

THE Malay keris is about loyalty and honour. Most Malaysians are familiar with the picture of first Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman, hand raised in the air, shouting "Merdeka" three times. Fewer know that in February 1956 in Malacca, when announcing the date for independence, the Tunku had raised the unsheathed *keris* to symbolise Malaya's achievement of independence.

Turning the clock back a few centuries, Hang Tuah's legendary *keris*, Taming Sari, was supposed to have been able to "fly in air", striking whomever harboured evil intent against its owner. And it served only one master — Hang Tuah himself.

Torn between his loyalty to the Sultan of Malacca and his love for his childhood friend, it was with the Taming Sari that Hang Tuah killed Hang Jebat. Then, filled with remorse, Hang Tuah returned the "*keris* of invulnerability" to the sultan.

It is believed that this Taming Sari is housed at the Istana Iskandariah, in Bukit Chandan, Kuala Kangsar and is used during special ceremonies.

It was with these values in mind that Umno's founding fathers chose two crossed *keris* as the symbol of Malay strength for their party flag in 1946. The context of the *keris* then was the fight for independence, spearheaded by Malay youth movements and Saberkas (Sayang Akan Bangsa, ERTinya Korban Apa Segala), which itself was later absorbed into Umno.

That fire for independence may no longer be relevant but, as the recent Umno general assembly demonstrated in its call to Malay unity, strength and sense of purpose, the fervour has not really waned.

When Umno Youth chief Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Hussein had the Keris Panca Warisan ceremoniously carried into last year's Youth convention, pledging to uphold the Malay struggle, many non-Malays became perturbed over what they perceived to be a call to arms.

This year he repeated the symbol-

Blade of power and tradition

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within the vicinity of their stilt houses in Terengganu and Kelantan.

The *keris* is made by forging various types and grades of metal. — iron, nickel and steel are the standard — into a blade of between 30 and 38cm in length. A *keris* may be straight-bladed or wavy; the latter must have an uneven number of *luk* (curves), ranging from at least five to 47.

The hilt of the *keris* may be made of carved wood, horn or ivory, and embellished with a band of silver or gold. The stylised hilts are invariably bent to give a better "pistol-like" grip.

Only royalty may own *keris* hilts made entirely of silver or gold. According to the late Tan Sri Mubin Sheppard in his *Living Crafts of*

Malaysia, the short *keris* worn by the Yang di-Pertuan Agong on ceremonial occasions has an ivory King Fisher Head hilt.

The *keris* is a stabbing weapon. While it could be used to attack, it was more often a weapon of defence due to its lightness of weight and relatively short blade.

Silat exponents are masters of the art, as romanticised in the black and white movies of the late Tan Sri P. Ramlee.

Today, the *keris* is adopted as a part of proper Malay regalia. In formal settings, a man without a *keris* is deemed to be half-naked.

Malay bridegrooms traditionally carry a *keris*, sheathed, securely tied and usually borrowed, on the left of their *samping* when they turn up at

the bride's house.

It is there to complete the *baju Melayu*, without which the attire would smack of impropriety.

Along the same vein, some ranking hereditary datuks are also specifically required to wear the *baju Melayu lengkap*, complete with the *keris*, at the palace investiture ceremony.

Those who turn up to receive their awards, however, are generally requested not to do so. In some instances, to do so would be deemed as being *derhaka pada raja* (treachery to the ruler).

In the royal palace of Negri Sembilan who are descended from Pagar Ruyong, a Yang di-Pertuan Besar who takes on a commoner bride, or marries for a second, third

By the nature of their intended use, *keris* have to be pre-ordered. To tide them over, *keris* makers have resorted to producing smaller versions, with four-inch blades and obviously without spiritual powers, for the tourist market.

As a weapon, the *keris* has long given way to that other "Western" import — the pistol. Crime stories are full of people being shot, rather than "*kerised*" to death.

As a symbol of their position in the land bearing their name — "Tanah Melayu" — Malays can become emotional about the *keris*. But few today own a genuine one. Even fewer know how to use it.

For collectors, its value is almost exclusively ornamental, a piece of nostalgic memorabilia.

or fourth time, might send his *keris* on his behalf. Technically, the bride will then be married to his *keris*, but because it represents the ruler's stature and power — in fact, represents the ruler himself — it is considered culturally acceptable, especially by traditional society.

Many superstitions abound regarding the *keris*, especially those made over many years and designed as being "personal to holder".

The *Empu* would usually go into a spiritual state of prayer, fasting and meditation before he embarks on making a new *keris*. Sometimes he would dream of its design.

A *keris* must befit its owner's status. A soldier cannot carry the *keris* of a general — it would be "too heavy" for him. He might become feverish, or some calamity might befall him.

In Malay homes, *keris* are treated with respect, even veneration. Apart from the obvious danger of two sharpened edges and a pointed tip, it is supposed to embody a spirit, which could rattle in its sheath, warning its master of danger.

Folklore has it that once unsheathed, some "spirits of the *keris*" even crave blood.

And thus, goes the same legend, one should not unsheath the *keris* if one does not intend to use it.

Even today, *keris* may not simply be given away. When sold, the transaction is done for a *mas kahwin* or "bride price". Keeping the tradition alive, former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamed when presented with one, bought it for a token silver coin.

through a simple process of decorating with vegetable dyes, while using wax to areas of specific colours in a design. The three artist sons have followed in his specialising in batik as well as various other art media. The three sons now help to supervise the s Yehong Art Gallery, which was established as an art supplies and tailoring shop on Hill Road in 1953. It has since moved to its location in Batu Ferringhi and sells art done by Chuah and his sons as well as sons. In whose life stories are now mostly told in his sons due to his hearing problem, these words to say about his life-long love with batik: "Chinese brush painting is tied with China while watercolour and things are associated with the west. I can say that batik is the art medium that represents Malaysia."