



# Outside Influences *on the* Edged Weapons *of* Indonesia

*A brief survey by Charles Saunders*



# Outside Influences on the Edged Weapons of Indonesia

Few areas of the world have a more rich tradition of edged weaponry than the Indonesian archipelago. The arsenal of bladed weapons from the region is both vast and varied. Among these variations is clear evidence of a variety of outside, or foreign, influences. Those influences may be evident in the blade of a weapon or its hilt and mounts. Unfortunately, there is little documentation or absolute evidence of these direct influences, but Indonesia's vast resources made her a very desirable trading destination, and the influence on weapons most likely followed the trail of that trade.

Indonesia's first major cultural contacts and exchanges may have been with India; in fact, the famous Indonesian keris is generally attributed to an 'Indian connection', as well as a variety of religious beliefs. Even the solid metal hilts of the Sumatran Batak piso podang show evidence of early influence from Hindu India. Later, Muslim north India will play an even greater role in the influence on traditional weapons.

Chinese trade was prevalent throughout the archipelago, but the Chinese seem to have had the least influence on Indonesian bladed weapons, or, indeed, on Indonesian culture. Still there are some indications of borrowing Chinese styles or, at the very least, recycling Chinese blades. Some examples of this are illustrated here.

By the 16th century Islam was well established in Indonesia. This gave the archipelago a connection, via trade, to some of the best blade workshops, innovations, and materials in the world. Whether from the Ottoman Empire, Persia, or Muslim north India, the Arab trade routes to the Indies may have provided Indonesia with its greatest cultural influences, including influences on its traditional weaponry. Clearly foreign blades from the Islamic world were valued for being both exotic and of quality and as such generally became status pieces as well as functional weapons.

The colonial experience was the next major influence on Indonesian culture, and the last influence on her traditional weapons. Beginning with the Portuguese in the 16th century, and later, and more importantly, the Dutch imperialism of the following centuries, these colonial influences reveal themselves in both imported blades and copied styles. Yet, in an attempt to combine tradition with the undeniable superiority of colonial forces, it was not uncommon to 'marry' a traditional blade or hilt to a European style blade or hilt. This would become a common practice well into the 20th century.

The vast array of outside influences, and the Indonesian ability to adapt to them, has made the already fascinating variety of Indonesian edged weapons even more varied and interesting.



*Minangkabau  
chieftains.*

Note the one to the left  
with a European hilted  
sword, but likely with a  
native made blade.

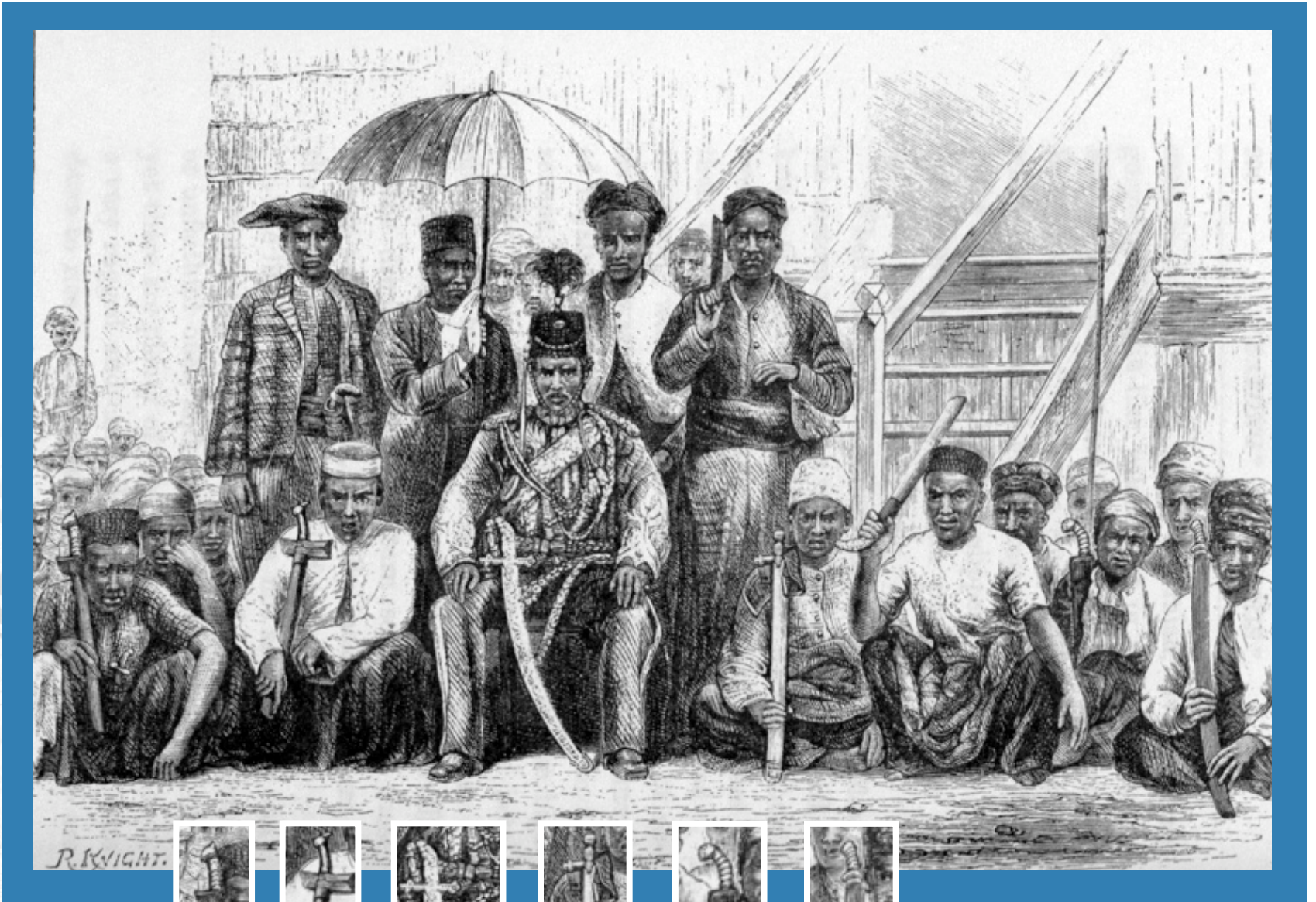


*Nias chieftain*  
with a European hilted  
sword, but likely a native  
made blade.



*Flores dancer.*

Note the sword hilt.



*Sultan of Perak.*

Note the variety of sword types,  
including a European type.



*Two daggers with  
outside influences:*

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To the left is an Indo-Malay dagger with a blade from the tip of a Chinese jian. To the right is an Indonesian jambiya, clearly influenced from Arab types.



*Two Moluccan swords,*  
the bottom one of more typical form. The top one has had a knuckle guard added, almost certainly influenced from European or, possibly, Indian forms.



*Two piso podangs  
from Sumatra.*

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The top example features a Chinese jian blade, or is perhaps a native made blade heavily influenced by the Chinese jian form. The bottom example features what appears to be an Italian made blade.



*An Indonesian (likely  
Javanese) sword*

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featuring an Ottoman Turkish  
yataghan blade.





*Two swords with Persian made wootz blades.*

To the right a blade of high quality wootz from the Assad Allah workshop on a Batak piso podang. To the left is a blade of lesser quality wootz and what are likely forged(faked) cartouches of the Assad Allah workshop on a Sumatran parang.



*A large saber, likely Sumatran, with a far longer and more curved blade than typically found on a native parang. Though this blade is native made, it is clearly influenced in size, curvature, and forging at the forte by European sabers.*



*A massive saber, likely Sumatran,* with very wide European style fullers. Most interestingly, all the fittings of the sword are decorated in silver niello work, a style more typical of the Russian Caucasus.



### *Two Javanese short swords*

whose owners opted for European style hilts, but more traditional pamor, or keris style, blades. These blades were often 'pusaka', or heirloom blades, and were handed down through generations. A most interesting attempt to blend old tradition with new realities of colonialism.