

# The Parang Lading as a Medium of Visual Cultural Communication: A Semiotic and Iconological Perspective

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**Abstract:** *The parang lading, a traditional Malay weapon, is more than a practical tool for survival and combat; it serves as a profound medium of cultural communication and individual character. Its morphology, materials, and usage embody the values, beliefs, and identity of the Malay people. This paper examines the symbology inherent in the parang lading, exploring its historical significance, philosophical underpinnings, and role in visual communication within the traditional Malay community. Utilizing qualitative analysis of literary materials, interviews with cultural practitioners, and artifact studies, this research highlights the weapon's contributions to the preservation of Malay heritage and its communicative function as a cultural artifact. The framework suggested by de Saussure and Peirce on semiotics, and Panofsky's work on iconography and iconology is applied as the basis for deliberating the findings of this research. These findings are then further expanded using Ibn Al-Arabi's philosophy of wahdatul wujud or "the unity of being", which is one of the cornerstones of the Malay faith, or akidah. The context of the parang lading as an instrument for spiritual refinement is considered in this discussion. This study aims to explore the iconology behind the visual elements of the parang lading and the awareness of the spiritual aspirations one could undertake by appreciating it. These findings emphasize the importance of safeguarding such traditional elements in the context of personal spiritual growth as well as cultural continuity and Malay heritage discourse.*

**Keywords:** Cultural Communication; Iconology; Ibn Al-Arabi; Kedah; Parang Lading; Silat Cekak

## 1. Introduction

Malay culture, rich in tradition and history, is replete with artifacts that embody its ethos. Among these, traditional weapons like the keris hold a significant place, serving not only practical purposes but also symbolising the values and worldview of the Malay people. Traditional weapons are cultural artifacts that communicate societal values, norms and philosophies. Other than the keris, the parang lading is an iconic weapon that originated in the northern Malay states, particularly Kedah. The parang lading is both a tool of survival and a weapon of war, closely tied to the agrarian and martial heritage of the region. The unique design and practical applications serve as a lens through which we can understand Malay perspectives on balance, adaptability, and resilience. This study aims to decode the visual and symbolic language embedded in the parang lading, contributing to broader discussions on cultural communication, heritage preservation and spiritual development.

An analysis of the parang lading's semiotics and iconography will reveal a close connection that the Malays have with nature. The parts of the weapon named after various flora and fauna reflect this intimate relationship. Materials required to forge a parang lading are also obtainable from nature. It has been a part of the daily lives of the inhabitants of Kedah and its surrounding areas since time immemorial. It also plays an important part in silat, the Malay form of martial art. Among the silat schools that practice the parang lading as a weapon is Persatuan Seni Silat Cekak Malaysia (PSSCM), whom declared the parang lading as their official weapon in 1965. Other northern silat schools that employ the parang lading include Seni Silat Gayong Harimau from Pulau Pinang and Seni Silat Gayong Harimau Hitam from Kedah.

While the keris has been extensively studied for its symbolic, cultural and mystical significance, less attention has been paid to the parang lading's communicative role. This paper addresses this gap by analysing the weapon's design and cultural symbolism. This study employs a qualitative approach, focusing on the visual and symbolic elements of the parang lading. Themes of balance, resilience and cultural identity are explored through a semiotic and iconographic lens. Semiotics and iconography offer complementary frameworks to explore visual cultural communication. These ideas are further reinforced by Ibn Al-Arabi's philosophy of *wahdatul wujud* or "the unity of being". These theories illuminate how the parang lading conveys meaning through its design and historical role, revealing the depth of Malay cultural identity and philosophy.

## **2. Methodology**

This research was conducted using three qualitative approaches: documentary research, artifact analysis and ethnographic interviews. Literary texts and records relating to Malay weaponry and especially the parang lading were reviewed, as well as material on Malay iconography and visual motifs. These include books on Malay carvings, textiles, clothing, and academic work on silat. Reference materials relating to Malay culture and the Islamic faith were also examined, as the Malay culture is closely associated with the Islamic religion.

Whenever possible, artifacts such as antique and recent examples of the parang lading were also studied. These artifacts were in the possession of private collectors and silat practitioners, as well as a few specimens in local museums. A typological study by Hanif (2024) revealed 10 types of parang lading that have been categorised according to blade profiles. Each of these types of parang lading were designed according to specific functions such as domestic tasks, farming, bush clearing or warfare.

Last but not least, due to the scarcity of written material on the parang lading, interviews with cultural practitioners were also conducted. These included silat masters, bladesmiths (*pandai besi*) and historians. The interviews were also quite challenging because some of the respondents were reserved when it came to revealing the secrets of the parang lading's philosophy.

In order to understand the significance of the parang lading as a tool for visual cultural communication, this study was approached from the semiotic and iconographic perspectives, applying theories from de Saussure, Peirce and Panofsky. These theories collectively provide a robust framework for analysing the parang lading as a medium of visual cultural communication. This is further augmented by Ibn Al-Arabi's concept of the unity of being to illustrate the Malay thinking in terms of spiritual development. Each theory offers unique perspectives on how the weapon encapsulates and transmits cultural values.

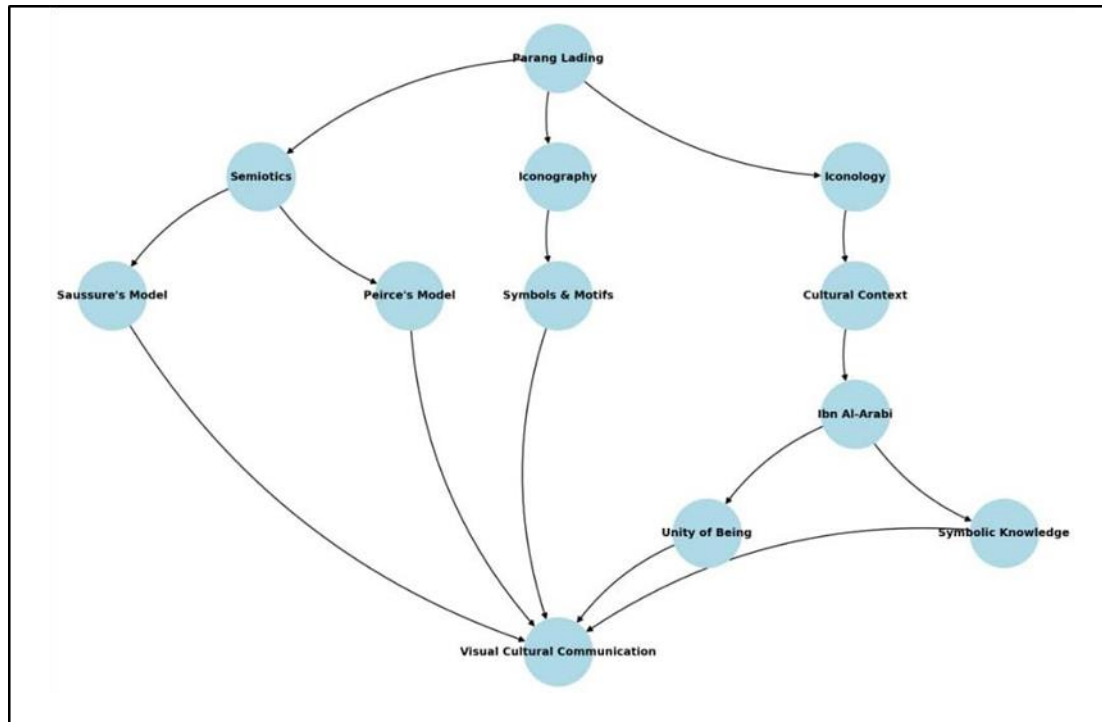


Figure 1: Flow diagram of the semiotic, iconographic and iconological analysis of the parang lading

### 3. Literature review

With regards to the parang lading, a majority of the written sources were obtained from the archives and publications of Persatuan Seni Silat Cekak Malaysia (PSSCM). This silat school was registered in 1965. The late Ustaz Haji Hanafi bin Haji Ahmad, the founder and Guru Utama of PSSCM formally introduced the parang lading as the official weapon of Seni Silat Cekak in 1973. This was during the National Silat Convention organised by Persatuan Bahasa Melayu of Universiti Sains Malaysia. PSSCM has been issuing articles on the parang lading, but with similar content for their publications. The parang lading was also reputedly the weapon used by Panglima Ismail, one of Kedah's military commanders during the Kedah-Siam wars of 1821-1842, popularly known as Perang Musuh Bisik. According to Janudin and Yusoff (2019), Panglima Ismail was actually Dato' Seri Paduka Raja Laksamana Wan Ismail, Kedah's commander-in-chief during the early years of the Kedah-Siam wars.

Ismail, et.al. (2018) presented a paper on the parang lading entitled Parang Lading: Senjata Rasmi Seni Silat Cekak Malaysia. This paper portrayed the parang lading as the official weapon of PSSCM and also included some details on the measurements for the parang lading according to PSSCM standards. The paper also mentioned that PSSCM held the patent for the parang

lading from 1994 until 2018, which was registered at the Patents Office in Great Britain under the registration number 2037410. Ismail et.al. also referred to the parang lading as the letter "Alif", the first alphabet of the Jawi script. The significance of this statement will be discussed further in this paper.

Janudin (2024) approached the topic from an etymological approach in Etimologi Asal-usul Parang Lading: Senjata asli Melayu Kedah dan senjata rasmi Persatuan Seni Silat Cekak Malaysia (PSSCM). This paper offered a different perspective on the parang lading, not only as the official weapon of PSSCM, but also the traditional weapon of the Malays of Kedah.

A typological study of the parang lading was carried out by Hanif (2024), which resulted in the establishment the Hanif typology for parang lading. This study revealed 10 different types of parang lading and also a morphological comparison of parang lading from Kedah to parang lading and similar types of parang from other parts of the Malay Archipelago.

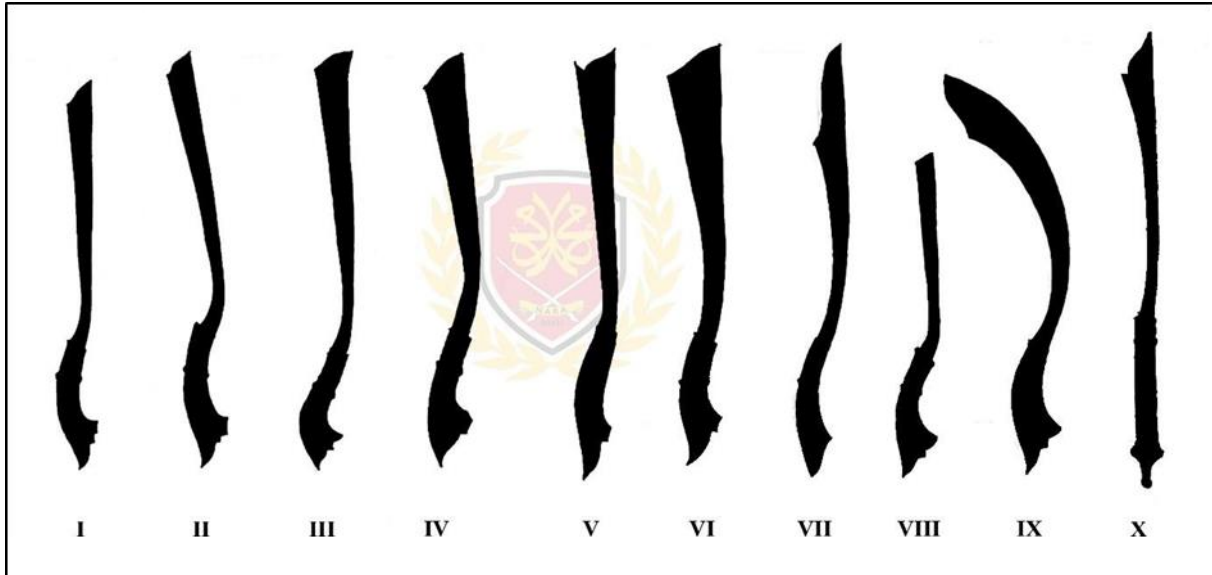


Figure 2: Parang lading typology (after Hanif, 2024)

A parang lading was featured in the book *Rupa & Jiwa* by Syed Ahmad Jamal (2010). However, not much information was included other than the single photo of the parang lading, which was from the collection of the National Museum of Malaysia. The author has reason to believe that this particular parang lading was one of two specimens provided by the late Ustaz Haji Hanafi to the museum in the 1980s.

The oldest photographic record of a parang lading was obtained from *20th Century Impressions of British Malaya: Its history, people, commerce, industries and resources* edited by Wright in 1908. This book displayed a photograph of a parang lading with a tassel, captioned, “C is the

broad-ended Malay sword called Lading (this last has a horn handle with coloured tassel: the backward curve of the blade enables a draw cut to be given with great ease.”

The word lading was mentioned in *Dictionnaire Malai, Hollandais et Francais = Maleisch, Nederdutch en Fransch woordenboek* by Marsden and Elout in 1825. This was the earliest mention of the lading by a non-Malay source. Other manuscripts that mentioned the lading include the *Hikayat Pelayaran Abdullah Ke Kelantan* (1838), *Syair Hemop* (1740) and *Hikayat Banjar dan Kota Waringin* (1663). However, none of these sources mentioned how the parang lading was used, except in the documentation by PSSCM, which mentioned and/or illustrated some basic techniques of the parang lading. As such, this study relied heavily on ethnographic interviews with cultural practitioners, silat masters and traditional bladesmiths.

#### 4. Results and Discussion

The design and morphology of the parang lading has remain unchanged for hundreds of years. Its broad-ended blade and triangular cross-section suggest functionality and efficiency. The simple, flared hilt provides excellent hold either in the forward or reversed grip positions. The

absence of a guard highlights the user's reliance on skill and adaptability, embodying Malay values of self-reliance and resourcefulness.

Hanif (2024) observed that the parang lading is both a tool for working and a weapon of war. This illustrates that one design can be utilised for multiple functions, a testament to Malay ingenuity and practicality. In fact, in the past, the parang lading was used both as a farming tool and weapon by conscript militia who fought to defend their homeland from the Siamese invasion. Only the warriors and battlefield commanders had specially made "weapons grade" parang lading, distinguishable from the farming version through several unique features.

Ishak Itam (pers.comm.) stated that the tasselled parang lading was usually gifted by the sultan to battlefield commanders or panglima. One such example was illustrated in Wright (1909). Md. Faisal (pers.comm.) affirmed that weapons grade lading are only sharpened at about 3 inches from the tip, while those used for agricultural work had a cutting edge for almost the entire length of the blade. However, the agricultural version of the parang lading were in their own right, formidable weapons that can be used to defend oneself.

One could infer that the parang lading of Kedah spread throughout the archipelago due to trade, migration and conflicts. The Kedah-Siam wars or Perang Musuh Bisik (1821 to 1842) was one such conflict. It was known that warriors from Aceh, the Minang kingdoms, Palembang, Pattani, and even as far away as Java joined the Kedah forces to fight against the Siamese invaders and British traitors.

Other instances include the Pahang civil war, also known as the Perang Bendahara (1857 to 1863), when Kedah forces were brought in to reinforce the attack on Pekan and Gancong. A descendant of a bladesmith from this war still makes parang lading in the traditional design in Gancong (Asnawi Ismail, pers.comm.).

Another conflict that possibly helped to widen the distribution of the parang lading was the Selangor civil war or Perang Klang between 1867 and 1874. The conflict was between Raja Abdullah bin Raja Jaafar and Raja Mahadi bin Raja Sulaiman. Tengku Kudin of Kedah, who was an ally to Raja Abdullah, marched a host of 500 warriors from Kedah to help Raja Abdullah in the campaign against Raja Mahadi, and the former was victorious in the confrontation. It is plausible that together with the host of warriors, a few bladesmiths would have been brought along.

The assassination of British resident JWW Birch in 1875 in Perak was also related to the parang lading, as he was reputedly dealt the final blow from such a weapon (Shukri Janudin, pers.comm.). This shows that the parang lading was also extant in Perak. An antique specimen was also recovered in Taiping, Perak when the heiress donated this artifact to Ustaz Muhammad Al-Amin (pers.comm.).



Figure 3: Parang lading from Taiping (source: Ustaz Muhammad Al-Amin social media)

### Physical characteristics of the parang lading

Typically, the parang lading is comprised of 2 main parts: the blade and the hilt. The main distinguishing feature is the blade, which widens towards the tip, facilitating powerful chopping motions and reflecting the practicality of rural Malay life. The hilt, typically crafted from buffalo horn and sometimes wood, is simple yet ergonomic, with minimal decoration. Its flared end or pommel, often likened to a “deer’s hoof”, symbolizes stability and grounding. The parts of the parang lading are illustrated in the figure below.

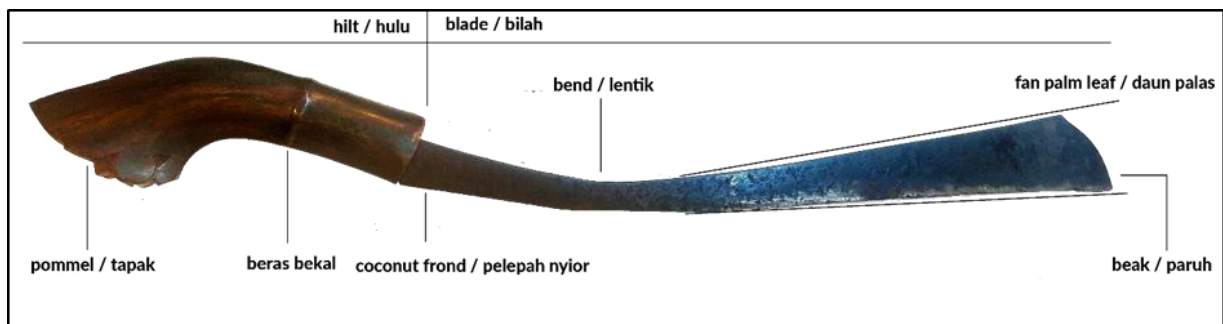


Figure 4: Parts of the parang lading (after Hanif, 2024)

According to Hanif (2024), identifying characteristics of a parang lading can be summed up as below:

- Base of blade with triangular cross-section (pelepah nyior, trans. coconut frond)
- Spine and edge curvature not similar
- Curvature of blade is close to the hilt
- Balance of the parang is on the curvature or lentik
- Blade broadens in the shape of a fan palm leaf (daun palas), with the tip measuring 2- 3 inches in width
- Blade is straight or almost straight on spine and edge after the curve
- Blade is usually made of high carbon steel
- Tip of the blade is cut at an almost 90° angle, to about 60° on some examples
- Hilt is usually made of horn or wood, with a bend to accommodate the grip of the wielder and to prevent the hilt from slipping off while in use
- Hilt usually carved in the shape of tapak kuda (trans. horse hoof), tapak kijang (trans. deer hoof) or pucuk daun (trans. leaf shoot), usually with a beras bekal (ring carved into the hilt) present

These are the general characteristics of a parang lading from Kedah. However, some examples do not have all of these attributes, but can still be categorised as parang lading due to having several of the main features such as the triangular blade cross-section at the base, the difference in curvature between the spine and the cutting edge, and the distinctive paruh (trans. bird's beak) or blade tip. Below are some differences between a parang lading and other similar types of parang.

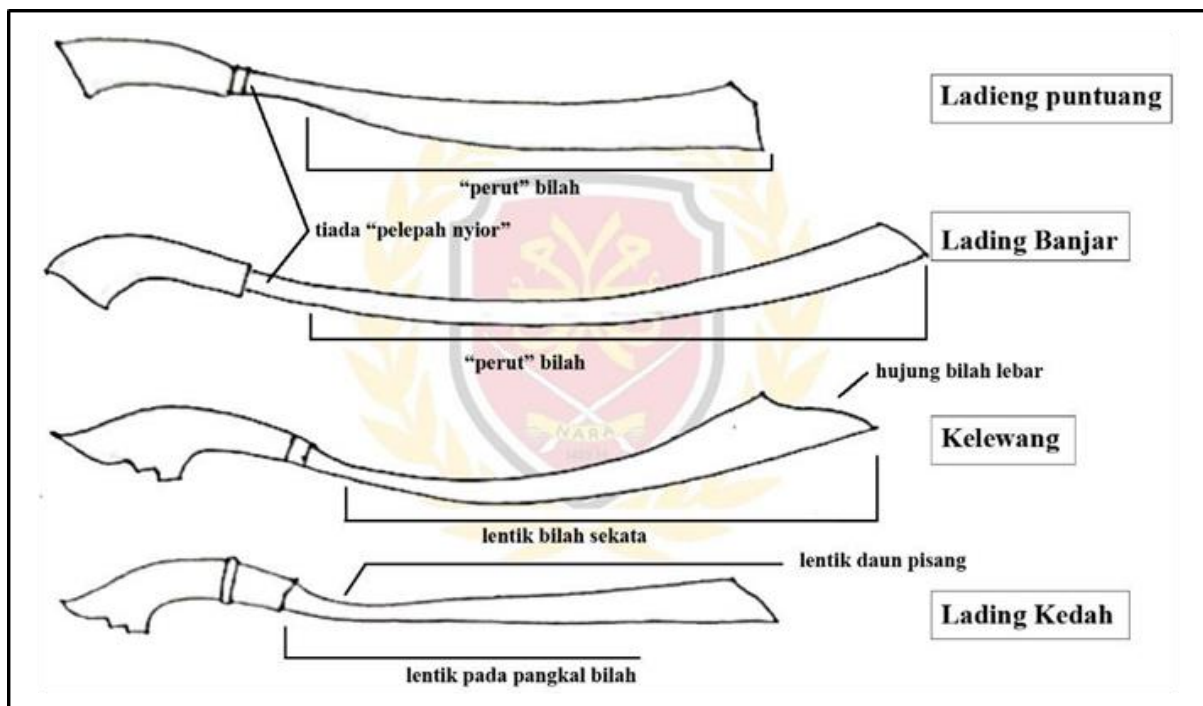


Figure 5: The differences between the parang lading and other types of parang (after Hanif, 2024)

The ladieng puntuang is an example from the Talu province of western Sumatera. It has a slightly different blade profile in that the curvature on the cutting edge is convex and not straight. The lading banjar, despite its name, comes from the Malay peninsula. It was introduced by the local Banjar ethnic but is somewhat different from the version in Banjarmasin. This looks more like the Kedah version, except that the blade still has a convex

edge and the curvature is towards the tip of the blade. Next is the kelewang, a type of parang found in the east coast of the Malay peninsula. This version is often mistaken as a parang lading, but it does not have the triangular cross-section at the base of the blade. The curvature of the blade is also evenly distributed and the blade often ends in a sharp tip. The handle is also noticeably different from the design of the parang lading hilt. Parang lading originating from Pattani and neighbouring areas look similar to some types of kelewang that they are hard to distinguish. At the bottom of the figure is a typical parang lading from Kedah, for comparison. Some of the parang in Borneo also resemble the parang lading. For example, the parang ilang and parang latok, represented in the diagram below which shows several other types of parang from the Malay Archipelago which resemble the parang lading.

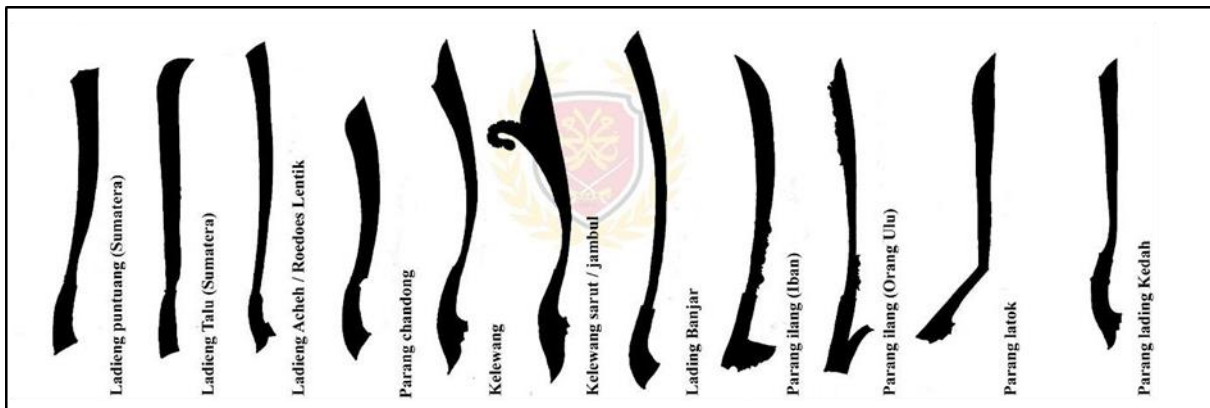


Figure 6: Different types of parang similar to the parang lading

However, these traditional parangs are being replaced with more modern and simpler designs such as the commercial variants of the parang chandong and lading banjar. Not only are these new variants easier to make, they are also more economical to produce.

### Semiotic, iconographical and iconological investigation of the parang lading

Generally, semiotics is the study of signs, or an epistemology about the existence or the actuality of signs in social life. This framework was suggested by de Saussure and others such as Peirce, Barthes, Jakobsen, Morris and Eco. Semiotics accounts for everything that can be seen or interpreted as a sign. De Saussure's theory emphasized language as a system of sign, and besides language there are many other sign systems that exist in the world of mankind. According to him, a sign consists of two focal components, namely the signifier and the signified. In this dichotomic approach, the signifier refers to something that is in material or physical form, explicitly exists and can be distinguished by human senses. Conversely, the signified denotes to something that literally and physically does not exist. The relationship between the signifier and the signified is referred to as the significant system. De Saussure also asserted that both concepts have mutual need and complement each other, and one aspect cannot exist without the other.

In contrast to de Saussure's theory, Peirce's concept of sign focuses on a three-dimensional or triadic system. He classifies signs into three components – the sign (representatum or ground), the object, which is referred to as the referant, and the interpretant. The first component is synonymous with de Saussure's concept of signifier in which physical signs explicitly exist, but is not necessarily material in nature. On the contrary, Peirce divided de Saussure's concept of signified into two components – the object and the interpretant. Object refers to something

that is represented or exemplified by the sign, while interpretant means any meanings conveyed by the sign about the object which was previously unknown and abstract in nature. The interactional relationship between those three concepts is denoted by Peirce as semiosis.

In order to bring this study into deeper, more meaningful context, Panofsky's notions of iconography and iconology are brought into the discussion. Iconography refers to the study of symbols, images and motifs within works of art. Iconology goes beyond this method of identifying and interpreting individual images or symbols to exploring their deeper meanings, historical context, and cultural significance. It seeks to understand the intellectual and spiritual ideas conveyed by images, often examining the societal, philosophical and theological implications of those representations.

Ethnographic research should be conducted from the local perspective in order to explore, examine and try to understand the local wisdom. As such, based on Islamic teachings, Ibn Al-Arabi's framework of the unity of being is applied to further enhance the understanding of the symbology behind the parang lading. Islamic iconography utilizes symbols that suggest divine presence and power, often through non-figurative forms that embody unity, eternity and divine order. Iconology is Islamic thought would explore the deeper, mystical significance of Islamic symbols and symbolism. Ibn Al-Arabi's work has important relevance in this study, as the Malay civilisation is closely related to sufi teachings and philosophies, as mentioned by Al-Attas.

For Ibn Al-Arabi, the visible world is a mirror of the unseen divine reality. His concept of the unity of being asserts that all of existence is a manifestation of God's divine attributes. He also emphasized the importance of symbolic and esoteric knowledge, which has a close connection to iconology. Symbolic knowledge refers to the understanding of symbols, metaphors, and signs used in religious texts, mystical visions, and natural phenomena. Ibn Al-Arabi believed the universe is like a vast book filled with signs pointing toward divine realities. Symbols bridge the gap between the seen (phenomenal world) and the unseen (divine realities), offering insights accessible to those with refined perception. Esoteric (batin) knowledge is the inward, hidden knowledge that pertains to the essence of spiritual truths and divine realities, often described as "gnosis" (makrifat). It transcends the outward forms of religious practices and laws, delving into their spiritual purposes and meanings. However, each seeker experiences and understands esoteric knowledge uniquely, as it is tied to their spiritual journey. In his treatise *Fusus Al-Hikam*, he mentioned:

“The one who knows himself knows his Lord; he knows himself because he has seen the traces of the divine on himself, and he knows that his true essence is nothing but God's essence.”

Ibn Al-Arabi's work explored how language and symbols, such as Arabic letters and their spiritual significance, could be tools for meditation and mystical insight. The distinction between iconography and iconology becomes intertwined with his mystical experience of the Divine. Through the lens of *ta'wil* (interpretation), Ibn Al-Arabi encouraged an esoteric understanding of images and symbols, wherein they function as signs pointing beyond the material realm to the deeper roots of God's nature. In this perspective, he suggests a view of the world where symbols, forms and art are not just aesthetic expressions, but serve as bridges to a greater understanding of the Divine, pointing to the hidden and transcendent truths of experience.

### **The physical signs of the parang lading**

A key physical feature of the parang lading is its simplicity and minimalistic design. Unlike the keris, the parang lading is mostly devoid of any form of ornamentation. The term "minimalism" originated in the 1960s to describe a movement in art and design, particularly influenced by artists like Donald Judd and movements like Bauhaus and De Stijl. Buckminster Fuller is a key proponent of this concept, which emphasises on simplicity and functionality over aesthetic embellishment and décor. It is also evident in the Japanese sword or katana, featuring elegant design, functionality and aesthetic simplicity. These features are also reflected in the parang lading. In Islamic teachings, simplicity and minimalistic design reflects the principle of moderation. The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) encourages moderation in all matters, faith, work and even design. As recorded by Sunan Ibn Majah:

*“The best of all affairs is the middle course.”*

The weapon’s emphasis on functionality over aesthetic excess mirrors the Islamic teaching that true beauty lies in a purpose and form serving a higher function, rather than ornamentation or flamboyance. The wielder’s attention should be focused on the mastering of the weapon and its practical application rather than getting lost in superficial aesthetics. In essence, the weapon, through its simplistic design, integrates moderation into the spiritual journey of Syariat, Tariqat, Hakikat and Makrifat. In relation to Syariat, the blade’s simple, functional design mirrors the

idea that religious observances should be done with sincerity and purpose, not for show or ostentation. As an instrument of spiritual journey relative to Tariqat, it acts as a reminder for the practitioner to stay focused on the essential truth and not be distracted by external extravagance or unnecessary ornamentation. At the level of Hakikat, the lading’s design symbolizes that true reality is not complex or embellished but can be found in the pure essence of things. The minimalistic form of the weapon mirrors the seeker’s/practitioner’s focus on the direct experience of the Divine, where extraneous elements of life are left behind in the level of Makrifat. The parang lading is a spiritual symbol that encapsulates the Islamic understanding of moderation and the path of spiritual refinement, a tool that both reflects and facilitates the journey to divine knowledge.

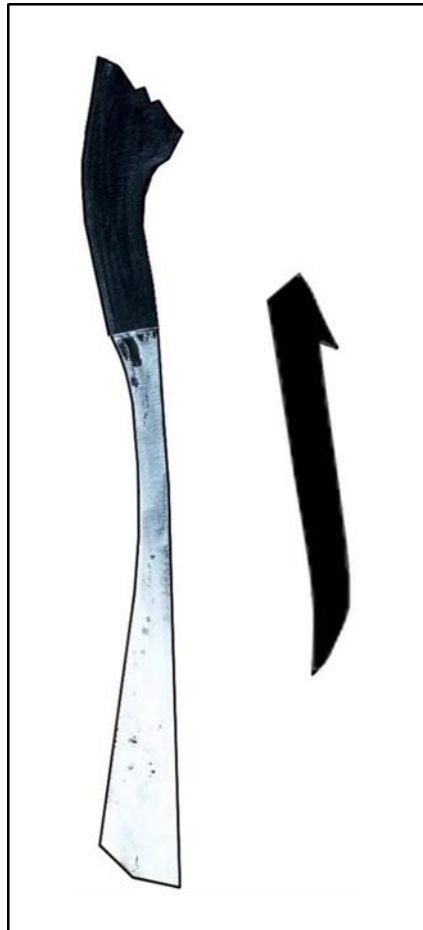
The humble materials used in the construction of the parang lading also emphasizes the concept of moderation in Islam. In Islamic thought, luxury and excessive ornamentation are often seen as distractions from the true purpose of life and the pursuit of spiritual knowledge. The choice of buffalo horn over ivory for the hilt of the weapon and the absence of precious metals such as gold, silver or jewels in the design of the parang lading further underscores the Islamic principle of moderation. The choice of these materials also reflects the rejection of vanity and emphasis on humility, which is a significant value in Islam and the Malay ethos. The use of modest materials can also be viewed as an expression of moderation in the same way that the parang lading’s design – and the journey it symbolizes – embody balance. It is an external reflection of the internal spiritual attitude that values simplicity and functionality over excess and luxury. The weapon, while functional and carefully crafted, is not about outward display or opulence. Spiritual purity and righteousness are not measured by material wealth, but by one’s inner state and connection to the Divine.

The physical form of the parang lading itself is an exercise in understanding tawhid or the oneness of God. The straight edge of the lading represents the singularity of the True Path, which is aligned with the concept of tawhid. It reflects the clear, unwavering direction towards

the Divine. It symbolizes the path the seeker of truth follows that leads directly to the ultimate destination – the recognition of God’s Oneness. This concept is reflected in one of the pantun composed by Ustaz Haji Hanafi, the founder of Persatuan Seni Silat Cekak Malaysia (PSSCM):

*“Lahirnya Cekak kerana kesedaran,  
 Bukan bermusuh sebagai tujuan...”*

It approximately translates to, “Cekak was born out of realization, making enemies is not the intention...”. Realization here can be interpreted as one’s recognition of the oneness of God, and the intention – or ultimate destination – is not to make enemies. “Making enemies” is against the Islamic teachings and it is a superficial act that brings no benefit to the seeker of truth. Once a practitioner recognizes the oneness of God, everything else becomes inconsequential. This was the message that Ustaz Haji Hanafi, through his iconology of the pantun, conveys to his students. As mentioned previously, the parang lading is the official weapon of PSSCM, and thus correlates directly with this study.



**Figure 7: The parang lading as “Alif”**

Ismail, et.al. in their paper mentioned that the parang lading, held with the hilt pointing upwards, resembles the letter “Alif”. The letter Alif (the shape of the lading) signifies a person standing upright in prayer. It symbolises steadfastness and humbleness while essentially “facing” God. By applying Ibn Al-Arabi’s approach, it can be deduced that the letter Alif, the first letter in the Arabic and Jawi alphabet, represents the concept of oneness of God (tawhid). The letter Alif is originally a simple, straight, vertical line. It is also the first letter of the name

“Allah”. Intrinsicly, the word “parang lading” itself is a connotation of “perang ad-din” or “war of religion”. This indicates that the weapon was made for the purpose of defending one’s religion, beliefs and way of life. This was evident especially during the Kedah-Siam wars (1821-1842), when the warriors of Kedah defended their homeland and way of life from the oppression of the Siamese invaders. The parang lading was an important aspect of this conflict, being the default weapon of the Kedah people.

The broad end of the blade symbolizes the many paths that individuals may take in their spiritual journey. These paths may vary in form, but they ultimately lead to the same end – the hilt, which represents Faith. The curved spine of the blade represents different ways in which a person might navigate to reach the ultimate End – God. While the straight edge signifies clarity and unity, the curved spine is a symbol of circumstantial and diverse paths that individuals may take to reach the final truth. The curvature represents the various trials and tribulations that different individuals have to go through in order to reach their destination – the recognition of God’s Oneness (tawhid). It is a symbol of resilience, adaptability and the process of learning through both challenges and ease. The curvature or the bend in the blade suggests the transformative nature of the spiritual path that the seeker takes, on their way to Makrifat.



Figure 8: Different types of parang lading hilts (from Hanif, 2024)

The hilt designs of the parang lading share a similar profile in that they flare towards the end, culminating in motifs referred to as “horse hoof” (tapak kuda), “deer hoof” (tapak kijang) or “leaf shoot” (pucuk daun). Practically, the hilt is the handle with which the practitioner grips the parang lading. Symbolically, the hilt represents the spiritual grip of the seeker – Faith. This can be illustrated by the following line from the Qur’an:

*“And hold firmly together to the rope of Allah, and do not be divided...” (Qur’an: 3:104)*

In the Qur'an, God commands the believers to hold on to His rope. This can be alluded to the hilt of the parang lading, and just as the hilt is the part of the weapon that is held and controlled, Faith is the foundational aspect that guides the practitioner on their path. The verse above signifies holding on to Faith, providing internal strength to hold onto during the ups and downs of the spiritual journey. It acts as the constant reminder of the ultimate truth, keeping the practitioner grounded as they move toward their final goal. The hilt signifies Faith as the Anchor. Another feature of the hilt is the beras bekal, a ring that is carved into the hilt to act as a marker for the practitioner to gauge their grip on the weapon. The beras bekal is a symbol of sustenance. It can be signified as the Provision of the Journey. The term beras literally refers to rice, which is a staple food and an essential source of sustenance in many cultures, including the Malays. The state of Kedah, often referred to as "The Rice Bowl of Malaysia", is renowned for its long-standing tradition of cultivating rice paddy fields.

In the context of the parang lading, the beras bekal represents the spiritual sustenance one needs to sustain them on the journey toward God. Just as rice is essential for physical nourishment, the beras bekal is a symbol of spiritual provision – the essential knowledge, guidance and virtues that sustain the seeker of truth. In Islamic thought, the true sustenance is the knowledge of God and faith in Him, as reflected in the verse of the Qur'an:

*"And it is He who sends down rain after they have despaired and spreads His mercy. And it is He who is the Protector, the Praiseworthy," (Qur'an, 42:28)*

On a deeper level, the beras bekal is also a reminder of the essential knowledge required to navigate the mysteries of life and the Divine. This is knowledge that goes beyond the superficial – knowledge that is not just theoretical but must be integrated into one's life through practice. In this way, the beras bekal points to the concept of Hakikat (the Inner, Hidden Truth), the realization of God's essence. This knowledge forms the provisions that the seeker requires to continue their journey.

Next is the symmetrical profile of the parang lading. It can be seen as a profound reflection of the concept of the "mirror" in Ibn Al-Arabi's teachings. In his thought, the mirror is a metaphor for how the Divine is reflected in all of creation. He explains that the universe is, as a whole,

like a mirror in which the Divine's attributes are reflected. The emphasis between the symmetry between self and the Divine, where both reflect and complete each other. In this sense, everything in creation – including objects like the parang lading – can be seen as a mirror of the Divine.

The parang lading can be viewed as a reflection of the self and the Divine. The symmetrical blade profile can be interpreted as the mirror of the self – an object that reflects the internal journey of the seeker toward understanding the Divine. Just as the blade is perfectly balanced on both sides, so too must the human spirit seek balance between their inner and outer worlds. The symmetry also represents the Divine Attributes that are reflected in the universe. The blade's balanced form signifies the harmony of the Divine Names, and as the practitioner holds the parang lading, they are reminded of the need for equilibrium in their actions, thought and spirit. The same concept of the mirror is also a reminder to the wielder of the parang lading of the oneness of God (tawhid) that one must reflect in their own being. In Islamic mysticism, the heart is often described as the mirror of the Divine. The heart is said to reflect the Divine Presence when it is purified. Holding the parang lading, therefore, serves as a reminder that

one must purify their own heart, so that it may reflect the Divine Light as perfectly as the symmetrical blade reflects the balance of nature.

Thus, the parang lading, through its symmetry, becomes a spiritual mirror, not just of the wielder but of the universe itself. It symbolizes the path to understanding, where the seeker reflects on the Divine Presence and aligns their own actions with the Unity of God. The blade's symmetry is the mirror through which the seeker perceives the truth of the universe and the Divine unity that underpins all of creation.

### **Future explorations and Conclusion**

The parang lading serves as a profound symbol within the framework of the Islamic cosmology, particularly when examined through the lens of Ibn Al-Arabi's mystical thought. It embodies the concept of Oneness (tawhid), and its creation and practice reflect a spiritual path akin to the stages of Syariat, Tariqat, Hakikat and Makrifat. The parang lading, as simple and humble as it may seem, represents a very important concept in tawhid and the unity of being. While the keris is supposed to make one feel proud and empowered, the lading takes the path of the paddy – semakin berisi semakin tunduk – the riper it gets, the lower it bows. This is a very significant symbolism for a weapon that originated from the “rice bowl of Malaysia”, which is the state of Kedah.

As one holds the parang lading and appreciates its minimalistic features, one can feel the humility and moderation that emanates from the weapon. There are no beautiful carvings or golden ornaments on this weapon that suggest it was made for show. A relatively simple tool, it was made for the household, farms and also battlefields. As the lading is used to help create and sustain life in agriculture, it is also an instrument for taking lives in combat. As one wields the parang lading in practice, it can become a medium for zikir (remembrance) as one goes through the practical steps of the parang lading play.

Nonetheless, in the tradition of Seni Silat Cekak Malaysia, the parang lading is a weapon of self-defence. It is held in the reversed grip position, hidden from view behind the practitioner's forearm. Only a selected few are awarded the parang lading by the Guru Utama (Grand Master) based on their contributions and service to the organisation. This was a tradition that was started by the late Ustaz Haji Hanafi bin Haji Ahmad, and continued by his successor the late Ustaz Haji Ishak bin Itam and presently being practiced by the current Guru Utama and President, Datuk Haji Maideen Kadir Shah.

However, this ceremony had its roots in the old Kedah sultanate, with records going back to the 1800s. One of the earliest recorded practitioners of Silat Cekak was Panglima Ismail, one of Kedah's generals who led their forces against the Siamese invaders during the Kedah-Siam wars between 1821 to 1842. It was recently discovered that Panglima Ismail was in fact Dato' Paduka Raja Laksamana Wan Ismail bin Wan Muhammad Long, one of Kedah's highest-ranking nobles and the father of Dato' Haji Wan Mat Saman, the first Prime Minister of Kedah. Panglima Ismail inherited Silat Cekak from his father, Laksamana Wan Muhammad Long. During the Kedah-Siam wars, it was said that some of the Kedah warriors held a lading in one hand (in reversed grip) and a sword or parang in the other (in forward grip) to fight the Siamese invaders (Hj Ghazali Abdul Rahman, pers.comm.).



**Figure 9: Dual-wielding – one of the techniques of the parang lading.**

He was succeeded by Panglima Tok Rashid, a native of Yan, Kedah, who was also his favourite disciple. In the 1920s, Panglima Tok Rashid, whose real name was Panglima Rashid bin Panglima Awang Lahat, entrusted Silat Cekak to Mr Yahya bin Said of Batu Kurau, Perak. In his testament to Mr Yahya Said, he confided the latter to return Silat Cekak to his descendant when the person comes to claim it. About 40 years later, Ustaz Haji Hanafi bin Haji Ahmad acquired Silat Cekak from Mr Yahya bin Said and was declared as Guru Utama of Seni Silat Cekak Malaysia in 1965.

Interestingly, the parang lading was not inherited from the teachings of Mr Yahya bin Said. Datuk Haji Maideen (pers.comm) stated that the parang lading was introduced by Ustaz Haji Hanafi and he declared it as the official weapon of Seni Silat Cekak Malaysia. It is the author's belief that the knowledge of parang lading combat was obtained by Ustaz Haji Hanafi prior to his meeting with Mr Yahya bin Said. In order to complete his training, he sought out Mr Yahya bin Said, and thus became the true inheritor of the silat style known as Silat Cekak. Ustaz Haji Hanafi was a person of deep religious knowledge. He would have understood the significance of the parang lading, not just as a weapon but as an instrument of spiritual enlightenment, to be practiced with the methods of Silat Cekak.

As a future exploration, the author would like to study the relationship between the practitioner, the teacher and the smith of the parang lading. This triadic relationship can be linked to the principles of qalbi (mind), qauli (speech) and fi'li (action) which is a concept applied in Islamic teachings. The roles of the practitioner, teacher and smith can be further elaborated by using Ibn Al-Arabi's approach of unity of being or wahdatul wujud. This would open new doors in

the study on the path of spiritual enlightenment, while relating the concept to the stages of spiritual journey, i.e. Syariat, Tariqat, Hakikat and Makrifat.

The parang lading can become a symbol for modern spiritual discourses, incorporating philosophy with practical applications. Practices that use the parang lading's spiritual teachings to enhance mental health and well-being can also be developed by create mindfulness exercises based on parang lading symbolism, such as meditative visualizations of its symmetrical blade or the "beras bekal" (essential provisions). One can also further contextualize the parang lading within Quranic and Hadith teachings on balance, moderation, and the straight path. The focus of this endeavour is to identify specific verses or narrations that align with the spiritual principles symbolized by the parang lading, such as those on steadfastness, provision, and unity in diversity.

The parang lading is far more than a physical weapon; it is a profound symbol of the human journey toward self-realization, divine understanding, and cosmic unity. Further research can deepen this perspective by integrating historical, philosophical, spiritual, and practical dimensions, providing new ways to engage with Islamic cosmology and Malay culture in a modern context.

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