

Defence strategies of the Malays of Sri Lanka: the use of the legendary *Keris*

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Malays are the dominant ethnic group scattered across Southeast Asia; and are found in Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, Pattani (Southern Thailand), the Indonesian Archipelago, Mindanao (Southern Philippines), Cham areas of Cambodia and Laos. People of Malay descent can also be found in Madagascar, South Africa (Cape Malays), Andaman Islands and Sri Lanka.

There are a number of weapons used in the Malay region, among them the *Keris* remains the most favoured in the whole region. As a traditional Malay weapon, the *Keris* is the embodiment of Malay Culture and synonymous with the way of life of the Malay Diaspora. It is a work of art in itself, especially when one considers the effort put into the forging and shaping of the blade, the patterns (damascene) on the blade, the carving of the hilts and the worked sheaths. The *Keris* is ideally suited to the temperamental nature of the inhabitants of that region and is carried by men of all ranks and in some instances women as well.

This weapon has evolved throughout the ages and there are several variations in its hilt, blade and scabbard, depending on its region of origin. The *Keris* is not just a weapon, there are many mystical and magical qualities associated with it. As an ethnic group separated from the larger Malay world it is noteworthy that the *Keris* still remains of cultural significance to the Malays of Sri Lanka. Historical sources indicate that the Malays of Sri Lanka were famous for their extensive use of the *Keris* especially during close range combat (Mahavamsa II/Culavamsa, Pieris 1995, Percival 1990).

The National Museum in Colombo possesses a fine collection of *Kerises* and some Sri Lankan Malay families still possess their ancestral *Keris*. Parker's (1992) excavations in Tissamaharama revealed that the *Keris* was introduced to the island during very early times. As each area of the Malay region has its own unique *Keris* style, we may tentatively use the *Keris* as a means to identify the place of origin of the Malays of Sri Lanka.

After the Malay Peninsula and the Indonesian Archipelago were brought under Colonial rule the *Keris* gradually ceased to be used as a fighting weapon. In present day Indonesia and Malaysia the *Keris* has been relegated to a status symbol and used for ceremonial purposes such as Royal ceremonies and wedding ceremonies. In countries like Malaysia it is used as a symbol of racial supremacy of the Malays who are considered "*bhumi putras*" or sons of the land. Unfortunately however the fine art of *Keris* making is facing a slow death as industrialization and modernization rapidly sweeps across the region and younger Malays prefer the glamour and allurements city jobs have to offer.

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