



Fig. 1: Kris from Sunanate of Surakarta, ca. 1768-1820. Photo: Collection Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen. Inv.no. RV-360-8082. <https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.11840/651065>

Zaal, designed by L.J.C. van Es, was built as a special gift from the people of the Dutch East Indies at the wedding of Queen Wilhelmina and Prince Hendrik in 1901. The money used to build the Indische Zaal was collected from community donations in the Dutch East Indies from various circles when, in 1898, Queen Wilhelmina's marriage plans were announced. The fundraiser raised 150,000 guilders.

The construction of the Indische Zaal offers a long and interesting story in itself, and it can be told separately. This article only talks about some cultural objects from Java that are still stored – or have been previously stored – in the Indische Zaal. One of them is the Keris Kyai Hanggrek from the Surakarta palace in Central Java (Kraton Kesunanan Surakarta), which was placed in the Koninklijk Kabinet van Zeldzaamheden (King's Cabinet of Curiosities). A kris is a distinctive ceremonial dagger, often associated with Central Java, but also produced in many other regions in Indonesia and Southeast Asia more widely.

The story of Keris Kyai Hanggrek is alluded to by Rita Wassing-Visser in her book *Royal Gifts from Indonesia: Historical Bonds with the House of Orange-Nassau (1600-1938)*.<sup>1</sup> Wassing-Visser writes that the kris in question had been transferred to the Rijks Ethnographisch Museum (now Museum Volkenkunde, part of the National Museum of World Cultures [NMVW]) in Leiden, never to be found there again. Many krisses can be found in Dutch museums, along with other classical artifacts from colonial countries. There are hundreds throughout the Netherlands, and most of them are in NMVW Museum Volkenkunde, as can be seen in the museum's online catalogue [Fig.1]. Only some of them are on display. These krisses came from various places in Indonesia and arrived at this museum in different periods.

The history of krisses in Dutch royal possession goes back to the 18th century. The first Dutch ruler who had an interest in cultural objects from colonial territories was King and Stadhouder William IV (1711-1751). He was influenced by his consort Princess Anne of England, who was very interested in science. He asked Van Imhoff (1743-1750), Governor General of the VOC in the Dutch East Indies, about the possibility of the VOC helping to collect various species of animals and plants as well as other objects. This request was heeded, and the collected objects became the early occupants of what later became the Koninklijk Kabinet van Zeldzaamheden. In this collection were also three golden krisses, among which was a kris from the Kingdom of Gowa, South Sulawesi.

At a time when relations between France and Holland were deteriorating, William V, the son of William IV, began to feel uncertain regarding the future of his country. Therefore, he began to save some of the heirlooms in his cabinet by sending them to Germany, entrusted to his daughter who married a prince there. He then asked for asylum in England when the French army occupied the Netherlands in 1795. The krisses in his collection were also evacuated to Germany when French troops occupied Holland. After Napoleon was defeated and the United Kingdom of the Netherlands was installed in 1815, the heirlooms returned.

According to Rita Wassing-Visser, by the time of King William I's death in 1843, there were 22 krisses from various regions in Indonesia in his Koninklijk Kabinet van Zeldzaamheden. One of these was Keris Kyai Hanggrek.

### Seeing the kris from an historical perspective

Critical studies of colonial objects with a historical approach can produce useful knowledge, not only about the object itself but about human history in general. Knowledge about the kris usually focuses on the technical aspects of manufacturing, treatment, model, and function of the

weapon, and also on the various mythologies attached to it. In many Javanese manuscripts, “Tosan Aji” is a prominent term to refer to various traditional weapons made out of iron. Likewise, modern studies of krisses have been widely carried out. These studies generally discuss the “dhapur” (design) and its philosophical values. However, there is still little study of krisses from a comprehensive socio-historical perspective.

In Javanese material culture, the kris is considered an animated object that has certain philosophical and cultural values. In this case, a unique symbolic interaction occurs between humans and the objects they create. Krisses are given (usually masculine) human names, decorated, cared for, and not infrequently placed in high/sacred positions as heirlooms. Thus the history of the kris is the history of the symbolic interaction between humans and the kris itself.

Not every kris has an important value in history. The interesting thing about a kris as a property is that it can change owners for various reasons. Therefore, the kris can be a connector from one life story of to another. Even if a kris ends up in a museum as an object of display, at least it has carved out its own history. The itinerary of a kris from one owner to another can traverse a broad historical journey that can include stories between regions, nations, and even the world. In other words, tracing the historical journey of a kris can reveal a history of human relations in the world.

Tracing history through artefacts may reveal important historical clues that are not revealed in archives and documents. This method can be applied to various other types of artifacts that have undergone quite a long journey as part of human-object interactions. Writing history with this approach has been introduced by Neil MacGregor, director of the British Museum London, in his best-selling book, *A History of the World in 100 Objects*.<sup>2</sup> The book presents the history of humanity through the stories of 100 objects in the collection of the British Museum – objects that have been made, used, preserved, and disposed of by people.

### Tracing the journey of Keris Kyai Hanggrek

The Keris Kyai Hanggrek had been in storage since 1818 and was kept until 1883. The origins of Keris Kyai Hanggrek takes us back to the early period of the formation of the Dutch East Indies colonial state and to the colonial scientific expeditions commissioned by King William I (1772-1843). He sent scientists such as C.G.C Reinwardt (1773-1854), C.L. Blume (1796-1862), and P.F.B. von Siebold (1796-1866) to the Dutch East Indies to collect various objects and artifacts that could fill collections in museums and scientific institutions to be established in the Netherlands. These objects represented the cultural richness of various ethnic groups in the archipelago, but also advances in the spheres of health, pharmacy, and natural history.



Fig. 2: Drawing of A. J. Bik of a statue of the goddess Prajnaparamita, near Candi Singasari, 1822. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, inv.no. RP-T-1999-198. <https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/nl/collectie/RP-T-1999-198>

# The Missing Kris

## An Early Provenance Research of the Loss of the “Keris Kyai Hanggrek”

Sri Margana

Around 1818, Susuhunan Pakubuwana IV, the ruler of the Central Javanese kingdom of Surakarta, sent a ceremonial kris (“Keris Kyai Hanggrek”) to the Dutch King William I as a token of gratitude and friendship. It was said to carry protective powers for those who held it. And indeed, in 1818, the kris protected the crew of the *Admiraal Evertsen* ship against a terrible shipwreck. But where is the kris today?

In the center of The Hague, the Netherlands, there is a very beautiful old building, built in the 16th century. The building is Paleis Noordeinde, one of the palaces of the King of the Netherlands. Although this building is located thousands of miles from Indonesia, it has a very close relationship with Indonesia and always reminds us of the historical relationship between the Netherlands and Indonesia. Indeed, the history of relations between the two countries has been marked by conflict and hostility. However, in this building is stored a memory that reflects the deep love that the Indonesian people (Dutch East Indies at that time) held toward Queen Wilhelmina (r. 1890-1948), the highest ruler

of the Dutch kingdom in colonial times. Part of the building in question is a large room called the Indische Zaal (or the ‘Indies’ Room).

Queen Wilhelmina had never been to the Dutch East Indies, but her name was very popular with the people of those territories. So many celebrations were carried out by the people of the Dutch East Indies on important days related to her life: her birthday, her coronation as Queen, and her marriage. Indische Zaal is a special room that was built with an interior design that reflects the diversity of the Indonesian cultural community, whose main walls and ceilings are made of wood filled with carvings from Kudus and Jepara. Indische



Fig. 3: Watercolour painting of disembarking crew of the sinking ship Admiraal Evertsen in 1818, near island Diego Garcia. Artist Q. M. R. Ver Huell, Collection Maritiem Museum Rotterdam, obj.nr. P2161-94A. <https://mmr-web.adlibhosting.com/ais6/Details/collect/98999>

In 1815, a committee was formed that with the young German researcher C.G.C. Reinwardt, the botanist Willem Kent, and painters such as Adrianus Johannes Bik (1790-1872). They had to collect rare objects about the natural history of the archipelago. The committee departed for Java in October 1815 and arrived in Batavia in April 1816. A.J. Bik had the task of drawing all of the objects that were collected. Shortly thereafter, his brother Jannus Theodore E. Bik (d. 1868) joined the team, followed later in 1817 by Antoine Auguste Joseph Payen (1792-1853), a painter born in Brussels, Belgium. Payen was sent to the Dutch East Indies specifically to draw natural landscapes and the daily life of the people in the Dutch East Indies. His paintings were intended to complement the Indies Art Gallery in the Netherlands. In 1826, Payen returned to Brussels and spent most of his time painting based on the sketches he had made while in the Dutch East Indies.

During the six years of conducting various researches in the Dutch East Indies, many artifacts were collected, including a statue of Prajnaparamita from the Singosari royal site in Malang, East Java [Fig. 2]. The number of items that were collected caused problems in terms of transportation. All of the objects and manuscripts were sent to the Netherlands on eight ships, but only four ships were able to sail safely to the Netherlands. The four other ships sank on the way.

The first shipment of objects began in September 1818, comprising a natural history collection that also included a living elephant and tiger. Unfortunately, this ship never reached the Netherlands and sank at sea. The second shipment was made in January 1819 and made it safely to the Netherlands. This cargo later became the main filler of the Natural History Museum in Leiden.

The third ship, named the *Admiraal Evertsen*, suffered the same fate as the first. When it reached the Indian Ocean island Diego Garcia in 1818, the ship sank. Fortunately, the ship's crew was rescued by an American ship, *The Pickering*. One of the crew members who survived this shipwreck was a member of the scientific committee that was sent to Batavia with Reinwardt in 1816, namely C.T. Elout (1767-1841). The story of the sinking of the *Admiraal Evertsen* was written by Q.M.R. Verhuell in a book entitled, *Herinneringen van een reis naar Oost Indie* [Fig.3].<sup>3</sup>

This accident destroyed the main objects collected by Reinwardt, as well as letters, reports, and notes concerning the research and collection of these objects. However, there were still some objects that were rescued – namely, some colourful illustrations of various natural objects made by A.J. Bik and an heirloom weapon from Surakarta. The heirloom was the Keris Kyai Hanggrek given by Susuhunan Pakubuwana IV (r. 1788-1820). When C.T. Elout visited Surakarta, he met Pakubuwana IV. The Sunan of Surakarta strongly requested that he bring the kris back to the Netherlands as a present to King William I. At that time, Elout objected because there were many krisses in the King's collection, but the Sunan of Surakarta insisted. He had already promised the gift in an earlier letter – sent when he succeeded his father's throne in Surakarta – as a token of gratitude and friendship. Finally, Elout agreed to bring the kris to the Netherlands.

After arriving in the Netherlands, Elout handed the kris to King William I with all the stories and traumatic experiences incurred during the delivery of the heirloom from Surakarta to the Netherlands. King William I received it with pride, even though it was not the first kris he had. William I valued the kris very highly and kept it combined with the other krisses as a sacred family heirloom in the Koninklijk Kabinet van Zeldzaamheden.

King William I was very pleased and amazed, not only because of such a beautiful object but also because of the story of the amazing journey and shipwreck. It was the only object that survived the accident. Therefore, King William I asked to be given a clearer picture of the kris. However, because the record about this kris had also disappeared, this request for details could not be immediately granted. Elout then asked the Resident of Surakarta to meet Susuhunan Pakubuwana IV, to tell him about the incident, and to ask for further information about the kris. According to an oral statement from the Susuhunan of Surakarta, who is also known as a poet, the kris was named Kyai Hanggrek. It was forged in 1643 by a master named Yasa, who served Sultan Agung of Mataram. The *dhapur* (design) is called Lara Stuwa, and the prestige is called Melela. The gold ring that is wrapped around the wooden *tajuman* is called Mendak Parijata, with a *warangka* of Tambala wood and a *Suasa sarong* (cover).<sup>4</sup>

### The disappearance of Keris Kyai Hanggrek

My curiosity about Keris Kyai Hanggrek began in 2018, when I was asked to be a speaker at a seminar on krisses at the Indonesian Institute of the Arts of Surakarta. Along with my other activities in the Netherlands, I later took the time to come to the NMVW Museum Volkenkunde in Leiden to see first-hand the Keris Kyai Hanggrek listed there. The online catalogue of the museum does not contain any photos. In Rita Wassing-Visser's book, it is stated that the kris was "not found."<sup>5</sup> My visit to see this kris was also in vain: the museum staff who were there were also unable to explain the absence of the object with inventory number RV-360-1474. This makes my search for the kris deadlocked.

I only received instructions about the disappearance of the kris at the end of 2021 from a curator of Insular Southeast Asia at the National Museum of World Cultures. The curator indicates that Keris Kyai Hanggrek was indeed registered in the museum database, with number RV-360-1474. The number 360 indicates that the kris was part of the collection of the Koninklijk Kabinet van Zeldzaamheden, part of which was transferred in 1883 to the Rijks Ethnographisch Museum, a predecessor of today's NMVW Museum Volkenkunde. The curator concluded that the kris, in reality, never entered the museum.<sup>6</sup> Because part of the collection of the Koninklijk Kabinet van Zeldzaamheden was also transferred to what is now the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam in 1883, it is most likely, according to the curator, that Keris Kyai Hanggrek went to Amsterdam and not to Leiden. Earlier research in 2017 – conducted to locate another missing kris, Keris Kyai Nagasiluman, which belonged to Prince Diponegoro – led to the conclusion that five of six krisses in the Rijksmuseum that originate from Koninklijk Kabinet van Zeldzaamheden could not be identified. In other words, the curator concludes that Keris Kyai Hanggrek is certainly not in Leiden, and probably also not in Amsterdam.

This conclusion is, of course, very surprising to me, as it suggests that there has been serious negligence in the handling of cultural objects in the Netherlands. This is similar to the Keris Kyai Nagasiluman belonging to Prince Diponegoro, which was lost for decades and was only relocated in 2017 and returned to Indonesia in 2020.

### Conclusion

Indonesian krisses in the Netherlands have a variety of origins and causes, but there are some common threads that can be drawn from this phenomenon. First, the krisses represent the political and cultural relations of the two nations. The kris became a liaison as well as a symbol of the political and human bonds between the two different nations, especially among the elite. However, tracing the journey of Keris Kyai Hanggrek from Surakarta to the Netherlands leads us to a colonial imperial project, which was built for the sake of absolute control and conquest. This project was not only carried out for the sake of science but also in pursuit of cultural colonialism – from the personal interests of William IV and V to the imperial project carried out by William I. The kris was transferred to museums as an object of study and academic inquiries. It was exhibited to the public to arouse various cultural, economic, artistic, and scientific interests. If the study is carried out further, it will be seen how the recitation of the kris by Dutch orientalists began to emerge. They encouraged Javanese intellectuals to be able to explain more broadly and deeply about the ins and outs of the kris. From this colonial interest grew literacy about krisses by Javanese scholars.

On the other hand, from the Javanese side, the gift to the colonial rulers by the country's elite at that time was full of symbolism, which was not always easily understood by the Dutch. In the case of Keris Kyai Hanggrek, Elout said that Pakubuwana IV was a bit forceful so that the kris could be delivered to the King of the Netherlands. However, from Pakubuwana IV's perspective, crossing the ocean was not an easy task, considering that the previous ship carrying the objects of the archipelago had sunk in the sea. For Pakubuwana IV, who insisted Elout to carry the kris, it was perhaps not only a gift but also a protector for those who carried it. While Elout considered his survival pure luck, in Javanese culture and belief, an heirloom could produce a supernatural power, and Keris Kyai Hanggrek was indeed the only object that survived the fateful event.

The disappearance of Keris Kyai Hanggrek – in the process of its transfer from its original repository in The Hague to Leiden or Amsterdam – shows that serious negligence has occurred in the handling of these colonial objects. This is, of course, the responsibility of all the institutions mentioned in the transfer plan. The research to recover this valuable object is urgently needed so that this kind of negligence does not become a permanent defect of the institutions, which are responsible for the conservation of historical objects.

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#### Notes

- 1 Rita Wassing-Visser, *Royal Gifts from Indonesia: Historical Bonds with the House of Orange-Nassau (1600-1938)*, House of Orange-Nassau Historic Collections Trust, The Hague, Zwolle: Waanders Publisher, 1995
- 2 Neil MacGregor, *A History of the World in 100 Objects*, Deckle Edge 2013.
- 3 Q.M.R. Verhuell, *Herinneringen van een reis naar Oost Indie* (1836)
- 4 Rita Wassing-Visser, *Royal Gifts from Indonesia: Historical Bonds with the House of Orange-Nassau (1600-1938)*, House of Orange-Nassau Historic Collections Trust, The Hague, Zwolle: Waanders Publisher, 1995
- 5 Rita Wassing-Visser, *ibid.*, see, the footnote 15 of chapter II.
- 6 The Museum's database states that RV-360-1474 was 'afgevoerd, Jan-01-1883' [disposed, January 1, 1883], and not 'vermist' [lost].