a local wisdom. One of the most prominent knowledge is the knowledge of metallurgical technology that was inherited by the ancestors of the Indonesian people and became the pinnacle of technology in making the best weapons. Deeper than that, because the Archipelago is a society that also applies the concept of symbols in its cultural system, the presence of a keris cannot be separated from the knowledge of symbols. This knowledge is a form of thinking of the Archipelago people in implying their culture on an object, namely the keris. The concept of knowledge about the keris as a symbol is a system formed by the Archipelago community and

becomes a culture.

A work of art is often present symbolic, Suparlan in Tjetjep Rohendi Rohidi explained the relationship of symbols and works of art is a symbol is a major component in culture, everything experienced and seen by humans is processed into a series of symbols that are understood by humans. In a symbol are stored various meanings in the form of ideas, abstractions, stances, considerations of desires, beliefs, certain experiences. These meanings in an art can more precisely be lived together. Therefore, art as well as culture can be regarded as a symbol system (Rohendi Rohidi 2000). This explanation relies on the fact that symbols are important things of a culture and become a relationship of aesthetic interaction in a work of art.

The symbols present in a work of art are certainly not merely present, symbols that are interpreted through aesthetic interaction within the scope of the culture concerned certainly have their roles and functions. The aesthetics of Nusantara art are always related to the value of spectacle and guidance influenced by natural suggestions. The religious view of the people of Nusantara is always one with their God and always one with the natural environment, so as to realize a work of art prioritizing aesthetic aspects (spectacle) and philosophy (guidance). Therefore, implicit forms and symbols that are cultural in nature emerge through character as the basis of philosophy and used as a view of life. (Sony Kartika and Sunarmi 2007).

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### *The Existence of Keris in Nusantara Society*

Keris is one of the original cultural products from Indonesia. The course of Indonesian history has been influenced by Indian culture (Hindu Buddhism) far in the past. However, Indonesian culture found its own peculiarities in a long process (Yuwono 2011a). Culture originating from India is only in the form of skin, the core and distinctiveness is the local culture owned by Indonesia itself. In accordance with what Bambang Harsrinuksmo explained in his book entitled Encyclopedia Keris that although in the 14th century the ancestors of the Indonesian people were basically Hindus and Buddhists, but there was no evidence that the keris culture originated in India or other countries (Harsrinuksmo 2008).

Findings sourced from archaeological and literary data say that keris is a culture originating from Java and spreading throughout the archipelago. The definition of keris, which is a stabbing weapon in the form of curves or straight, in the view of Javanese people, this understanding becomes more open. The understanding of keris has developed from the sense-language and symbol system understood in the life of Javanese society. Like keris is an ethnic identity, keris is the identity of Javanese male perfection and so on. This understanding then participated in the spread of keris in various regions of the archipelago and gave birth to keris terms that adjust the language and cultural identity in their respective regions (Yuwono 2011b).

The distribution of keris in various regions of the archipelago was caused by several factors, namely through trade, war, marriage, political relations and so on, which then gave birth to a diversity of patterns and styles that reflected

their respective characters and cultures. This is also the difference between keris and other traditional weapon cultures in the archipelago. Keris unlike other traditional weapons that are regional, keris has been present and played in almost all regions of the country and has become the culture of the archipelago.

There are 5 symptoms in culture, consisting; myth and religion, language, art, history and knowledge (Sony Kartika 2005). Keris is one of the cultural products of the community which is also included in the category of art which has long been part of the life of the people of the archipelago and penetrated to the joint layers of society with all its values. Basuki Teguh Yuwono took the opinion of Arnold Hauser, an art sociologist, explaining that art is very influential on the cultural layer of society, supporters and connoisseurs. According to Hauser, art products are divided into three categories, namely; the art of the cultural elite, folk art, and popular art (Yuwono 2011a). This is in line with the development of keris which is a form of art product.

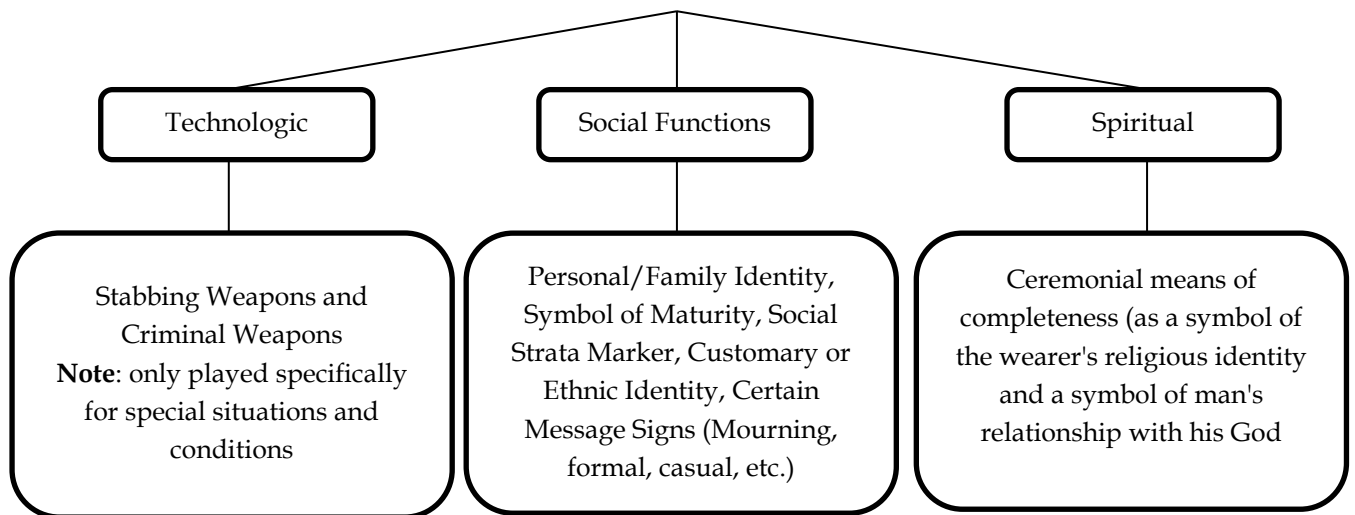
The course of history states that keris is an art product that was originally classified as elite art that was only found within the palace walls, keris at that time as a symbol of the king's power. Therefore, the culture and knowledge of keris are *synergistic* (not just anyone can know it). Keris at that time could only be presented through the decrees of the king and noble families. However, because the community outside the palace wall also became part of the king's power, gradually keris culture was present in the joints of the community outside the palace wall and was accepted as a folk-art class. The presence of keris in the art layer of society outside the palace walls is of course also under the supervision of the royal / palace government and its value aspects also follow the rules of palace culture.

The palace which became the center of culture had a great influence on the ups and downs of the literary world. Each work / palace certainly has different characteristics in influencing the course of the development of perrisan culture. The different styles and styles of keris culture in each period of the reign of a government are then known in today's kerisan culture as *Tough*, which is a term of development or style from each period of the kingdom that is reflected in the works of keris produced (Yuwono 2011a). Science *Suspension* That is what until now is used by the Keris Cultural Guardian Community in identifying keris artifacts from the past that still exist today.

Keris culture has an important meaning in the life of the people of the archipelago. Keris is one form of the intelligence of the ancestors of the Indonesian nation in the past, in which technology, science and norms have been contained that must be passed down from generation to generation as a form of unifying culture of the nation. Keris as the pinnacle of metal forging art technology and a crystallization of traditional weapons in the archipelago has eliminated its function as a weapon and prioritized function over symbol language. Keris is always present in the journey of the life of the people of the archipelago from birth to, death which reflects the symbol of human relations with its creator, so that keris becomes a means of building awareness to always remember and have a sense of divinity in accordance with the beliefs they hold. Keris reflects a symbol of maturity and a sense of responsibility, therefore a

person who has grown up must wear a keris as a symbol that he must be ready to become an adult human being full of a sense of responsibility (Yuwono 2021).

Javanese teachings say that the way to perfection in life is through a deep understanding of a science *pethingan* (glorified science). Keris which is presented with the language of symbols and the process of meaning as a cultural process, by the people of Nusantara is considered a science that needs to be maintained, because the people of Nusantara consider keris culture is one form of glorified science, so that it can be used as a reference for how to achieve perfection in life (Darmosoegito 1992). So many doctrinal values are contained in the keris culture as one of the guidelines for thinking and behaving as a portrayal of the character of the people of the archipelago.



The function and role of keris in the life of the people of the archipelago (Yuwono 2021).

***Keris symbols that are full of guidance as a depiction of the identity and character of the people of the archipelago***

Every aspect of human life will not be separated from a symbol. The existence of symbols is a form of expression of the value of a culture. Symbols are always played as a means of communication based on cultural values that present them for mutual understanding. Man could not exist without symbols in his life. Ernst Cassier argued that humans are *animal symbolicum*. By using symbols, man can express what he wants to achieve. How to express these symbols can be through language, mite, art, belief or other forms. The archipelago has diverse tribes and cultures. In every culture, of course, there are also many symbols that always accompany it, and these symbols are the result of agreements that describe the character, identity and characteristics of a customary identity in a tribe (Dilistone 2002).

A work of art is often present symbolic, Suparlan in Tjetjep Rohendi Rohidi explained the relationship of symbols and works of art is a symbol is a major component in culture, everything experienced and seen by humans is processed into a series of symbols that are understood by humans. In a symbol are stored various meanings in the form of ideas, abstractions, stances, considerations of desires, beliefs, certain experiences. These meanings in an art can more precisely be lived together. Therefore, art as well as culture can be regarded as a symbol system (Rohendi Rohidi 2000). This explanation relies on the fact that symbols are important things of a culture and become a relationship of aesthetic interaction in a work of art. The existence of symbols that are an important part of the life of the people of the archipelago is also present in a keris which is one form of culture that exists in the life of the people of the archipelago.

The symbols present in a work of art are certainly not merely present, symbols that are interpreted through aesthetic interaction within the scope of the culture concerned certainly have their roles and functions. The aesthetics of Nusantara art are always related to the value of spectacle and guidance influenced by natural suggestions. The religious view of the people of Nusantara is to always be one with their God and always one with the natural environment, so that in realizing a work of art prioritizes aesthetic aspects (spectacle) and philosophy (guidance). Therefore, implicit forms and symbols that are cultural in nature emerge through character as the basis of philosophy and are used as a view of life (Sony Kartika and Sunarmi 2007).

Epistemologically, keris can show the knowledge contained in it which until now has become a local wisdom. One of the most prominent knowledge is the knowledge of metallurgical technology inherited by the ancestors of the Indonesian nation and became the pinnacle of technology in making the best weapons. Deeper than that, because the people of Nusantara are people who also apply the concept of symbols in their cultural system, the presence of a keris cannot be separated from knowledge of symbols. This knowledge is a form of thought of the people of the archipelago in implying their culture on an object, namely keris. The concept of knowledge about the keris as a symbol is a system formed by the people of the archipelago and becomes a culture. The presence of a keris is also inseparable from the existence of a keris maker maestro (master).

The philosophical values contained in the keris are expressed by the mpu implicitly. This began with the habit of Javanese people who were not fulgar expressing everything that contained life teachings. Therefore, the masters of antiquity expressed a teaching in the form of symbols in a cultural work in the form of a keris (Sony Kartika 2005). An mpu maker of keris in bringing up

symbols that are full of deep meaning and full of life guidance also based on cultural references and ethical values in the culture in his environment.

Keris as a whole in the appearance of each element has a symbolic meaning value. The symbols on the keris are located in various elements that support it, starting from the shape of the blade (*Dhapur*), prestige motifs, warangka (sarong), hulu (handle), to the ornamental sculptures that decorate it. Many teachings and guidelines live in the keris through the symbols contained in it. The teachings contained in the keris are a depiction of the true character and identity of the people of the archipelago. In the presence of the keris contained teachings about the consciousness of divinity. There is a Javanese expression "*Suspicious of the Parents and Wrestling*", which means that the blade of the keris when integrated with its warangka is a depiction of the meeting between man and his creator. Then the shape of the keris that tends to lean forward is a symbol of humans who are worshiping (Yuwono 2011a). This expression also certainly accompanied the spread of keris to various regions of the archipelago which originally came from Java, and was believed by the people of the archipelago as adherents of keris culture. The presence of this symbol implies that the people of the archipelago are a divinized society that always remembers its creator, as a religious society.

The names of keris typology forms, ornamental keris ornaments, and names of prestige motifs are often presented identical to phenomena and names that exist in nature. This shows that keris is a depiction that the people of the archipelago always live in harmony with nature. The people of the archipelago in maintaining their lives will not be separated from nature. All the needs of his life come from the natural wealth around him. Nevertheless, love and awareness to live in harmony with nature will be needed for human survival and for the preservation of the integrity of existing natural wealth.

In addition to the naming system in the keris reflects the people of the archipelago who live in harmony with nature, the naming on the keris is also a symbol or depiction of how the personal character of someone wearing the keris and of course implies how the character of the people of the archipelago. For example, there is a typology of keris shapes with the name "*sinom*". *Sinom* literally means young shoots of tamarind tree leaves, tamarind trees always grow and blossom both in rainy and dry seasons, besides that even though the leaves are small but when sheltering under them will still feel cool. The name *synom* in the typology of the keris shape that reflects the character of the tamarind tree is a depiction that the people of the archipelago who always add to develop their knowledge and insight in all situations and become a shade for the surrounding community. There are many more naming systems that exist in



keris and even hundreds that reflect the character of the people of the archipelago.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Keris is a cultural product of the past that originated in Indonesia. The presence of the keris is beautifully packaged with guidance and teachings. Keris is the pinnacle of metal forging technology. Keris is always present in the life journey of the people of the archipelago from birth to death. Keris is a cultural product in the field of metal forging (*tosan aji*) that is most prominent and different from other tosan aji works. In the process of its development, keris that was initially originated from Java then spread almost throughout the archipelago. Therefore, it differs between keris and other tosan aji creations. Existing tosan aji works in the archipelago only accentuate their regional characteristics.

The presence of the keris has left its function as a weapon but prioritises what is behind it, representing a language of symbols for a message. All the symbols in the keris are a form of prayer and hope that humans will always live better. The way to be a person who is useful for the people around and how to respond to the phenomena in his life properly in accordance with the teachings contained in the symbols in the keris. Keris was presented by the ancestors of the Indonesian nation full of life teaching values through the language of symbols in it based on the knowledge of the master in implying his culture through suggestions of nature and phenomena in the environment. The teachings in the keris through the language of symbols are a depiction of how the identity and character of the people of the archipelago.

## FURTHER STUDY

The knowledge and teachings passed down by the ancestors of the Indonesian people through keris are a form of culture that must always be passed down and preserved, so that the character of the archipelago's society is still reflected from generation to generation.

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