

# Finding the Ethical Context of the Dragon Keris

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**Abstract:** UNESCO's recognition of the kris as a world intangible heritage does not stop the marginalization and even harassment against it. Placing the dagger as an object of academic research would be an award for him. The message of ethics as a valuable human idea must be contained in a keris. The message will be traced through this research that aims to find what ethical messages contained in various forms of dragon keris. Some of the dragon kerises as observation units are described and analyzed semiotically to find context. The research found that in the dragon dagger there are: a) The dragon figure in the Keris Naga contains ethical discourse that originates from beliefs based on certain religions and that comes from Javanese knowledge systems; b) Intellectual practices took place in the form of simulacra in which the dragon in the Keris Naga was interpreted as the wisdom of living wisdom. Intellectual practice in the form of conversion from explicit knowledge to tacit knowledge is driven by the practice of commodification of the dragon dagger as an economic and symbolic value object.

**Keywords:** *dragon keris, ethical context, simulacra, commodification, knowledge*

## Introduction

Keris as an artifact made from metal left traces of cultural practices in the past. As is happening all over the world, metalworking has a very big role in the history of human civilization for thousands of years ago (Comelli, 2016: 1301). The forging metal industry generally produces metal tools which are generally utensils for doing work in agriculture and household (Arkundato, 2019: 39). But the keris as an object made of metal specifically made by a blacksmith master (called *empu*). Not only does a master craftsman have very special competencies that cannot be achieved by ordinary people but he is also traditionally considered to have the capacity, among others, as a source of ethics and certain powers. In other words, metalworking has strong links with socio-cultural life. Not only in Indonesia, but the influence of social traditions related to material culture is also seen throughout the world, for example in Ireland (Molloy, 2017: 281). Although the blacksmith is an ancient original technology, which is the ancestor of various metal forging practices, it is still subsistence, primitive and imperfect (Oladimeji, 2013: 3810).

The first interesting thing that requires research is based on the theory that culture comes into being as a result of human creativity, taste, and motives. These three categories refer to the long process that begins with intellectual practice. The word intellectual is an adjective from the word intellect or intelligence. The word intellectual in English means to need or use intelligence or need well-developed intelligence (Ostler, 1987: 282). The keris survives and continues to be produced today after the first creation a thousand years ago or more.

This research is expected to be some kind of "solace" when Indonesian keris experiences harassment or some kind of unfair treatment: firstly, associating that keris with the "black world" whose manifestations include the keris attribution to shamanism. This stigma is very difficult to remove and put the keris as an attribute of primitive society so that it is at odds with common sense which is an attribute of modern society. This fact has become public knowledge

as seen on television program shows. Even dragons in the Western thought was seen as dangerous representations of Eastern culture (Rajgopal, 2010: 143).

Secondly, the unfair treatment is considering the keris as idolatrous or a means for idolatrous practices. Considered the practice of idolatrous because in this thing there are beliefs and rituals on that belief that there are other powerful forces in a keris. Considered as a means for the practice of idolatrous because of the dagger becomes a path for knowledge about the existence of magical powers that are more easily felt by humans. This is certainly thought of academics, apart from any suspicion whether this stigma is actually aimed at making the keris "discarded" by Indonesian people and instead sent abroad as a very valuable item (Arifin, 2006: 356).

Thirdly, is cruelty treatment to the keris. The method involves soaking it in a corrosive solution to get an old-fashioned impression on the dagger. Cruelty to the dagger is also done by changing the physical form of the dagger into a new form (*dhapur*) because of consumer demand (Pipin, interview, March 26, 2017). Quite a large demand comes from urban communities such as Jakarta and Bandung who have a new awareness to treat ancestral heirlooms. Neighboring countries such as Malaysia, Brunei Darussalaam which put the keris as an official requirement and a symbol of statehood have encouraged practitioners from certain circles to change ancient crises but are considered to be of high selling value to change their physical appearance to become ancient, unique, and have certain greatness (Arifin, 2006: 356). Changing the physical appearance is done for example by cutting the nut-shaped nut flower (the decoration at the front of the keris that dangles downward) into a *pogog* (humped), removing *greneng* (spines) at the back of the keris, and so on.

The bitter truth adds to the fact that today the young generation is not interested in knowing the traditional weapons of their ancestors. According to Husniah (2019: 27), the fact of selling traditional Indonesian weapons knowledge books compared to imports in several bookstores and online bookstores shows a ratio of 1: 7.

## **Method**

This research tries to approach cultural phenomena in the form of cultural practices related to the existence of the *dhapur* (shape) Naga keris. The shape of the dragon dagger is relatively new compared to ancient keris, but today it is still well known by the people who love keris and even ordinary people. The other motives of this research include wanting to participate in the promotion of culture as mandated by Undang-undang No. 17 Tahun 2017 concerning the Advancing of Culture, especially Article 5. point a. 'develop the noble values of the nation's culture'. What glorious value is intellectual practice as an intelligent citizen based on literacy in reading symbols?

The main data as the research's corpus is kerises called the Naga Saptas, Naga Raja, and Naga Pasa keris from the Brojobuwono Museum located in Wonosari Village, Gondangrejo District, Karanganyar Regency. This data is supported by written sources, especially the Keris Naga book written by Basuki Teguh Yuwono as a researcher who has dug deep information about the existence of the *dhapur* Naga keris in Java and Bali. Data analysis was performed by directly observing the appearance of the Dragon dagger and cross-check with written sources. The description of the results of the research is in the form of a narrative of intellectual practice around the *dhapur* Naga keris creations guided by research problems aimed at answering the questions: 1) why is there a dragon on the keris and what image is to be displayed; 2) what intellectual practices are related to the keris's creation.

Because the keris currently only functions as a symbolic object - and instead is not a mechanical object as a stabbing weapon - the first interesting thing to study is the imagination or fantasy that accompanies the dragon in the visualization of the keris. This imagination and fantasy by its nature will be approached using the simulacra theory first proposed by Jean Baudrillard. The second theory is hegemony, considering that the meaning of the Naga keris is so inherent in Javanese people's awareness that the assumption that there is a current of hegemony from certain parties can influence public awareness. The third theory is commodification given that there are signals of the role of capitalism in the production of the meaning of the keris. According to Sulistyorini (2017:23--24), commodification can be seen from the process of changing cultural artefacts into cultural industries that have a certain economic value. Kris usually appears in three parts at once, namely blades, handles, and sheaths or seams (Guntur 2018: 108), but this study only examines the blades.

## **Results and Discussion**

Lexically, dragon means 'big snake only in the story' and 'big snake watching the point' (Great Indonesian Dictionary; Poerwadarminta, 1939: 335); 'mountains, trees, snakes, elephants' (Mardiwarsito, 1978: 196). According to de Hoop (1949: 206), the figure of a dragon has existed since before the Hindu period. Hoop gave an example of some artefacts in the form of wood carvings on the house decoration and the coffin cover of Sandang-Toraja people in Rante Pao (Central Sulawesi). During Hindu the figure of the dragon was also found among other things in Hindi-Javanese yoni made of stone. Yoni is the symbol of the woman and the head of the dragon in this artefact is where the holy water flows during the ceremony. de Hoop states that in a dichotomous system, dragons are classified into women, the subcontinent, water, etc. (Hoop, 1949: 208).

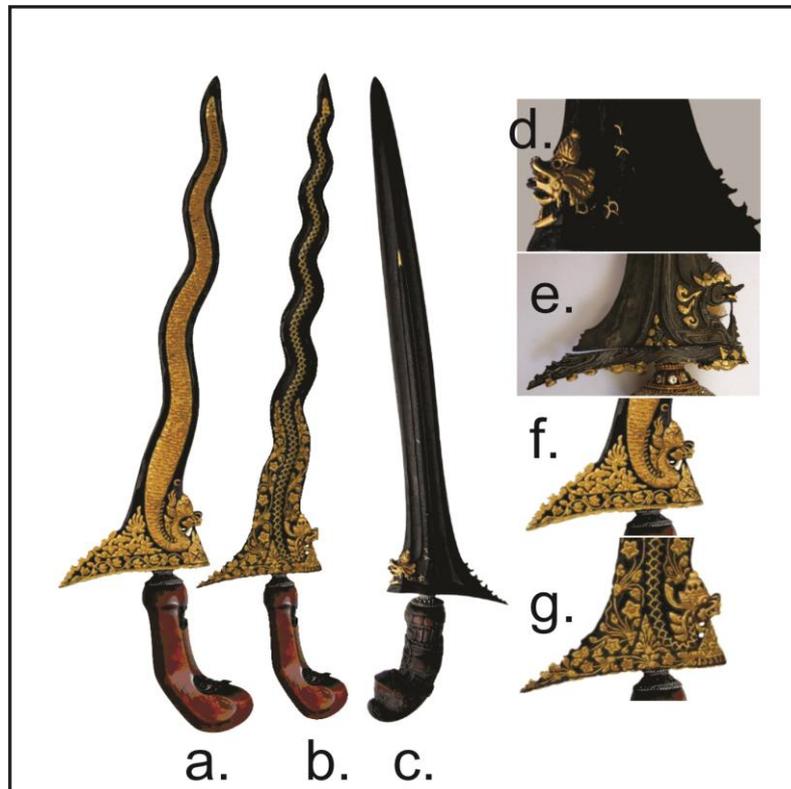
The figure of the dragon also continues to exist today even though there are various belief systems in society. During the Islamic era, the figure of the dragon can be found both in a stylized form such as the doors of the Demak Mosque as well as those of various decorative and functional objects. The decoration on the Surakarta's gamelan style is mainly in the place of placing the *bonang barung* and *bonang penerus* instruments, the *rebab* (fiddle) backrest, and where the instrument gongs and *kempuls* are hung. This beam is called Gayor. Gayor in the Surakarta Kasunanan style gamelan, the figure of a dragon is depicted perching on the wooden beam, while in the Mangkunegaran style gamelan the figure of a dragon is shown coil around a wooden hanger.

The dragon figure found on the keris by de Hoop is described deformatively and in the form of a stylized dragon. The deformative image of a dragon appears in a curved type keris depicting a dragon in an active state (*naga kridha*) while a straight keris depicts a dragon that is resting or meditating. The Javanese look at the keris as a powerful dragon. For the first time to get a powerful keris done by bringing the keris closer to the brain and the entrails of snakes. So it is not surprising that keris blades are often decorated with dragon shapes (Hoop, 1949:212).

The description leads to the conclusion that the figure of an imaginary dragon or snake - because it is only in the story - has been around for a long time and still exists today. Dragon visualization is intended as a symbol of great power because it is identical to the underworld, water, earth, and women who are all symbols of fertility. Dragon as well as a symbol of strength or power. The message to be conveyed in the symbolization may be similar to ethical discipline to always respect the universe, always full of hope, and warnings of supernatural powers over

the human world. This interpretation is a consensus because the relationship between animals and ethical demands does not exist in the reality of life.

Kris is an asymmetrical long blade with a pattern of motifs on different blades which is achieved through alternating laminations using iron and nickel (Solyom, 1978: 5). Solyom tried to define a dagger from the perspective of Westerners. The definition is true even though it feels very simple for the observer of the keris. Many things are attached to the keris outside the statement. For example, there is a surface of a dagger that does not have alternating colours (dark-light), there are sharp parts of a dagger that differ in shape between straight and curved. There are three parts of the keris blade where the bottom of the keris (called the *gandhik*) determines the naming of a keris and more. This study specifically looked at the shape (commonly called *dhapur*) of a dragon keris. The name of the dragon is based on the *gandhik* part and part of the blade. The kris that is observed is in the form of a dragon in its entirety (head, body, tail) although there is a kris that only shows the head and small part of the body (called *dhapur Naga Seluman*).

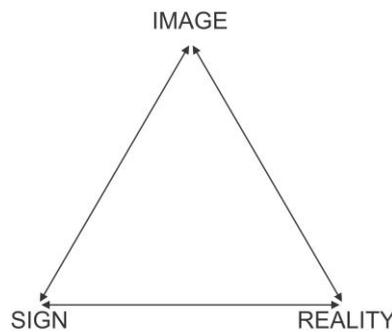


**Figure 1.** The appearance of three types of dragon keris: a. Keris Naga Sapta or Seven Curved Dragon Keris; b. Keris Naga Raja or King Dragon Keris; c. Keris Naga Pasa or Fasting Dragon Keris; d. *gandhik* of Keris Naga Pasa; e. *gandhik* of Keris Naga Raja; f. *gandhik* of Keris Naga Sapta; g. *gandhik* of Keris Naga Sasra (all photos and artefacts is collection of Museum Brojobuwono, 2018)

As additional information, keris a. Naga Sapta is a Keris Naga Sasra (thousand dragons) with some 7 (seven) curves created at the time of King Pakubuwana VII in Surakarta, made in 7 pieces. The characteristic of Naga Sapta is the existence of a crescent symbol above the dragon's head. Keris b. is Naga Sasra, curved 13, the dragon's head in an upward position while the dragon's head on Naga Sapta is horizontal. The Kris Naga Sasra and Naga Sapta keris both show the crowns that are worn on top of the dragon's head (this kind of crown is called *topong*). *Topong* in Javanese public awareness is a symbol of the king in his position as a warlord. This

can be seen in other texts such as the crown found on the Mangkunegaran Palace logo, and also Adipati Karna figures in Javanese puppets. Keris c. Naga Pasa, a straight keris, the dragon's head in a raised position and not crowned but wearing a kind of cloth. In Javanese consciousness, the cloth covering the head is called Durban and at other times it is called Sorban. Durban imitates the headgear of the Turkish nation, it can be seen as the head covering of the puppet figure Pandita Durna which symbolizes a spiritual figure. The term pasa in Naga Pasa refers to the term fasting in English so that it is a new understanding of the Javanese consciousness. The symbol of the turban and the term fasting can easily be guessed as symbols of the Islamic world as markers of the inclusion of Islamic culture in Javanese keris. Keris d., e., f., and g. details the gandhik part. It is only a little different in that the keris e. the Naga Raja. Slightly different from Naga Sasra, the position of its head is relatively flat meanwhile the crown it wears is called *kuluk kanigara* like the crown of King Kresna in a Javanese puppet (Harsrinuksmo, 2008: 307). *Kuluk kanigara* symbolizes the king is in office as head of government (Yuwono, 2011: 210). Generally, all the Dragon dagger has gold or diamond beads in his mouth.

The Naga Sasra Keris according to Yuwono was the earliest model of the dragon keris created by the late Majapahit King Prabu Brawijaya (Yuwono, 2011:6). Because this kris is so phenomenal, whomever the king in the land of Java must have ordered to make a derivative or duplicate of this keris and also the creation of a new dragon shape according to the king's wishes. The image of the dragon itself is a mythological figure whose information is very widespread from the holy books of the Hindu religion to myths and folklore. According to the theory of semiotics, the figure of a dragon is included as a simulacrum because it is a symbolic and imaginary figure that does not exist in reality as a result of the dynamics of signs and images.



**Image 2.** Semiotics triangle

The semiotic triangle as stated by Eco (2009:85) is a simplification of the scheme proposed by Pierce and Frege. There are three points whose relationships show meaning, namely reality, signs, and images. Honesty is the equivalence of the relationship between reality and signs, reality with images, and signs with images. But in the simulacra type, there is no link between signs and reality. According to Baudrillard, the basic axiom of semiotics is the equivalence between signs and reality even though the equivalence is utopian. Simulacra start from this state of utopia, so the relation of signs and reality becomes rejected (Baudrillard, 1998:353).

According to the statement, there are circumstances in which images and signs "play" themselves without reference to reality, and in other cases, the relationship of images and signs has created its reality which is now known as pseudo or virtual reality. Wolny (2017:76) called it self-referentiality. Barker gave an example of the Disneyland case which was imaged as an

imitation of the street atmosphere in New York City which was full of peace because it was clean from rifles, illegal drugs, no homeless people, and there was no fear and things were very far from the real reality. The keywords of simulacra are symbolic and imaginary forms (Barker, 2004:184). So the notions say that the dragon figure depicted in the keris is classified as simulacra. There is no dragon in reality. Likewise, in reality, there has never been a dragon who wore crown in the shape of a kuluk or likewise in topong. The shape of the kuluk as a symbol of a king in peace because he was on the throne of the kingdom, while the topong shaped symbolized the king as a warlord. The dragon who wore the *kuluk kanigara* was called Naga Raja, the king who wore the *topong* was called Naga Sasra.

Symbols and imaginary things are inherent in the visualization of the dragon figure. The appearance of the *gandhik* part contains allegory of dragon head symbols that lookup, the mouth of the dragon that is sucking golden bead (*naga ngemut mas*), there are 3 types of head coverings (crowns and *sorban*), the existence of a crescent moon, the dragon's mouth is above a sharp and pointed object resembling a vajra in ancient weapons systems, and so on. The decoration of the head covering in the form of a turban, the term *pasa* (fasting), and the presence of a crescent moon symbol may lead us to argue that there is an Islamic element in the visualization of the Dragon keris.

The dragon's mouth is stoppled with gold and the threat of vajra under the dragon's mouth is a code for the ethical value of silence. As is known by the Javanese people in general the danger that threatens humans comes from all directions symbolized by the four cardinal directions (Poerwadarminta, 1939:335). The threat of danger will come to humans if he or she commits misdirected actions. The threat of danger is symbolized by the state of a snaking dragon (the dragon opens his mouth and makes a loud voice).

The golden beads in the dragon's mouth can be interpreted differently for example that whatever comes out of the king's mouth - the dragon figure usually symbolizes the king or a respectable person - is very valuable so humans must be careful in issuing words. If you cannot speak well then silence is golden. If the one who wants to speak is a king, then he must remember the king's decree is like a law that must be obeyed. The words of a king are like ink dripping on paper, they cannot be erased. Meanwhile, the figure of the dragon is a symbol of human hope to be given a long life because the dragon can change its skin so that it is always young and long-lived. Dragons are also symbols of supernatural powers and rulers in 3 world levels (Yuwono, 2011: 192-228).

The head looks up to be a special symbol in the awareness of Javanese society as a symbol of being "in contact" with God or a supernatural figure. This can be seen from the batik motifs in Java that use fowl as the motive where the bird who is looking up usually symbolizes death, so this patterned cloth is worn at the time of mourning. Instead, the head of a bird that is looking down is a symbol of God's creatures who are eating or looking for a living. Therefore, the bird-patterned fabric can be worn every day in a state of work or pleasure.

Based on the lexical as well as contextual of the dragon as outlined above, it can be concluded that the visualized dragon figure on the Javanese kris is an agreement of meaning that the dragon is a symbol of the universe, fertility, strength, and ethical virtue above any religion. The existence of a symbol system in dragon visualization can be seen as a discourse that requires influencers to function to discipline anyone who lives it. In addition to depicting animals in an artifact, there is a belief that the bones are affected by mythic things about certain animals (Choyke & Daroczi-Szabo in Luik, 2011: 33). In the past where the kingdom still held political power and had repressive power, this discourse was used in a hegemonic foundation. There are two parties most responsible for launching this hegemony, namely the king and the

masters of the keris makers. There is another fact in the meaning of the relationship with Javanese keris world that hegemony is launched by the masters (keris smith) where the discourse used in disciplining the people is derived from the masters or keris smith. This can be seen in the Serat Centhini which outlines the meaning of the keris that comes from the masters both inside (*empu lebet*) as well as outside (*empu njawi*) of an empire (keraton).

Hegemony implies a situation in which the 'historical bloc' of the ruling class factions exercises social authority and leadership over subordinate classes through a combination of power and, more importantly, consent (Barker, 2004: 84-85). This view is seen in the fact that the meaning of the dragon figure does not shift as disciplining Javanese ethics. The concept that refers to Gramscian's opinion according to Barker is proven to have a long-term meaning in cultural studies, especially related to the meaning that emerged at a time, among others, to popular culture as a place of ideological struggle. As a result, Gramsci made ideological struggles and conflicts within civil society a central arena of cultural politics, with hegemonic analysis as a way of measuring the relevant balance of power.

There are two important points to the phenomenon of the emergence of masters in Javanese keris life, namely in the form of self-awareness as stated by Gramsci that all men are "philosophers". Philosophy in themselves is contained in language itself, "common sense" and "good sense", and popular religion (Hoare, 1971:323).

Gramsci states, it must first be shown that all humans are "philosophers", by defining the limits and characteristics of "spontaneous philosophy" that is right for everyone. This philosophy is contained in 1) language itself, which is the totality of ideas and concepts that are determined and not just words that have no grammatical content; 2) "common sense" (common sense and good sense); 3) popular religion; and 4) the whole system of beliefs, superstitions, opinions, ways of seeing things and actions, which are collectively bundled together under the name "folklore" (Hoare, 1971: 323).

Related to this awareness Gramsci continued, "The starting-point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one is, and is "knowing thyself" as a product of the historical process to date which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory (Hoare,1971:324). This sentence contains a paradox that needs understanding. First, as a follower of Marxism, of course, he believes that history is determined by material dynamics, but at other times he recognizes the existence of historical social construction as stated in the quote. This leads to a critique of the model of Marxism that in contemporary times material dynamics produce images that still refer to existing value systems such as language, common sense, and good sense as a result of social construction, as well as all belief systems obtained from various sources such as religion, even superstition, opinion from person to person, to folklore. The starting point for critical elaboration is awareness of what is, and "knowing yourself" as a product of the historical process to the present that has placed a person on a trail without limits, without leaving an inventory.

Another important trail that is shown in the visualization of the dragon keris above is the traces of capitalism. Two things stand out the most, the first is the use of the gold element to decorate the dragon's head and even the entire dragon's body. If the dragon keris is produced by the palace, then there is a possibility that there is a system of symbolization of the use of gold as a symbol of glory or other symbolic nuances of spirituality. However, it has become an understanding that crises produced in Surakarta after Pakubuwono III were not a monopoly of the court. There is a fact that some nameless masters such as tangguh or estimated masters of the smith such as Koripan, Mangkubumen, Setrabanyu, and others are masters who work independently. For example, the Empu Setrabanyu whose keris workshop was in Matesih (a

small town in the east of Surakarta) did not work for and on the orders of the court (Harsrinuksmo, 2008: 425). These masters should be fathomed of making a keris at the request of the community and of course taking into account the cost of making and also considering the costs. Second, some traces making keris using "modern" equipment means that it is not in the form of traditional equipment as stated in the sources of keris making in the past. It looks in the Naga Pasa keris for example, which looks very sophisticated process. These facts have the potential to support the theory that in the Surakarta period there were traces of the capitalization of keris-making combined with Islamization in Javanese keris life. What is the motive underlying this requires separate research. If this theory is true, Javanese keris life has long experienced profanation in the form of commodification, in which a keris which acts as a symbolic capital has been combined with economic capital.

Commodification is a process related to capitalism in which objects, qualities, and signs are transformed into commodities where a commodity is an object whose main purpose is to buy and sell in the market (Barker, 2004: 28). Buying and selling activities cause the commodity as an object that has a value and a sign, i.e. in the form of money and placing the object in a complexity. According to Foucault money has the power to mark because it is itself a true sign. The problem then develops towards a standard price based on the value that at least two values apply in the buying and selling activities, namely the use-value and the exchange value. To have a high exchange rate an object must be rare, useful, and desirable (Foucault, 2005:183). The problem is no longer simply because the object enters complicated social life, most of which are political in nature to increase the exchange value of a dragon keris.

According to Appadurai who refers to Simmel's opinion, value is never a property attached to objects, but it is an assessment made about them by the subject. But the key to understanding values, according to Simmel, is precisely located in an area where "subjectivity is only temporary and is not very important" (Appadurai, 2013:3). This statement implies that the subject has an important role in increasing the exchange rate. In what way is it in making commodities appear rare, useful and desirable. Concerning the exchange rate which is a political act then returns to the subject, namely the court and the keris smith. In this issue, the hegemony and imagination or fantasy of possessing symbolic values have a real place, namely how to influence the awareness of the Javanese people in terms of demand or interest in the ownership of symbols as Foucault's statement. In other words, political action aims to turn desire into demand. Institutions such as language, religion, and folklore such as Gramsci's indication will be maximally utilized for this political economy.

The description implies that behind the dragon visualization on the keris is related to efforts to create and increase community demand for the importance of ownership or at least appreciation of the dragon dagger. First, the dragon dagger has the potential to become an economic capital because it has high economic value and this can be seen from the materials used and the expertise of the master. The economic value that causes public knowledge (explicit knowledge) requires special or specific knowledge and this is classified as tacit knowledge as stated by Baker (2008: 80). Second, the dragon dagger has the potential to become a symbolic capital because it is the centre of literacy or understanding of symbols that lead to the legitimacy of cultural expertise during social life.

## **Conclusion**

It can be concluded that the figure of the dragon has been around for a long time and its visualization has become an ethical discipline discourse. There are at least two ethical values

contained in the depiction of the dragon in the Dragon Keris. Firstly, ethics which is based on certain religious beliefs where the figure of a dragon is a representation of supernatural power. Secondly, ethics originating from the Javanese knowledge system that considers the figure of a dragon as a symbol of silent ethics or if we have to speak should be done wisely.

There have been two intellectual practices in the creation of the *dhapur* Naga keris artifact. Firstly, there is the practice of simulacra in which the figure of a dragon as a mythological figure is paraded in an allegory of symbols in the visualization of a keris especially a Javanese keris in the Surakarta style. These symbols are visualized in various ways including the application of the keris which leads to a certain meaning such as ethical discipline as previously described. Symbols that are discursive as a discourse for disciplining social ethics contain messages so that people of any religion live wisely and have an optimistic mind. Naga as a symbol of strength, optimism, and hope for a better life is conveyed to the community through hegemonic agreement both by the court and the masters of the keris smith. Secondly, there is a signal of the commodification of the noble message that is accompanied by the application of gold material to decorate the Dragon dagger and the sophistication of work that contains certain economic values. In other words, the dragon dagger is considered as economic capital and symbolic capital. Economic capital causes the conversion of explicit knowledge into tacit knowledge. Meanwhile symbolic capital stimulates the legitimacy of cultural expertise.

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