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## Inclination of *Keris* Research Theme According to Colonial Scholars Perspective

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### Abstract

This study explores the inclination of *keris* research theme as a significant weapon in the traditional Malay community until now. The discussion focuses on the main function of *keris* as a weapon and how it evolved to become a symbol of identity for the Malay community that attracted the interest of colonial scholars, especially the British in the 19th century AD, in researching and understanding the relationship between the weapon and the colonised society. This study will complete two objectives which is to analyse the themes of research regarding *keris* in the colonial era and to deduce the tendency of these themes based on the opinions of several renowned colonial scholars. The research methodology is a bibliographic analysis of several scientific journals by colonial scholars in the 19th century AD on Malay *keris*, especially on the Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society and some others. The results revealed that the themes associated with the study of *keris* by colonial scholars mainly focus on non-physical properties, such as mystical elements and beliefs on *keris*. These past studies were also found to have an influence over the mentality and way of thinking of the Malay community today. In conclusion, research works on *keris* as a weapon that is synonymous with the Malay identity need to be intensified so that more rational and relevant findings can be highlighted in order to reduce the dependency on studies by Western scholars, which are often biased and have their own interests.

**Keywords:** *Keris*, Theme, Colonial Era, Perspective, Malay Community

### Introduction

*Keris* is a dagger-like weapon that carries prominent heritage and cultural values of the Malay community. The uniqueness of *keris* lies on the characteristics of strength, power, glory, and mystery that can be explained through its physical and non-physical aspects (Mohamad et al., 2012). This positions *keris* as a valuable and recognised world heritage artefact by UNESCO in 2005.

The usage of *keris* extends across all hierarchies in the traditional Malay society, including the sultan, nobility, and ordinary people. Its uniqueness has attracted numerous scholars from within and outside of Malaysia to conduct in-depth research on the special weapons of the

Malay community. Studies on *keris* are believed that begun as early as the colonial era until the present time, with the existing literature offering a broad scope of studies on *keris*. As an effort to contribute to the body of knowledge, this paper presents a discussion on past studies of *keris* by focusing on the colonial era.

### **Problem Statement**

The majority of studies that looked on the prominence of *keris* during the colonial era have focused on its history, background, and the communal beliefs associated with *keris*, which were mainly attributed to the culture and way of life of the Malay community during that time. The fact that *keris* is highly synonymous with the Malay community has attracted many colonial scholars to conduct detailed investigations regarding Malay weapons. Aside from its physical features, the non-physical characteristics of *keris* have also been a prominent interest among researchers following the belief that the weapon has magical and mystical properties that can significantly influence those around them (Laidlaw, 1905; Windstedt, 1925). This is aligned with Gardner (1933) who stated that many people believe in the spiritual property of *keris*.

A thorough review of past literature revealed that most colonial scholars have examined the non-physical features of *keris* with a particular interest on the mystical elements. This indirectly prompts the society to relate *keris* with mystical and spiritual matters (Mohamad & Shuhaimi, 2013). This is further supported by Abdul Muati (2015) who stated that *keris* is commonly associated with superstitions and supernatural matters as many of the Malay community believe that the weapon carries certain mystical values.

The above arguments thus signify that *keris* is often perceived as an object which reflects the negative perception of today's society. Such issue arises from the public's limited understanding and lack of exposure to *keris*-related knowledge. Therefore, this paper aims to explore the inclination of themes in *keris* research during the colonial era and its influence on today's society.

### **Objectives**

Referring to the issues of the study presented, this study will outline two objectives:

- 1) Analysing the theme of the study on *keris* in the colonial era
- 2) Summarize the inclination of the *keris* theme study and its influence on today's society

### **Methodology**

This study applies a qualitative methodology by using text analysis. Referring to the study's material, this paper limits on the study during the colonial era in the Malay's world. These scientific studies will be discussed on the tendency of the *keris* study theme by colonial scholars and its influence on today's society. This paper will analyse 10 scientific studies which discussed on the *keris*, covering several aspects and themes of the colonial era in the Malay world. The research materials will be analysed to meet the objectives and problem statement of this study.

## Analysis and Discussion

### *Keris Studies*

Research on *keris* is not a new topic in the academic world. It began as early as the colonial era within the context of the Malay community and has been expanded by further investigation done by both local and foreign scholars. The discussion in this paper aims to identify the main themes of existing *keris* studies, especially during the colonial era. A theme or title is a major component of a research. Past studies on *keris* have covered an extensive range of themes with several gaps that can be addressed by future research. Following our observation, past studies on *keris* not only examined its physical properties but also its non-physical properties.

There is an urgent need to extend the investigation on *keris* in order to elicit fresh insights regarding the topic. In this millennium era, studying *keris* can come with certain privileges and a wider scope of study, such as from the engineering, social, arts, and philosophical perspectives. The findings will provide a positive development in the study of *keris* that can complement the existing findings on its history, background, and associated beliefs.

### *Keris Studies in Colonial Era*

Our literature review shows that the study of *keris* began since the arrival of the colonials in Tanah Melayu and it remains relevant and significant to date. Many colonial scholars are interested with the unique weapons of the Malay community which are believed to have incredible strength and spiritual values. Some people consider *keris* as a sacred item with a touch of luck (Haryoguritno, 2005). This has prompted many colonial scholars to explore the origin and background of *keris* to understand its significance among the Malay community. Most past studies on *keris* focused on two main themes, namely (i) the history and background of *keris* and (ii) the beliefs associated with *keris* as shown in table 1.

Table 1

*Literature review of Keris study from the colonial scholars*

No.	Year	Title	Theme	Author
1	1895	<i>Malay Sketches</i>	History & Background	Swettenham F. A.
2	1899	<i>Real Malay</i>	History & Background	Swettenham F. A.
3	1900	<i>Malay Magic : Being An Introduction To The Folklore And Popular Religion Of The Malay Peninsula.</i>	Belief	Skeat W. W.
4	1933	<i>Notes On Two Uncommon Varieties Of The Malay Keris</i>	Belief	Gardner G. B.
5	1936	<i>Keris and Other Malay Weapons</i>	History & Background	Gardner G. B.
6	1937	<i>Suggested Origin Of The Malay Keris And Of The Superstitions Attaching To It</i>	Belief	Williams, G. C. G.
7	1938	<i>Keris Measurements</i>	Belief	Wolley G. C.
8	1940	<i>The Kēris Sulok Or Sundang</i>	History & Background	Banks E.
9	1947	<i>The Malay Kēris: Its Origin And Development</i>	History, Background & Belief	Wolley G. C.
10	1956	<i>Keris Types and Terms</i>	History & Background	Hodgson, G.

*i) Studies on Keris History & Background*

One of the main themes in *keris* studies during the colonial era is related to the history and background of the weapon. Such theme focuses on the origin and early introduction of *keris* and the findings not only establish the uniqueness of *keris* as an important heritage for the Malay community but also serve as a fundamental basis for future research.

Among the preliminary studies that become a well-known reference for *keris*-related research include *Malay Sketches* (Swettenham, 1895) and *Real Malay* (Swettenham, 1899). Both studies examined the cultural background and usage of *keris* in the daily lives of the Malay community. According to Swettenham (1899), the Malays often brought their *keris* when leaving their houses as a form of protection against danger. It was also used as a weapon during fights. These notions indicate the role of *keris* as a tool for self-esteem and protection for the Malay community. Swettenham also reported of a commander named Panglima Perang Semaun who once swore that he would fight his enemies with *keris* despite having no modern firearms. This is interesting because the situation symbolises *keris* as a symbol of dignity and courage for the Malay community.

Studies on the history and background of *keris* also looked on its characteristics. In a study titled *Keris and Other Malay Weapons*, Gardner (1936) explored the characteristics of *keris* and other weapons used in the daily lives of the Malay community. The author posits that the privileges of *keris* should never be doubted because it is a prominent weapon for the Malay community, which has its own unique features and is different from other types of weapons. According to Gardner, the *keris* blacksmiths or craftsmen in Tanah Melayu were called *Pandai Besi* who were believed to have secret and magical skills that enabled them to recognise various types of iron. Gardner further explained that in the Malay tradition, *keris* should be made using at least 2 types of iron that would be forged to become a piece of iron. During the forging process, small pieces of iron would be arranged in layers and later forged to form a folding pattern. Different types of iron pieces would then be combined to produce a beautiful “*pamor*” pattern that resembled wavy hair. According to folklore, the wavy hair pattern of *keris* resembled the hair of the woman who was sacrificed before the *keris*-making ceremony. According to Gardner (1936), the blades forged using the binding techniques are called “*Keris Berpamor*”, which comprises various types of iron, nickel, and meteoric stones – the latter is used to increase the magic properties of *keris* and embody the “*pamor*” patterns for good fortune as shown in Figure 1.

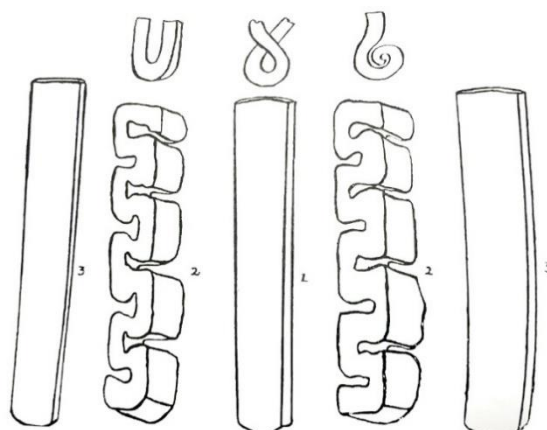
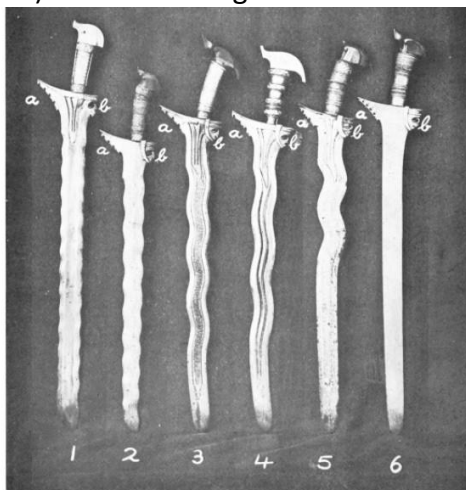


Figure 1: Notes on the *keris* folding techniques and iron arrangement by Gardner (1936) Source : Gardner, G.B. (1936). *Keris and Other Malay Weapons*. Silverfish Books Sdn. Bhd.



Similarly, a study by Banks (1940) titled *The Kĕris Sulok or Sundang* specifically explained the privileges and differences of *Keris Sundang* with other types of *keris*. According to Banks, *Keris Sulok* or *Sundang* is similar to a normal *keris* but with a longer and wider blade like a sword. Both sides of the blade are sharp and have the same “luk” design as other *keris*. According to Banks, *Keris Sundang* is highly suitable to use in warfare because the blade can cause severe damage through stabbing and is also efficient for swinging and backhand attacks. There are several types of *Keris Sulok* or *Sundang* used by the Borneo Malay community, including *Andus* (20 luk and above), *Rantai* (7 to 20 luk), *Jenoya* (7 luk), *Apit Liang* (5 luk), *Belinkong* (3 luk), and *Rajah Laut* (straight blade) as shown in Figure 2.

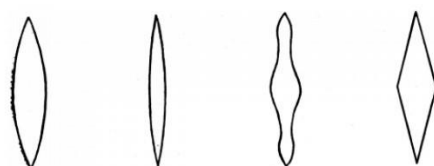


Banks: Keris Sulok or Sundang.

Figure 2 : “Keris Sulok” atau “Keris Sundang” notes by Banks (1940)

Source : Banks, E. (1940). *The Kĕris Sulok or Sundang*. *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 18(2 (137): 105–107.

Woolley (1947) studied the background of *keris* by exploring its origin through a research titled *The Malay Keris: Its Origin and Development*. The author believes that a *keris* can be defined by examining the blade features because the hilt and sheath act as a complement to a *keris*. According to Woolley, the *keris* blade comprises several cross-sectional forms including flat-shaped cutting, elliptical, diamond, rib down the middle, and shallow groove (as shown in Figure 3). The type of the “*pamor*” pattern, shape, and its origin will be examined once the basic form of the *keris* has been identified. Woolley also stated that there are various types of *keris* in the Malay world, which include “*Keris Bali*”, “*Keris Madura*”, “*Keris Jawa*”, “*Keris Semenanjung*”, “*Keris Bugis*”, “*Keris Sumatra*”, “*Keris Patani*”, and “*Keris Sulok*” or “*Sundang*” (shown in Figure 4). Each of these *keris* differs across the characteristics of its blade and sheath, which represent the *keris* respective origin. Additionally, Woolley stated that *keris* acts as a representative of its owner upon delivering a wish or news, such as carrying orders from the sultan.



Middle Section of Kĕris Blades.

Figure 3 : Notes on the example of *keris* blade cross sections by (Woolley, 1947).  
Source : Wooley (1947) *The Malay Kĕris: Its Origin and Development*. *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Asiatic Society, 20(2, 142): 60–103.

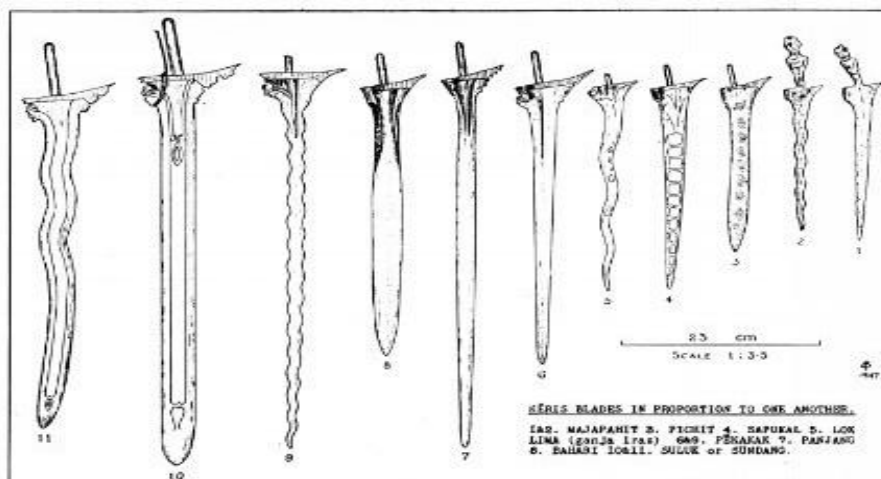


Figure 4: Notes on the types of *keris* blade's by Woolley (1947)  
 Source: Wooley (1947) *The Malay Këris: Its Origin and Development. Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, Asiatic Society, 20(2, 142): 60–103.*

Meanwhile, a study titled *Keris Types and Terms* by Hodgson (1956) reported various types of *keris* design that exist in the Malay world. The study also listed numerous names of *keris* that can be found in both the Malay and Java culture and communities. According to Hodgson, a *keris* can be identified through the features of the blade design with detailed parts of the blade distinguishing the types of *keris*, such as “*Aring*”, “*Belalai Gajah*”, “*Dagu*”, “*Ganjar*”, “*Janggut*”, “*Lambai Gajah*”, “*Lurah*”, “*Pamor*”, and “*Tuntong*”.

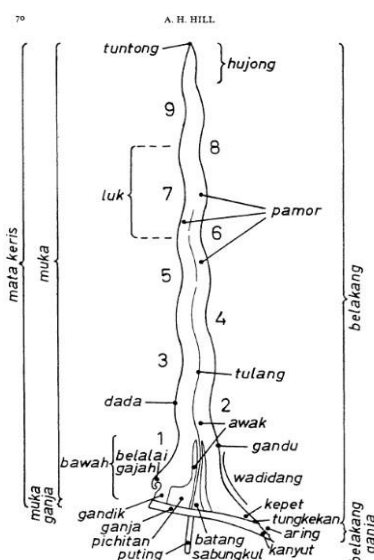


Fig. 7. A Javanese *keris* showing the nine waves, the names of parts of the blade and some of the decorative features, mainly in Malay.

Figure 5: Notes on the parts of the *keris* blade by (Hodgson, 1956)

Source : Hodgson (1956) *Keris Types and Terms. Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, 29(4, 176), 68–90.*

i) *Studies on the Beliefs in Keris*

*Keris* is a mysterious and respected weapon among the Malay community. Its privileges and uniqueness have attracted scholars' interest from within and outside Malaysia. Over the time,

stories and folklore about the mystical and spiritual characteristics of *keris* are often heard and become a topic in today's community (Abdul Muati, 2015). Similarly, studies and notes from colonial scholars argue that *keris* has an extraordinary mystical element and power compared to other Malay weapons.

In a study titled *Malay Magic*, Skeat (1900) stated that there are numerous beliefs and mystical matters in the life of the Malay community that are sacred and related to extraordinary powers. Some people believe that *keris* possess a spirit that can protect and keep the owners safe. This is supported by Gardner (1933) through his study *Notes on Two Uncommon Varieties of the Malay Keris* which stated that the Malay community believes that every *keris* has a spirit, even though the origin of the spirit remains unidentified. He further reported a unique and rare-shaped dagger known as "*Keris Picit*", which is made by a witch doctor by pinching hot iron with his fingers to prove his power. Additionally, the identity of the maker usually could not be identified and was often rumoured to have died when sought. This prompted Gardner to believe that the creation of "*Keris Picit*" is based on a purpose rather than intentionally designed.

Furthermore, Gardner (1933) said that the Malay community would hold a ceremony during the *keris*-making process to invite spirits into the weapon. Some believe that certain *keris* carry the spirits of the men who were killed by the weapon. Gardner also stated that some *keris* would jump out of the sheath on its own to warn the owners about potential danger. There are stories about *keris* that could kill its enemies at night without anyone knowing as well as stories of *keris* that vibrates in its sheath to convey certain messages to the owner, such as potential danger or news on the death of family members. Gardner further reported several folklores on certain *keris* that used a bigfoot hilt, which enabled it to stab the enemies accurately despite being thrown randomly.

Meanwhile, a study by Williams (1937) titled *Suggested Origin of the Malay Keris and of the Superstitions Attaching to It* discusses the origin and beliefs associated with the Malay *keris*. Williams argues that *keris* containing extraordinary spirit and strength will give an advantage to its owners and can hinder the enemies from approaching or hurting them. The author further reported that *keris* is a type of weapon that can protect its owners from attacks and ambushes by vibrating in its sheath to warn about potential threats and danger.

Furthermore, Williams (1937) stated that the belief in the magical power of *keris* was significant in the lives of the Malay community in the past; however, it later diminished following the introduction of Islam. During the advent of Islam into the Malay world, the Hindu community would use *keris* as a tool for cultivating hatred by claiming that they had the blessing from the Lord. However, Williams said that the negative bad belief was later abolished and *keris* remained as a respected weapon that gave its owners an invulnerability. Williams further explained that *keris* was initially created to describe the Hindu Gods but the practice was abolished following the acceptance of Islam by the Malay community. Several efforts were made by the Malay community to eliminate Hindu-related practices while maintaining the original characteristics of *keris*. For instance, the forms of the *keris* hilt were not completely changed but rather it was replaced by simpler shapes and the images were defaced to make it unrecognisable.



In a study titled *Keris Measurements*, Woolley (1947) found that the Malay community had a technique to determine the compatibility of *keris* with its owner using a *keris* measuring method. For this purpose, several reading formulas could be used to identify the fate and suitability of a *keris* with the owner. Woolley stated that one of the techniques was using a leaf or grass that would be measured according to the length of the *keris* blade before it was cut and arranged according to the size of the blade. The luck of the *keris* would be determined at the end of the measurement based on 3 types of ending, namely "Jarum Sepucuk", intersect, and two longitudinal strips known as "Gagak Lapar" (as shown in Figure 6). It was believed that *keris* measurement which ended with "Jarum Sepucuk" would bring luck. Whereas, the intersect was a bad sign and "Gagak Lapar" resembled that the *keris* is good for battle.

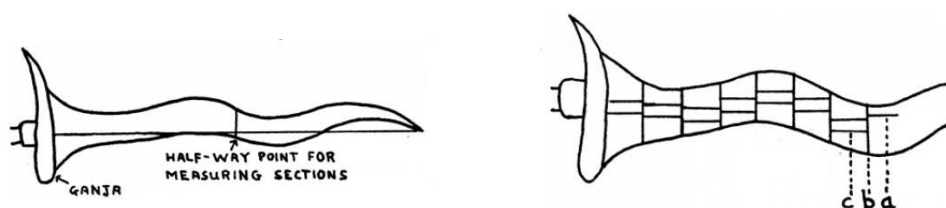


Figure 6 : Notes on *Keris* measuring technique by (Woolley, 1947)  
Source : Wooley (1947) the Malay Këris: Its Origin and Development. *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Asiatic Society, 20(2, 142): 60–103.

In another study titled *The Malay Këris: Its Origin and Development*, Woolley (1947) reported that *keris* is a weapon that is believed to have a magical element. This is because many *keris* were forged using meteor stones that contained incredible elements and were further strengthened by the figure of God on its hilts. However, Woolley explained that the advent of Islam reduced the mystical beliefs within the Malay society, however many basic features of *keris* were maintained as long as they were not conflicting with any religious teachings and beliefs. Woolley also stated that a good *keris* would consist of various types of iron. For instance, the *keris* of Hang Tuah was believed to have been forged using balance of steel which taken from the bolt of Ka'aba in Mecca. This gave the *keris* a special power to kill his enemies by stabbing their footprints. Woolley further reported several *keris* that could kill its enemies by pointing the blade at them remotely; however, the magical element would not be effective if the *keris* were used by others apart from the owners. Some *keris* were believed to be poisonous but no clear evidence existed to certify its authenticity.

### Findings and Discussion

Based on several studies from colonial scholars, it can be argued that the prefix study of *keris* is inclined toward on two main themes, namely (1) the history and background of *keris* and (2) the beliefs associated with *keris*. The theme for background and origin of the Malay *keris* stands as a fundamental component to explore about *keris* with further details. The findings of these studies show that since the colonial era, the historical background and origin of *keris* preceded the investigation of other components and aspects of the weapon. It subsequently serves as an eye-opener for many scholars and acts as the catalyst for future *keris* studies.

Furthermore, past studies on the history and background origin of *keris* suggest that the dagger is not only used as a weapon but also serves as an important object in the daily life of the Malay community, which was evidenced by the usage of *keris* itself. Additionally, *keris*

stands as a self-esteem component and a symbol of courage to the owners. The manufacturing of *keris* is greatly influenced by various types of dagger designs – the variety of shapes and features of *keris* subsequently highlight its characteristics, uniqueness, and interpretation. The “*pamor*” pattern and specific parts of the blade also give *keris* its own class that differentiates it from other types of weapons. Moreover, the association between *keris* with magical and mystical elements further increases the level of respect and honour. This indicates the existence of a relationship between the physical and non-physical properties of *keris* that can be further explored especially in relation to the beliefs in *keris*.

Besides, it can be concluded that many colonial scholars were also interested with the non-physical properties of *keris*, which are related to the spirit and magical power of Malay *keris*. Most of the colonial scholars described *keris* as having an unusual and mystical element. They further reported that the Malay community commonly associated the beliefs in spirit and magic into their everyday life, including *keris*. Some colonial scholars reported about *keris* with a spirit or ghost that could kill the enemies remotely. *Keris* could also act as a guardian to the owners by giving signals or warning about potential threats and danger. Besides that, the colonial scholars believed that the history of *keris* was closely related to the beliefs of the Hindu Gods but it later changed following the acceptance of Islam by the Malay community.

This prompted the Malay community to believe that *keris* has its own immunity than other types of Malay weapons. From the colonial scholars’ perspectives, there were various beliefs associated with *keris* in the Malay culture that contained magical and mystical elements – these beliefs and elements are what make *keris* a special weapon of the Malay community. Thus, this study shows that most of the colonial perspectives have influenced the views on *keris* particularly among today’s generation.

### Conclusion

Analysis of studies from colonial scholars on Malay *keris* has successfully identified several themes including history and background as well as the beliefs in *keris*. Both themes stand as a focus of the colonial era based on the privileges of *keris*, especially in terms of its origin and beliefs. The findings showed that *keris* plays an important role in the life of the Malay community since the beginning of time as evidenced by its usage and the uniqueness of its forging techniques. *Keris* is also perceived as a special weapon that differs from other types of Malay weapons, particularly as it is always neatly inserted and serves as a priority in the owners’ personal affairs. Additionally, colonial scholars also highlighted stories and folklore about the myths and mystical elements of *keris* as the weapon was believed to have a spirit that could defend the owners. *Keris* was also believed to have extraordinary power and was often associated with the purity of the gods during the pre-Islamic era.

The manufacturing process, myths, and mysterious elements are part of the reasons that make *keris* a well-respected weapon in the Malay society. Those who believe on the magical element of *keris* consider the dagger to bring good luck or even catastrophe. The mystical stories and folklores of *keris* remain in existence due to the lack of exposure and in-depth knowledge. In conclusion, the study of *keris* is never limited to its physical properties but can also be interpreted through the non-physical properties of the dagger. The mystical perception associated with *keris* has influenced the Malay community’s perspective, particularly among today’s generation. Thus, more *keris* studies are needed to widen the

scope of the existing research and provide a clearer explanation about *keris* and its heritage to the public, particularly regarding its specialities and privileges in the Malay community.

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