Lok: The Malay Philosophy of Art and Aesthetic of Kris Torso Sculpture

by: Faizal Sidik

This is an interview session of Raja Shahriman Raja Aziddin (RS) with the exhibition curator, Faizal Sidik (FS) and Idrina Ibrahim (ID), the guest writer at the National Art Gallery on 8th of October 2019.

FS: You have a talent in poetry recital and poetry writing in every exhibition. Is the poem a translation of your sculpture?

RS: In this exhibition, I also produced a poem about a metaphorical reflection of lok. There is a continuity to this verse that will be completed later. I will produce a complete poem for this exhibition. Actually, during my secondary years I was doing commerce but I was fond of literature especially poetry. Therefore, I bought a poetry book and learned it by myself. This is my product; words that I translated into a sculpture, as an introductory poem to Lok Series.

   Like a river the water flows,
   Moving along the bends and curves,
   Upstream to downstream it goes,
   Flowing constantly it rapidly moves,
   Life is a test till end of line,
   Be it easy or hard or bitter times,
   Carved like the lok and curves so fine.

FS: Your great grandfather Sultan Abdullah Ibni Sultan Jaafar was exiled to Sicily Island when he was associated as the mastermind in plotting J.W.W. Birch assassination in Perak River at Pasir Salak. A public sculpture in front of Pasir Salak Historical Complex in Perak Tengah district was built as the memorial and honour resembled a figure holding keris in his left and right hand. Is this work related and treated as a continuity of the Lok Series work?

RS: No, because in the previous work the keris was in a holding position while this keris is placed at the head, which is on the face itself. In the new sculpture, the keris is more to the body rather than in holding position. The keris element might have existed in the previous series but it was not emphasized as a concept like now. For Lok Series sculpture I made paintings in searching for solutions in early of 2000. If we look back to my sketches between 2001 to 2004, there were sketches advancing to the Lok Series. The Lok Series was fully matured in 2016, therefore the solutions for the three dimension design occurred in 2016.
FS: You have withdrawn yourself in Kuala Kangsar for more than two years and now you will make a comeback with 25 new sculpture in Lok Series. How did the changes in the previous series occur? What encouraged the transition?

RS: Every work I produce has its continuity, it relates from every title to another. As for the Lok Series I want to give an appreciation to the subject matter of my work. The figures and weapons have been my choice and favourite as the main focus and subject of my work. Therefore, for the Lok Series, I want to portray the figure as the subject that is really focusing on the body torso. The character of the body as the chosen subject and the keris is exaggeratedly stylized but its discipline remains unchanged, with discipline of the sculpture and the body. This means that the traditional making of the keris is stylized with what I feel in accordance with the series and will be displayed on the pedestal as the traditional frame between the sculpture and its base.

FS: Your sculpture in Taman Wawasan Public Bank entitled Growth With Equity (1992) also resembles a weapon drew into the sky. Is that a weapon and why is it shaped so?

RS: I used the shoot as subject for the public sculpture, a seed that became a shoot. So I took it from a different subject especially for the competition organised by Public Bank, a sculpture for Taman Wawasan.

FS: In your previous works, you produced weapon to be held and used. Why are you now focusing only on weapon compared to position and movement sculpture?

RS: For me, this is my way of appreciation. I want to narrate my work subjects; weapons and keris as these also refer to the Malay tribe and culture. I specifically focus on keris in this series. Previously, we can see that there were traditional and concocted of weapons creation in the more global exhibition. However, in this sculpture series I only used keris, with the tradition and small adjustments of symbols that I used in my works.
FS: People might see your works as violent at the outside but on the inside, are you an agressive and a temper person?

RS: Not anymore, that might be when I was younger. This sculpture narrates the Malay viability, in the current situation for example in the keris loks which exceeds the limit, explains the Malays are in the challenging era. But I am not as emotional as the politicians because I am not interested and involving myself in the matter. The cause is within ourselves, we should be adapting ourselves, which path should we choose to bring us back.

FS: Do you have the same feelings like in Gerak Tempur?

RS: Even though the character of keris that has been absorbed in me is not soft, perhaps the disposition does. The Malays are soft and so does the weapon, but it is dangerous. We live in a high civilization society, we can still think sensibly, we still live in the high patience context.

FS: You did not prioritise the face part in your works. In the previous sculpture the face looked like aliens, masks and animal heads. Why did you use keris as the substitute of the head?

RS: I made keris as an abstract, as to create the new keris. In the sculpture work, I am more on the forming of the body rather than the face, because for me, the face has a detailed forms. The face is not the main storytelling in the previous works, because I focused more on the movement; which is the body language movements instead of the facial expressions characteristic. In this sculpture, I substitute the face with the keris, as the face representation. The body is universal, while the face is more specific to the race characteristic. For example, in Chinese face, we can see the specific chinese look like small eyes and face, and same goes to the Malay. What is important here is the details, I am not keen to say that the face represents the specific race. I like to say that it is universal. In the lok series, I represent the keris as the face and culture of the Malay, the symbol, dignity and identity of the Malay. Keris brings the philosophy of the Malay. When I put the keris onto the head, it means that this is a Malay face but in a different situation, not to show the race as in the face, but the philosophy
of the Malay itself. That is why I made it such a way because it matches with my condition and what I want in the Lok Series.

ID: Are you a keris collector too?

RS: Yes, I am a keris collector too but not in a big scale. I was a keris trader, and I sold old keris.

ID: In the Lok Series, are you referring to any specific types of keris?

RS: I would say that I am not referring to any specific types of keris and it is various. Every keris has its own value and aesthetics. The thorough evaluation of the keris shapes inspires me to produce my own keris work.

ID: In Alam Melayu we have Bali keris, Jawa Demam keris that has various types of figured hafts. Does this influence your works because when I see the keris from Indonesia, the figures are exciting.

RS: For me, if we look from the figure shaping of the haft, it is an interesting subject; the art of shaping the keris and it interests me too. However, for the Lok Series, the tradition can be seen in the blade from the haft’s figured shape. The torso still refers to the torso-based sculpture, but has been stylised with the Malay influence. In this sculpture, I also inserted tracery motives to the figure’s backbone although it is the West tradition subject but the Malay cultural elements are still there.

FS: Perak is well-known for its Chura Si Manja Kini sword which has a long history in Perak royalty. Do these weapons’ resources give you ideas to your works, like the Taming Sari keris, for example?

RS: I can say that these have been legends: Chura Si Manja Kini, Ular Saktimura, Sang Nila Utama in the histories. They are regalia that have their own powers and I feel that inspires my interest towards the weapons themselves. Chura Si Manja Kini is a sword and in this series I only focus on keris and did not
take any history. I am more towards keris that I stylized. But every weapon brings interest and tendency to get ideas.

ID: In the current political situation, the Malay identity has always been brought up. If the weapon is soared it will bring a different meaning. Is this what you questioned in the new work?

RS: I started this project since 2016 and took almost 3 years to complete it. At the same time I was also involved with the cultural works especially cultural clubs that wanted to restore Malay tradition cultures. The tradition of soaring keris is not of fighting, in the coronation ceremony the keris is soared as a principle because keris symbolises many things and full of elements. When the keris is soared, it means respect to the culture and civilization and tauhid that we hold. The keris traditions such as wrenched, soaring, kiss as the tauhid respect to the cultural values that we hold and that were not an aggressive practice.

FS: This means that keris does not work as fictional item, but it has aesthetic values. Is it?

RS: Today, we cannot put the keris in its frame. For example, the keris slotted at the waist is for high fashion. I think the keris should live in other culture, therefore I am bringing the keris to live in the three-dimension sculpture in Malaysia. The keris is not only for high fashion and attire, but it sits in the storytelling of the philosophy of the sculpture art. The keris abstract can be used in the storytelling of current situation. This is what I am trying to bring in; the geographical order. In idiom, we say ‘sekalai air bai, sekalai pantai berubah’ or ‘sekalai air bai, sekalai pasir berubah’, which this is the value of art is all about. Some people preserve the traditional art; for me it can be preserved but there is a need of tradition expansion so that the tradition will not die in the tradition frame. It should be modernised in a new version. This is my appreciation to both the keris image and torso sculpture; to protude the images vividly.

FS: What kind of wood do you use as the base?

RS: Mixed, there are merbau, sena and other heavy and strong woods.
FS: In your previous works, it is difficult to see you use the base to place the work, a stand alone sculpture. Why did you use the base in this work?

RS: The Lok Series sculpture is a combination of my interests of weapon, figure and torso sculpture. Torso is a traditional combination of Western sculpture art; that is frequently made and stylized in the Western culture. Therefore, it is said to be from the West itself. In Malay culture, keris is a well-loved art device. This is because keris can be made as a culture device that represent status and specific symbols. First, the figure represents Western tradition as European based sculpture. Second, keris as the alam Melayu device that represents Malay identity to the sculpture's face. The combination of Western tradition through body face but the face tradition is still in our tradition. Therefore, I put this tradition in the sculpture tradition. Third, the base is the traditional structure of a sculpture. These elements have sculpture, European, and Malay tradition that were combined in the creation of my own sculpture and for me it is a form of modern Malaysian sculpture art that brings Malay identity. This is my readings of the series.

FS: Your new work is now seen from the head to the upper side of the body or torso. Why did not you give attention to other parts of the body such as the leg. Is this a comeback to the sculpture tradition, that requires it to be placed on the base.

RS: If we look back to the torso sculpture in the western art mould, it emphasises the upper body part of human, either from the thigh to the head or head but the hand is non-existence. In this sculpture I do not want to show the overall character of the body. It is enough to show the most interesting part of the body that I want which is the bottom to the upper side. In this subject I use the spine which we can see the undulation, even the figure is a half-body but we can see the dynamics of this work which is not static. Therefore, this subject is enough without feet and hands to show the movement because the body shape itself is sufficient in creating dynamics as an element to feature the flow movement. I play with ribcage in my sculpture to make the sculpture a strong structure. I used the ribs that are covered with moderate muscles but sufficient to portray the gallant of the structure. In the philosophy point of view, I want to show that the body endures the current challenges because the lok tells the meandering journey. Actually, lok means dent, a dent shows something twisted. The twisted shape is a journey philosophy like a river, as the lok and dents
get bigger, the journey will be hard and more challenging. This is the keris philosophy that I used in the lok sculpture.

ID: I know that there is a silat in Kuala Kangsar, silat gerak seni abjad. Are you the patron?

RS: No, I am not the patron but I am the student. I learned silat pelintau during my school days and seni silat abjad. This silat is more on self defense and play movement. But this silat is only a reference because I like the game. It creates ideas about movement.

ID: I was previously a keris researcher and for example, silat siput is not for fighting purpose because there are specific movements for it. How do you determine the lok in your work for the shape is unique?

RS: For the sculpture series, I used the concave and convex space elements, which are positive and negative spaces. In keris we can see the rise and subside parts or the high and dent, and the dent and the high parts. Therefore, it is two basic things in the shape creation which is positive space convex and the negative space concave. These are the elements and basic principles in design. Actually my sculptures revert to the basic philosophy in shaping, convex and concave. These are my basic foundation but after a long rehash, the formation became difficult. For me, the suitability of the keris depends on the suitability of body position. The keris I used in my sculpture is based on ke body position flow, where the body we see is a spine. If the bottom is high, it is convex and it will be concave in the positive and negative space game. Therefore, the keris should complement where it can adjust with the body. In this situation, the keris lok and body posture shape are important and interdependent.

FS: In Malay culture, keris is an important weapon and has many roles. Keris is inherit from one generation to another. This weapon has its own spirit, it can fly, kill or defend. Can you explain the perasapan or usap keris?

RS: When the Malays make the keris, it is a multifunctional tool and has a physical and spiritual value. We can see the physical of the keris by the feature,
shape, elements of subject such as elephant's tusk, lizard; symbols on
the keris such as sampan, river, straight road, there are hafts in a shape
of sitting (worshipping), tawaruk, servitude. As for the keris spear, it has
an element, the keris can be seen as a multipurpose object. Keris is not
only an ordinary weapon, it is a symbol and the Malays' journey stand.
Perasapan is a spiritual condition, stroking the keris can be related with
the early people in Malay culture. Stroking the keris is usually done
using the frankincense, incense for instance is a common culture in
Islam. In Islam, when people want to perform pilgrimage in Mecca, they
will use incense. Therefore, the incense in Malay civilisation comes from
the frankincense besides stingless bee's wasp. The lac fossils and stone
resources become the compatible incense because in Malay civilisation
we take things that have its physical and spiritual side. It is not only the
physical side, the surface, but also the inner side, then only it will live in
complementing the creation of human which is physical and spiritual.
The keris also must be in the physical and spiritual aspect that touches
two aspects; to be with the God which is supernatural and spiritual. But
there are some who go to the jins world, the higher world of the
angels, and the highest is the divinity. Therefore, among the symbols
we use is the incense; as we want to narrate that the keris stage can
reach the divinity level. But there are some practitioners who only
choose to be in the journey of the jin and this is a diversity in the
society.

ID: You said about the keris cleaning. Besides that, we know that there are
soil, fire, water, and steel elements when we talked about cleaning and care
of the keris. The keris is made from steel and why do we worship it? Is it
because of the steel element that we used? In this case, what type of steel
did you use or did you use steel mixture or on hand materials because if
there are keris collectors, this might be beneficial for them?

RS: Steel is a precious element created by Allah, whoever knows
how to do it will get the strength. The Malays are known for their
capability in handling the steel, Sungai Batu has a place to melt the
steel. This means that the Malay civilisation is and old civilisation
that uses the steel. In spiritual aspect, the steel is viewed for its
strength. We cannot find the strength of the steel in other materials
that we use. Most of the developed countries in the world have great
steel technology. In the Malay world, we have the traditional steel
and the steel from the space that we call meteorite. The mixtures of
steels made it stronger, they said it is the combination of heaven and
earth. Te steel practitioners have their own rituals to
make the steel stronger and extraordinary. There are stories on how the keris has its own characteristics in helping its owner. For example, the legendary Taming Sari and Hang Tuah. Nowadays, there is a vibration theory, that everything has its inner vibration power. Allah said that, “Nothing is created a waste.” In the mind of keris maker, they have a bility to mix the steels to create a new and strong steel. The basic modern mixture of steel such as carbon steel functions as a strong medium but it is a bit brittle. Although the steel gets into other steel through stamps and hits, but if there is an impact of the steel being break, it must have the mild steel characteristics. Although it is strong, the steel can be brittle but it can be soften dan the strength can be used by covering it with the mild steel. The mild steel has a moderate strength but not as strong as the carbon steel and has the strong characteristic when it holds the carbon steel. This is our understanding when mixing the steel to become a steel with its own quality. The mixtures of various steels make a new kind of steel with its own strength. Although this is the Malays understanding and know-how, but it has depleted due to the research by the Europeans. Now, they are using a lot if this mixtures on their weapon making. We also export our steel to the Middle East. Our know-how have been seen by the Turkiye in the Ottoman Empire but the strong swords used by Salehuddin Al-Ayubi were made by Damascus steel, a steel mixture, just like the Malays.

FS: Does that make it shinier?

RS: We should see what is the mixture of shiny steel and the ingredients of the steel. If the ingredients contain chromium, it will become shiny. This element also produce different results, if there is a nickel mixture it will have a white spots lines on the steel pattern. In Alam Melayu, we do not only understand the steel mixture but we surpass that to the details of the patterns where the steel patterns have their own luck, it is called pamur on the keris. Pamur brings luck and it is a symbol in status and attire.

ID: In the making of lok sculpture, did you only use the keris technique or mixture?

RS: In Lok Series, the keris used is still using the steel mixture but the it is not immoderate like the real keris because of the time factor. However, I still use two types of steel; carbon and mild steel. If you look at it closely, the pamur trace
can be seen like a steel line. For that reason I produce tradition keris including the discipline, retaining the tradition such as when you want to open it, you need to be bathed with lime. Every patch of the sculpture between the keris (head part) and torso (body part) is purposely unlocked. I used cloth as the chock to tighten the keris and body. If the keris becomes rusty in the collector’s collection, it will be wrenched and cleaned like the tradition keris in the sculpture. The keris culture still holds the originality of Malay keris.

ID: Can you share some advice on the steel mixture?

RS: There is an advice on steel mixture. In Perak, the steel mixture are called seven pa’ and ‘nine pa’. People ask what ‘pa’ means. I prefer using the term from Pahang, ‘kaf’ but I already know the formula to both knowledges. The Pahang people use ‘kaf’ because they have ‘kaf’ practice to awaken the steel. But now people do not practice for hikmah because there is no need for it. Keris is a symbol of our strength. There is a saying by tok guru that goes, “When Allah destroys the keris, it will come back to its owner.” The spirit of the steel will come back to its living owner who has the spirit.

FS: I can see that if the collectors own your recent works, they will get two objects. First, they will get the keris, and second, they will get the torso as a sculpture. But if we look for afar, the torso sculpture looks like the keris hafts. Did you plan to do it or it happened coincidently?

RS: Coincidently, there is a figure in the keris haft but it does not refer to the keris haft. The figure refers to itself.

ID: We usually count with odd numbers if we craft the lok. How is the actual method of counting the lok?

RS: In my work, lok is not only in odd numbers, there is also in even numbers because it had gone beyond the lok limit, therefore it does not follow the odd tradition. In the culture of keris making, even lok symbolises the end of the keris making. It means that the keris maker wants to stop before the passed away. In other words, he does not want to make more keris and close it with and even numbers. But in
my work, it is just a philosophy. The situation I tried to do has strayed from the real situation of kenis. I describe that our journeys and challenges have exceed the limits. In other words, I want to say that the Western culture has been absorbed in our race. However, they still have the Malay face and identity. The unreasonable look means a lot of unreasonable challenges.

FS: What is you practice? Is the working space like a workshop or studio influence the way an artist work and forming his work?

RS: I take this sculpture work as a professional work. The workshop is a place for me to sit, create and produce my work. I always sit there to look for materials and review my ideas, whenever I have free times. There is no ritual there. The ritual happens not only in the workshop, it is something that has been practiced within us. However, I learn that there is rituals in creating or producing a weapon. There is specific rituals to make a ‘hikmah’ weapon or to have a spiritual touch on it. It is to put the things that we create at par with something exceptional or Allah’s grace. I cannot deny that by Allah’s grace, I was given ideas, and advice. I always seek guidance and pray to Allah that I can benefit the society with my works. There are some who questioned my works, saying that the torso looks like a naked body. If there is an erotisme element, I have already put it away and what I want to showcase the strength, something that I want to tell and emphasise and I do not think it is unsuitable. Some still saying about the prohibition of making figure. For me, three-dimension is a visual language, therefore I express it from the language point of view in a situation and it does not lead to something negative. It means that from the three-dimension frame view, I have put it in my own frame. This is an idea that I seek and ask for.

FS: Do you have any common practice of the steel?

RS: There are rituals when dealing with special weapons. But not with this sculpture, it is a discipline that I practice way before, a responsibility of an artist is to create a work as a language of communication. For me it is a responsibility. Every morning before entering the workshop, I practice solat Dhuha, solat Istikharah for guidance. Solat Istikharah for example is to ask for guidance from Allah for every action and movement we make that day. I prepared myself before entering the workshop. That is what I do everyday. However, I did not do any
other rituals, like the weapon making ritual. It has a different ritual because it has a different art and conversation language.

FS: Does your working space influence the size and the quantity of the work that will be produced?

RS: The important thing in the workshop is I have all the equipments I need to do my work. I went back to my village to get an undistracted personal space, the need to pay the rent, and the non-urgent needs of life.

ID: Do you need to create new and specific equipments by yourself in shaping the steel for the Lok Series?

RS: In shaping the steel I used the sandwich or folding technique. For this series, I specially ordered the furnace gas to produce a better combustion. It is hard for us to find a good resource of charcoal. The charcoal to melt the steel is from merbau charcoal to get a clean combustion through a purple fire. To get the melting point, the temperature should reach 1300 degree. The combustion is strengthen with the wind combustion. The usage of the gas is not only to strengthen, but clean.

ID: Do yo still make keris for order?

RS: For now I do not take any orders but only for certain individual purpose. I made the keris as a token of appreciation. The keris making and its ritual is not as easy as it seems like the ordinary keris making. The certain keris making should be intended to certain people.

FS: What is your hope to the audience who come to see your new works?

RS: I hope the audience will understand the message that I would like to deliver and to accept, appreciate and share the enjoyment of the work. At the same time I hope that this exhibition can create a spark to the nation's art especially sculpture, to keep it fresh for the young generations and the researchers of Malay culture.