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The Zoomorphic Forms in Traditional Keris Hilts

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ABSTRACT *In traditional keris hilts, there are several types of images representing the handle. The zoomorphic forms are one of them, which used several animals as the keris hilts. This article looks into three major animals, namely, horse, elephant and insect. It is discovered that these three types of animals have gone through three major evolutions. The article will discuss each type, particularly on the form, the origin, the materials used and the surface treatment decorating the form.*

Keywords: Keris, zoomorphic forms, traditional hilts, hybrid, classification

Introduction

In traditional keris hilts, there are several forms which are used as the handle. They ranged from Human/demon form, the zoomorphic forms, the bird form and Simplified handles which do not represent any of the above. There are other types, which are combinations of the above group. These are termed as the hybrid types. The first hybrid type represents the image of the human and the bird form. The second hybrid type is the combination of the human/demon form, the zoomorphic form and the bird form (Fawazul 2004). In this article the emphasis will be on the animal form.

From the documented examples, there are varieties of animal forms used as keris hilt but only three are defined because they are the most common. They are the horses, elephants and crickets. Upon closer investigation, it is discovered that these animals depicted different stages of evolution. Each of these can be further classified into smaller groups based on the level of their transformation. Each animal form has its

own evolution as a hilt. The other animals found are crocodile, squirrel and tiger but they are not considered in the classification because they are too small in numbers.

The evolution is from complete animal form to those, which are still recognizable, and the third transformation is totally stylized. If no comparison is made with the earlier example of the horse form, it is not possible to recognize what is the origin of the actual form.

The horse, which is popular in Bali, Madura, Lombok and Sumbawa went through several evolutions. There are different reasons why these animals are selected to be designed as hilt. They are chosen based on domestic function, which includes myth and religion. There are examples discovered having a hybrid form of a horse and an insect. This type will be categorised under its own group.

The elephant form, which is mainly found in Java, is based on evolution of the Hindu God Ganesha where Hindu culture was strongest in the past, but it spread to Bali and Madura. These forms have gone through their own transformation. Several major changes have taken place from the original form. For this study, three major evolutions are taken into consideration. This is based on changes of the form from readable image of an elephant to semi abstract and to totally abstract form. These followed the drawings suggested earlier reference by Hoop (1949). The elephant forms can be traced to have gone through three major transformations. So the same stages are used to derive the other two-zoomorphic forms i.e., the horse and the cricket. They will be further defined under each subsequent group.

The insect forms are presented according to their evolution. There are mainly three defined forms and each form will be further discussed under their type. Each group will be represented with a diagram to show the flow of the evolution. To represent each image of subsequent group the drawings are derived from studying the whole example. Common features derived from the entire example suggest the image represented by the drawing. This drawing is used to represent typical image of each group. This drawing is an image representing common features of each group. In other words the character of each example is drawn into one representative drawing.

This typical image will be used in diagrams that show the whole form and its relationship with the rest of the group. Where arguments on surface pattern are discussed, the example is quoted according to their original image and individual.

Further explanations on each form are based on the flow of **Figure 1** for the horse type, **Figure 7** for elephant, and **Figure 11** for the insect. The Figures will follow subsequently under each heading.

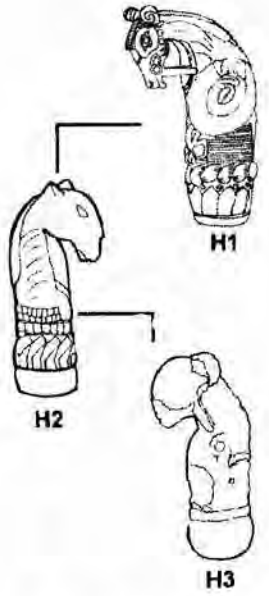

Figure 1: The horse form (Type H)

The horse is the first zoomorphic form defined. Examples are documented from different sources such as the museums in Malaysia, Kerner (1996), Duuren (1998), and Tammens (1994). The examples, which are in wood and ivory, have different origins. They are from Bali, Madura, Sumbawa and the island of Lombok. There are examples in Malaysia, which are not local, gathered from the above sources. The examples were collected by the previous National Museum director Dato' Shahrum Yub in his tenure back in 1962 till 1991. The horses are divided into three groups

based on the evolution of their forms. The first form is named Type H1, which have clear image of a horse (H –initial of horse). The second form consists of 17 examples and is known as Type H2. This group shows a change in style but still retains its images. The next evolution is known as Type H3. In this group images of the horses have totally stylized and its character can only be determined through comparisons with previous form. It is more complicated when images of horses are found as the head but the torso and the feet are of something else. This is how the hybrid of a horse and an insect are derived.

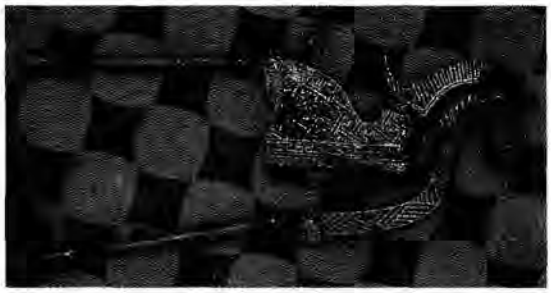

Figure 2: The *kacep* (Malay World Edged Weapons)

Other than its domestic use in Madura, the horse has its own myth and legend. The origin of using horses as the hilt can be traced from the mythological *Kuda Sembrani* (magic flying horse) or *Kuda penoleh* (horse looking back) (Duuren 1996, 71). This horse is known to be able to swim through water and straight into the air. Because of this character it is used as a hilt form. The images also appear as *kacep* (scissors) for cutting areca nuts in Bali (Figure 2).

Similarly one can find an actual horse form and in its symbolic form on hilts. There are 3 stages, which suggest how the evolution could have taken place. This is illustrated in Figure 1 of the horse form. The same approach is used in the diagrams for elephant and insect form.

Figure 3: Type H1 H1.01 H1.02 H1.03 H1.04

Type H1 is an example of horse form without the legs. The form shows in detail the head and parts of its torso, which is fully carved. Figure 3 shows examples that have been documented. The head clearly indicates the horse form while the torso is decorated with flowery motifs. The presence of a rein connecting the head and the torso suggest this is a tame horse. The presence of a shoulder garment later became an important element to distinguish the horse form. Decorative patterns on the bulbous form are unusual compared to other hilt types, which remain undecorated. Since the examples are mostly from Madura, it is common to see pieces heavily carved because their craftsmen are known for that. The repeated floral motifs surround the bulbous form with another repeated petal circulating the form above it. Example H1.04 (Figure 3) is not a handle of a keris but another short weapon with one-sided blade known as *Bangkung*. This is to show not many of this type are found in the first group, which is used as keris hilts. Images of a full horse are found on the cutters for areca nut. Except for example H1.02 that is ivory, the rest are made up of wood. Examples H1.01 and H1.03 (Figure 3) are part of the collection of National Museum Kuala Lumpur. These are the examples mentioned earlier which did not originate from the Malay Peninsula but brought in from the Indonesian islands.

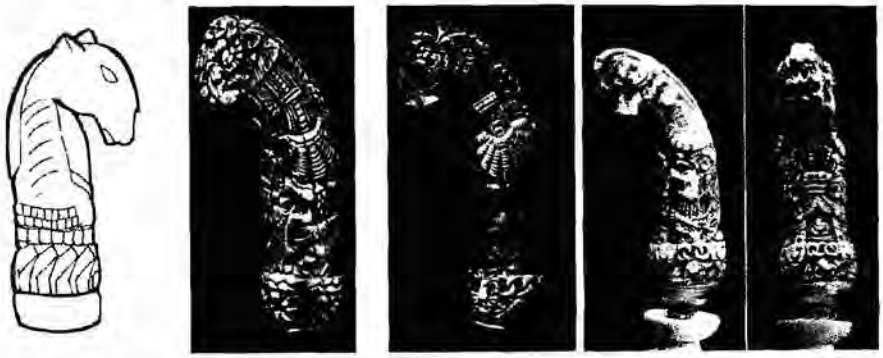

Figure 4: Type H2 H2. 01 H2.02 H2.03

Type H2 (Figure 4) is a further stylization of type H1. Here, the characteristic of a horse can be distinguished but is more decorative. The head, which is still recognized as a horse traced the transformation from type H1. In example H2.03 (Figure 4) from Tammens (1994), the eyes of a horse are still visible. The surface is decorated with several motifs such as a wolf, a horse, and a crown. The horse motif here could be the legendary *kuda penoleh*. The shoulder garment seems to appear on all other examples of this type. The surface treatment is heavily decorated with carvings hence only the horse form remains visible. Most of the bulbous form in this type is also decorated. The carvings are intertwined with flower motifs and elements described above.

The sizes of the hilts vary from 8.5 to 10 cm. This type is mainly made of ivory, wood and bone. Most of the examples for this group originated from Madura though there are examples found in Trengganu State Museum and the National Museum of Kuala Lumpur.

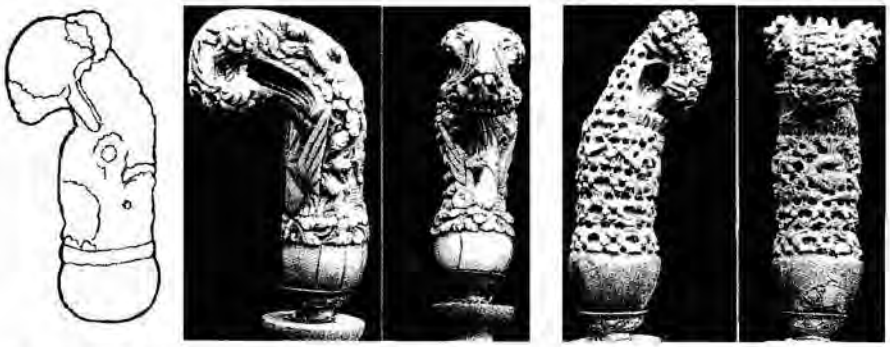

Figure 5: Type H3 H3.1 H3.2

The third horse form defined is termed Type H3. This form is highly stylized and decorated compared to the other two. The surface treatments, carrying the same motifs as the epaulette, the *kuda penoleh*, are some of the elements that help differentiate the two. One has to be careful in selecting this form as evolution of the horse instead of the insect. There is close similarity between type H3 and the insect type I.3. In the horse form, the front elevation looks like a horse but from the side it looks like an insect. In deciding this tricky situation, the front view is used to determine whether it looks more like a horse or not. The front elevation is broader for the horse but not for the insect. From the side elevation, the one categorized under the insect form is more rounded.

In the case of example H3.1 (Figure 5), it was decided that it belongs to the horse form based on the front rather than the elevation, which can be grouped under an insect. The presence of *kuda penoleh* as the surface pattern further supports the argument. The examples documented mostly from Tammens (1994) are made from ivory, wood and bone. The sources from the examples given indicated that they are from Madura. Example I.3.14 (Figure 6) is categorized under the insect form based on side elevation, which have a rounded curve that symbolizes the head of an insect. Its front elevation is not as broad to determine it as a head form.

Figure 6: I.3.14

The Elephant

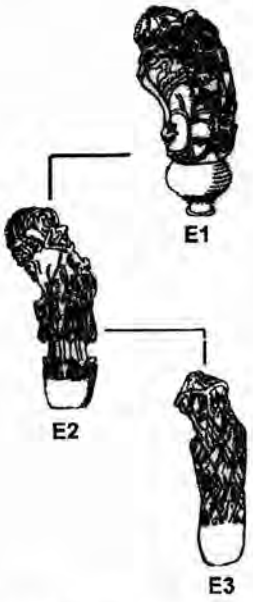

Figure 7: The elephant form

The second group of the zoomorphic form is categorized as the elephant, which was used for domestic work in South East Asia. The use of elephant not only to show strength, but symbolize power because it also denotes a Hindu God *Ganesha* especially in Bali. The design of an elephant was not only found on keris hilts but also on blades. The examples documented were categorized according to changes of the

elephant from a full identity to a stylized form. In identifying the evolution stages, the drawing suggestion by Hoop (1949) is used to determine each group. His illustration is not based on classification but arrangement of the drawings suggesting the evolution of this form. Hoop used four different stages of evolution. Stage one and two has close resemblance to show a change. There are several images of these elephants to illustrate the transformation but in Figure 7 only three stages are presented. Thus the three types, E1, E2 and E3, will identify the group. This type is normally found in the region of Java, Bali, Sumatra and Peninsula Malaysia.

In studying and comparing the examples, identifying type E3 was actually difficult because the simplified form could easily be mistaken as another hilt. E3 could be categorized under a variation of the horseshoe form. But a closer observation on the surface treatment would clearly indicate a trunk of an elephant. This helped support the images of the transformation suggested by Hoop (1949). The suggestion by him is also supported by strong photographic evidence.

In Malaysia and other parts of the archipelago, this handle is known as *Keris Bugis*. The hilt was associated with the Bugis who brought along the keris with that hilt. Bugis, at one time an Islamic kingdom, adopted this form. It is not surprising to see how the original elephant form evolved into this type. This could be another argument to show how Islamic influence has contributed to the evolution of the hilt form.

Keris Bugis were found in Malaysia only in the 19th century. The example taken from National Museum of Kuala Lumpur could have originated from the Indonesian islands. During Dato' Shahrom Yubs' tenure as director of the National Museum he had the opportunity to build the collection of keris and keris hilts. The museum collections were built through purchasing hilts and keris around the archipelago. That explains why the museum has many varieties in the collection that are not made locally. Thus most of the hilts and keris in the museum are not of local origin. This reasoning also helped in establishing keris *hulu tajung* (Fawazul 2004) as a local form, which are already in the Peninsula.

The images of elephant are not only found on the hilt but also on the blades as part of the decoration. On the blade there is a part called 'belalai gajah' which is the elephant trunk. This can be found on the lower part of the convex side of the blade. Often one will find a figure, which suggests the trunk and mouth of an elephant. This was probably intended to invest the keris with the strength of an elephant in some magic way (Wagner 1959).

Figure 8:

Type E1 drE1.02 E1.03 E1.04 E1.05

The first type in this category is where one can find a complete figure of an elephant used as a hilt. Though they are mostly based on the Hindu God *Ganesha*, they are examples, which are made following the elephant form. The hilts types are from Trengganu State Museum (E1.04) and type E1.03 (Figure 8) from the collection of the late Tengku Ibrahim. Example drE1.02 (Hoop 1949) shows the elephant in a sitting position. This is probably an image of *Ganesha* as the head is wearing a crown and part of the body is a human figure. The trunk clearly seen flowing down its body. The crown and the trunk are strong evidence, which support the idea of the evolution. Type E3 is categorised as such because of the images that could easily be observed. Example E3.01 (Figure 11) is the best example to support the idea of the evolution. Unfortunately there was no estimated date given to this example.

Example E1.03 was done in the late 19th century by Tengku Ibrahim, which is one of his collections. Made of ivory, it has no connection to religion as *Ganesha*. Other examples found in Trengganu State museum are made of metal and buffalo horn

(Duuren 1996). The sizes of the hilts range from 8 cm to 11.5-cm. An example E1.05 (Figure 8) from Tammens 1994 is convincingly *Ganesha* in origin.

Figure 9:

Type E2 E2.01 E2.02 E2.03 E2.04

Type E2 is a stylisation of the elephant form. Example from Hoop (1949) shows the elephant with a crown bowing down. The same goes with example from Kerner 1996 E2.01 (Figure 9). This position traces the next evolution of type E3. Here, the head and the trunk distinguish the form. Example E2.01 is made of wood and have the character of E2, but the head is not as rounded as example E2.02 (Figure 9). This could due to the stylised crown, which is slowly disappearing. The head of example E2.02 is rounded but the decorations around the head still recall the presence of a crown. There are other examples, which have elephant trunk folding upwards. This is shown on example from Tammens (1994) E2.03 and example E2.04 from Nik Rashidin (Figure 9). Example E2.04 which is more of a *Makara* form is not a keris hilt. It is the hilt of a *golok*, a short dagger for cutting with one-side blade. Thus the form of elephant is also used on other short weapons.

The form in three examples from Tammens (1994), type E2.06, E2.07 and E2.08 (Figure 10) are almost impossible to identify. However, certain elements such as the trunk and the crown mentioned earlier strongly suggested the characteristic of this group.

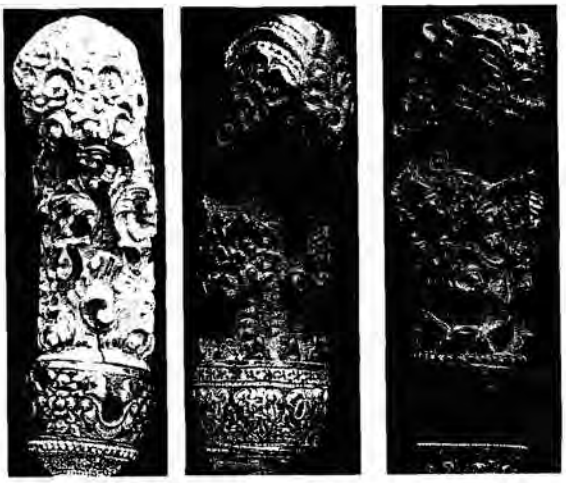

Figure 10: E2.06 E2.07 E2.08

Figure 11:Type E.3 E3.01 E3.02 E3.03

The current form, type E3.01 (Figure 11) found in Malaysia in the collection of the National Museum is far fetch from the original form. The evolution of type E1 to E3 is clearly detected in example E3.01.This example illustrates the presence of an elephant trunk in a simplified form. The surface decorations on the form have camouflaged the whole form of the elephant. The presence of the trunk helps to distinguish an elephant form. The surface pattern decorating the form is geometrical but the flow of the trunk is clearly observable. This indicated the creativity of the craftsmen during Islamic era (14 – 15 century) for within this example they are able to

show images of an elephant without showing the whole form. However, that example could not have come from that period as it is in wood. Credit should be given to the creativity of the craftsman who fashioned this hilt. By not denying the rules imposed on Islamic art, which prohibited the use of figurative form the craftsman managed to depict the characteristics, which shows the elephant origin. There are other similar examples discovered, but because of the image of the trunk, it is categorised as the best example. By this discovery it is safe to say that the simple E3 form have gone a long way from its origin into the current form. Most of the examples documented are from Java and Madura. The example found in Peninsula is one of the examples acquired from Java. This helped in building the museum collection.

The insect

The hilt is known as the famous *Kocet-Kocetan*. It is determined as an insect by the existence of its six legs. Some sources identify it as a stinkbug. The story behind the *Kocet-Kocetan* is as follows:

"The long horn beetle (or bug) Batara Karpa was born out of an egg, which was laid by his mother Dewi Winata, a bird-demon, who was married with the Rishi Kasyapa, a tortoise. Three other animal gods were born out of this marriage: Batara Garuda the sun-eagle, Batara Agniya the marten and Batara Kowara the snake. So the xenomorphical shape of a beetle is a very old motif and probably has a very deep mythological background. The Kocet Kocetan equals Batara Karpa. For this reason, in the Hindu priestly caste, only the Brahman is permitted to use the shape. The keris of the Brahman do have magical powers and are able to create `Holy Water`" (Duuren 1996)

The insect, known as cricket, is established as grasshopper from other regions. The following further explains why cricket is associated instead of grasshopper though the form may have that quality. Figure 12 represents the insect type. In this diagram the evolution of the insect followed the three suggested groups, which are used, on other type. The changes revealed the three stages of the transformation of the insect. These are termed as Type I.1, Type I.2 and Type I.3.

There are 29 examples documented in this type. These examples are found mainly in Java and Madura. Skeat (1984) stated that the imagination of the early man obtruded his fantasies into the province of primitive science. This is associated with the notion of vitality that all objects of the same class have external visible souls generally a miniature of the original form. A cricket is often seen or heard in a Malay house: so in Negeri Sembilan the soul of any house is thought to appear as a cricket. Similarly the Patani fisherman imagines that even a boat has a soul generally invisible, to keep it from disintegration: it is lucky to hear the chirping sound of this soul and luckier still to see it. Based on this superstitious element a cricket is thus used as a form instead of a grasshopper.

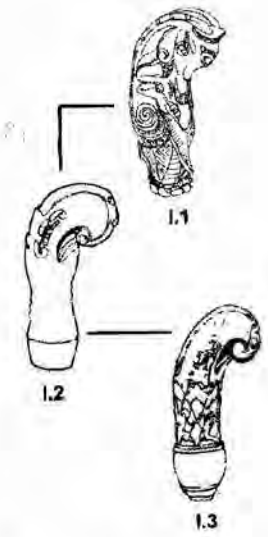

Figure 12: The insect form

The I.1 type

Both examples from National Museum in Kuala Lumpur are in wood, while the example from website (Ethnographic forum-posted on 27 September 2002 http://www.vikingsword.com.forums) is in silver (Figure 13). The example clearly captures the form and details of the insect. In example Ins.1.01-Figure 14 (the name

is based on initial –Ins- from insect), the image of a cricket is identified by the presence of its two long antenna. They are neatly carved beginning with the antenna right down to its wings and thorax. What is not clear is the set of feet, which should have three instead of two, although they are nicely arranged on its thorax. Example I.1.03 (Figure 14) shows three pairs of legs, just like the other examples. The presence of wing is rendered nicely at the back. Unfortunately to date this is the only example found having a complete form. Locally the insect is similar to the form of a grasshopper, which is in the same family as the cricket.

Figure 13: Type I.1 I.1.01 I.1 .02 I.1.03

Categorisation of this type is based on photo evidence of examples type I.1.01 and type I.1.02 (Figure 13) that is made of wood. This image of a cricket helps determine the first evolution of the famous hilt from Java known as the *Kocet-kocetan*. Though the two examples were documented from the National Museum in Kuala Lumpur, but these are known to have originated from Java and Bali. The later example (I.1.03 – Figure 13) in metal found from the website (http://www.vikingsword.com.forums) confirms that the origin of this hilt is Bali. Though it has its own myth in Java and Bali, in Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia, a cricket is believed to be appearing as the spirit of a dead person (Sheppard 1978). Though this is a different interpretation from the above, the insect is believed to deal with spirit.

Figure 14: Type I.2 Ins.1.01 Ins.1.02 Ins.1.03 Ins.1.04

The I.2 type

The next type in the insect category has few examples that can be referred to. Nevertheless they helped built categories of the transformation from clearly identified image to slightly stylised insect. In example Ins.1.01 (Figure 14- made of wood) from Bali the insect is still recognisable as a whole, even though the head is not as detail. The pair of legs helps distinguish this as belonging to this group. Example Ins.1.02 (Figure 14) is easier to identify because the character of an insect is evident. The head and the legs though not well defined are readable to show that it belongs to the type. This example from Bali, which is made of wood, is 12 cm in length (Tammens 1994). The other good example is Ins.1.03 (Figure 14), which has all the characteristics of an insect. Standing at 12 cm, this example shows images of an insect. Though the legs are slightly stylised, the head and the antenna are clearly defined. Example Ins.1.04 (Figure 14 - in wood), which is from Kuala Lumpur, is probably the last image, identifiable as an insect before it is fully stylised and is termed as type I.3. The only character, which helps in the identification, is the head. The torso is filled with flowery motifs. What is normally bulbous form on other hilts is cylindrical here. But earlier examples, mostly bulbous in form and are decorated with repeated rounded shape. The common material used in this type is wood and all of them are from Bali (some examples from the National Museum in Kuala Lumpur museum are not from the Peninsula).

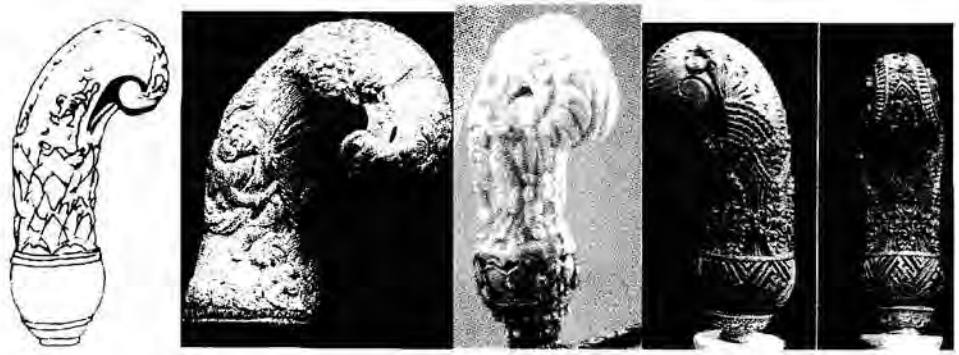

Figure 15:

Type Ins.1.3 Ins.3.09 Ins.3.02 Ins.3.07

The I.3 type

The third type categorised under the insect form is termed as Ins.3. In this form, further stylisation occurs where only the spiral curve at the head is still visible as element of the insect. The carving beneath the head is also an element to distinguish this form. If the example is selected without referring to its previous form this hilt could be mistaken for any other hilt. The main character, which follows the earlier form, is the head and the eye. The head is bent down, and following underneath, is a layer of carved lines signifying the neck of an insect. The legs and the thorax disappeared, but a pattern signifying the torso is readable as the legs on example Ins.3.09 (Figure 15). There is also an interesting example with geometric design covering the surface where the bulbous form is decorated with swastika design. These elements are found on example Ins.3.07 (Figure 15). While there are several hilts carved on wood, the most popular are those carved on ivory. Example Ins.3.02 (Figure 15 - from Duuren 1996) is popularly known as keris Madura. In general this form is associated with the Madurese. In this categorisation, it is distinguished as another stylised form of the insect. But there are still some similarities in the motif used in type H.1 where *kuda penoleh* seems to appear as surface decoration. The motifs can be seen on example Ins.3.13 and Ins.3.16 (Figure 16).


Figure 16: I.3.13 I.3.16

Conclusion

The three major hilts form represented above were some of the hilts identified in the zoomorphic form. There are more hilts, which represent human and demon forms and others. But the verification of the forms was made easier by identifying and establishing a classification for each group. By understanding their evolutions one will be able to identify the transformation of the forms. The explanations on each individual type hopefully will give some insight on understanding the vast varieties of the hilt forms. The material and motif explained is an opening for those who are doing further research on carvings and motifs.

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