

The Philosophy of Art Behind the Aesthetics of ‘Keris Malela’

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Abstract

This study explores the profound philosophical significance and aesthetic beauty of the Malela keris blade within Malay civilization. Utilizing Herbert's qualitative analysis of artistic forms, the research aims to appreciate the philosophical underpinnings imbued in the keris's design. The methodology involves observing the physical forms of the Malela keris blade, focusing on elements such as lok, akut, bone, canyon, groove, and cliff, which distinguish it from other keris blades. The study emphasizes the craftsmanship finesse of Malela keris blacksmiths, highlighting the unique appearance identity and deep crafting philosophy of the blade. While limited to the blade alone, the research draws from library resources including books, articles, and journals to enrich its findings.

Keywords: *Philosophy of art, Aesthetic, Malela Keris, Blade, Weapon*

INTRODUCTION

The keris, a traditional weapon of the Malay community, remains deeply embedded in Malay customs and culture, despite its evolved usage in contemporary times. Originally designed for stabbing and slicing, the keris holds significant historical importance in the martial art of silat. However, its primary function has transitioned from practical combat to a symbolic representation of Malay civilization. Helmi (2019) posits that the keris is a cultural heritage artifact, epitomizing the advanced science and technology of the Malay people, demonstrating their historical ingenuity and sophistication.

In various traditional Malay rituals, weapons now considered antiques function predominantly as symbols. Among these, the keris was esteemed above all other Malay weaponry. Historically, the keris was so intrinsic to one's identity that Malays would never leave their homes without it, comparable to venturing out without wearing a shirt. Despite the transformation in its practical application, the keris retains significant aesthetic value, making it a coveted item among collectors and enthusiasts.

The keris is a cultural artifact and heritage symbol for the Malay Archipelago and its people. It is traditionally worn as an accessory in regions such as the Riau Islands, Bugis, Java, and Bali (Al-Mudra, 2004). Woolley (1998) notes that the keris subsequently disseminated to other Southeast Asian nations, including Malaysia, Singapore, Southern Thailand, Brunei, and the Southern Philippines, where Malay populations are prevalent.

According to Mohamad et al. (2012), the keris is among the various armaments used by the Malays, alongside the sword, spear, badik, sewar, kelewang, kerambit, and others. However, the keris stands out as a symbol of Malay status and heritage. The Malay community views the keris as a talisman, while the Javanese perceive it as a 'tosan aji' weapon imbued with supernatural powers. In contrast, the Bugis community regards the keris as a 'polo besi,' signifying a noble and valuable heirloom weapon.

In this article, in addition to appreciating the philosophy behind the making of the Malela keris, the author elaborates on the aesthetics of its appearance, its history, and the materials used in blade crafting. There are numerous types of keris, each varying according to their geographic and cultural context. The Malela keris, originating from the provinces of Pattani, Kelantan, and Terengganu, is part of the peninsula keris tradition.

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This keris is distinguished by its unique and appealing blade design. The blades are meticulously crafted and intricately engraved. The Malela keris remains highly sought after by enthusiasts due to the distinctiveness of its blade and the profound philosophy underlying its creation.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology employed in this article is descriptive, incorporating library research and visual observations of art forms. McMahon (2022) suggests that aesthetic value is an evaluation based on an object's appearance and the emotional response it elicits. While challenging to assess objectively, aesthetic value often significantly influences an object's overall worth. Assessing the value of art is inherently complex and culturally debated, with perceptions of beauty shaped by cultural upbringing. For instance, Western individuals might favor classical designs inspired by Ancient Greece and Rome, whereas Eastern perspectives may differ. Artworks are appraised based on their aesthetic value, and their prices can vary dramatically depending on appearance and the creator, even if the materials are identical.

Stecker (2019) posits that the aesthetic value of artworks should be appraised in two ways: firstly, for its intrinsic worth, and secondly, to enable the artwork to fulfill other valuable functions. Gaut (2007) asserts that aesthetic value is the primary reason for owning artworks. Zangwill (2002) contends that aesthetic value is exclusively possessed by objects of sensory perception, grounded in their sensory properties.

Thus, this article's research data will be gathered from academic sources accessed through library research and credible websites. The information collection process will emphasize reading and referencing books, journals, papers, and related articles on the keris. The aesthetic design of the Malela keris will be analyzed based on the elements and principles of art. Herbert's (2017) approach will be utilized to assess the aesthetic value of the Malela keris, focusing on the observation of physical aspects and the form related to the use of art elements and principles.

THE 'KERIS' LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Shahrudin Yub (1991), the keris served as a sharp weapon for self-defense within the ancient Malay community. Arman (2014) further characterizes the keris as both a weapon and a high-value artistic masterpiece, noting the fluidity of its functions. Al-Mudra (2009) emphasizes the keris's artistic excellence, attributing its value to the beauty of its form, materials, and the lengthy, skillful production process undertaken by its maker.

Ibrahim (2017) asserts that the keris is inherently curved, with the curves typically appearing in odd numbers such as three, five, nine, eleven, thirteen, and higher. Even a straight blade is considered within this curvilinear context. Each curve design carries distinct symbolic meanings and philosophies. The fourth edition of the Kamus Dewan defines the keris as a sharp, double-edged weapon with either a straight or curved blade. Additionally, Harsrinuksmo (2004) identifies several criteria that a keris must meet:

- i. The keris is composed of two main parts: the blade, which includes the pesi and ganja.
- ii. The keris blade is slanted rather than perpendicular, symbolizing the submissiveness and respect inherent in the archipelago community.
- iii. The length of a typical keris blade ranges from 33 cm to 38 cm, although there are exceptions. For instance, some kerises outside Java can measure up to 58 cm, and a Southern Philippine keris called sundang can reach 64 cm. Smaller keris-like talismans are not classified as kerises.
- iv. A quality keris is crafted from three different metals, with the minimum being two types: steel and pamor (pattern) material.



Figure 1. Parts of keris.

Source: Ab. Hamid (2019)

According to Miksic and Tranchini (1990), the keris originated in the Javanese Islands and gradually spread throughout the archipelago. Its existence dates back to the 9th century, as evidenced by carved imagery found in the Borobudur Temple. Kempers (1976) suggests that the tradition of keris-making in the region was influenced by the bronze culture thriving in Dongson, Vietnam around the 3rd century AD. Kempers proposes that the keris evolved from the stabbing or punching weapons used during the Bronze Age, which were shaped in a manner resembling a human figure standing on its handle, integrating with its blades.

Al-Mudra (2009) highlights temple carvings on the Java Islands dating back to the 5th century AD, indicating the Javanese familiarity with the keris. These carvings, found in Dakuwu Village, Grabag, Magelang, Central Java, depict iron equipment and are estimated to be around 500 years old, featuring Pallawa script in Sanskrit. They clearly depict a clean, clear spring and various weapons, including tridents, axes, scythes, and daggers resembling the keris.

With the influx of Indian cultural influence around the 5th century, metal forging technology entered the archipelago, as evidenced by temple remains in the Java Islands, notably Borobudur and Prambanan. These remains depict a stab weapon resembling a sheet of leaves, believed to be the precursor of the keris, known in India as Keris Buda. The figure evidence, such as the appearance of keris-like shapes on remains discovered in the Prambanan temple, supports this theory.



Figure 2. A fragment depicting a figure wielding a Keris Buda, discovered at the Prambanan temple.

Source: Moertjipto (1991)

Gardner (1936) suggests that the keris originated from prehistoric weapons crafted from animal bones. Griffith Wilkens, as cited in the National Cultural Encyclopedia: Keris and other traditional Indonesian weapons (Harsrinuksmo 1988), posits that the keris represents a cultural innovation emerging around the mid-14th or 15th century AD. He further suggests that the keris can be seen as a development from spear-shaped weapons utilized by early humans in the Australian archipelago, particularly in terms of its physical structure, which resembles the original prototype of the dagger.

Raffles, in his book "The History of Java" (2008), mentions that the Majapahit army employed over 30 types of weapons, with the keris holding a prominent position among them. To support the argument for the Javanese origin of the keris, Van Der Lith, as cited in Harsrinuksmo (2004), recounts the discovery of an ancient keris during archaeological excavations at the Borobudur Temple. However, this keris differed from the depictions found in temple carvings, as its blade was fused with the handle. This artifact is currently housed at the Ethnographic Museum in Leiden, Netherlands.

Contrary to claims by Western scholars, archipelago historian Suwarsono Lumintu, also cited in Harsrinuksmo (2004), disputes the notion that the keris did not originate from the Majapahit era. He argues that while Western sources often classify the keris as a type of dagger or knife, this characterization is inaccurate as the keris serves a distinct purpose beyond mere killing, it is considered an heirloom believed to safeguard and bring prosperity to its owner.

In summary, the keris holds significant cultural value in the archipelago community, transcending its role as a mere weapon. Its development can be traced back to Java around the 5th or 6th century AD, with its current form emerging in the 12th or 13th century AD, coinciding with the zenith of the Majapahit empire, as recorded by the Chinese traveler Ma Huan.

According to Ahmad (2015), the early history of the keris in the Malay world dates back to the 13th to 15th century AD, during the Majapahit period. The evolution of its design—from straight to curved—reflects changes over time as it spread from Java to other regions of the archipelago. Despite regional variations, the keris continues to serve various functions, including as a weapon, a symbol of status, a fashion accessory, a tool for shamanic practices, and a symbol of power and authority within the Malay community. Thus, the value of the keris extends beyond its aesthetic appeal to encompass its multifunctionality.



Figure 3. A Malela keris with three curved (lok) blades.

Source: melayudankeris.blogspot.com

According to Ab Hamid (2019), the Malela keris originates from the provinces of Pattani and Kelantan, forged from a dark steel that reflects its robust and powerful craftsmanship. The blades of the keris are curved, featuring boned and sloping elephant trunk motifs on each side. These blades are intricately adorned with filigree patterns resembling pandanus artocapus thorns, arranged in sets of three, with corrugated detailing and insulation at the base.

Similarly, Ahmad (2020) notes that the Malela keris is also associated with Terengganu due to its distinctive grooved blades, known as Malela or Gelugur. These grooves extend from the bones on both sides of the blade to its tip. The Malela blade showcases two types of bones: round and sharp.

The Philosophy of Art Behind the Aesthetic of 'Keris Malela'

The term aesthetics originates from the Latin 'aestheticus' and the Greek word for sensory perception or taste. It encompasses the study of beauty in art and the universe, representing a branch of philosophical inquiry. Aesthetics emphasizes the beauty inherent in an object or impulse, as well as the aesthetic experience of its creation and observation.

Aesthetic theory posits that a work of art is deliberately crafted to evoke an aesthetic experience in the viewer, characterized by pleasure, joy, and satisfaction. From Aristotle to the 18th century, discussions on aesthetics revolved around the concept of beauty in literature. Alexander Baumgarten introduced the term aesthetics, defining it as the study of beauty encompassing all artistic endeavors.

George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel further developed aesthetic theory, integrating it with philosophical discourse on art. Evaluation of aesthetics in a work of art involves assessing its physical aspects, artistic principles, and the expression of the artist's emotions and sentiments.

In analyzing the aesthetic value of the Malela keris blade, Herbert's approach, focusing on physical characteristics and the application of art elements and principles, can be employed. Ahmad (2017) highlights the aesthetic value present in various components of the keris, but this study specifically concentrates only on the blade of the Malela keris.

According to Ahmad (2017), the Malela keris originates from the east coast of the Peninsula, particularly Terengganu. Notably, its blade features channels, depth, hollowness, and a prominent central bone, forged

from metal rods resulting in a dark-colored appearance. Expert blacksmith Pandai Zainal is credited with forging the Malela keris, distinguished by its unique characteristics compared to the Keris Cerita.



Figure 4. The Malela Keris blade

Source: Ahmad (2020).

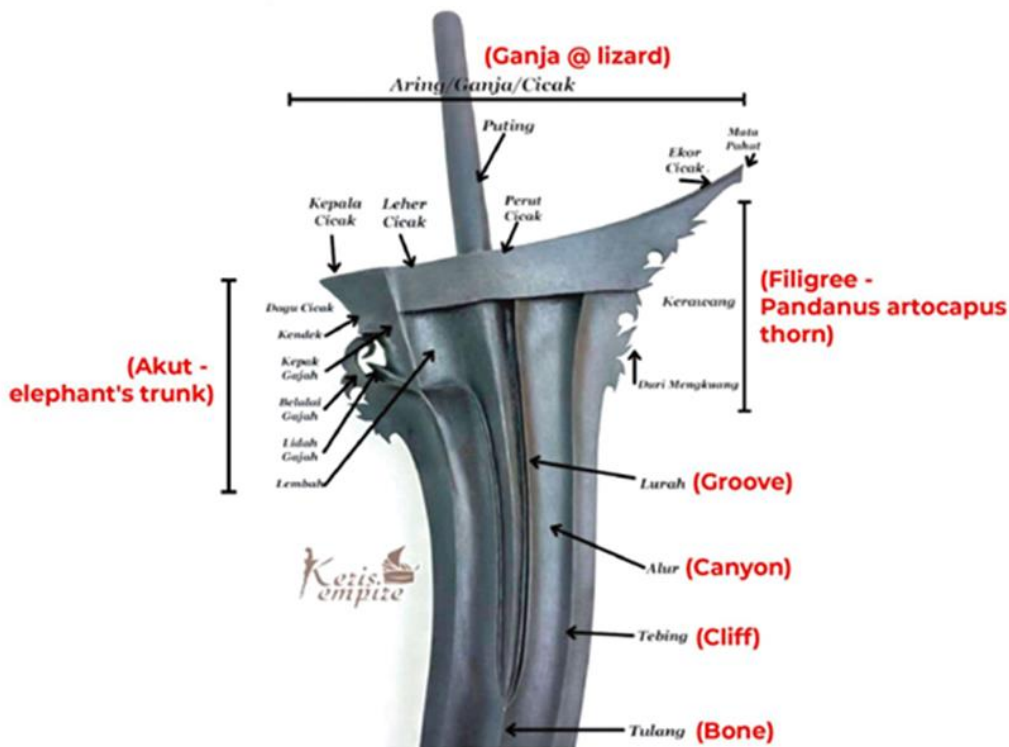


Figure 5. The aesthetic allure of the Malela keris blade.

Source: Adapted from kerisempire.com

Figure 4 presents the complete form of the Malela keris blade, whereas Figure 5 provides a detailed view of its individual components. Below is an analysis of the aesthetic qualities of the blade:

Blade Featuring a 'lok'.

Examining the overall shape of the Malela keris blade, it is notable for its curve, known as a "lok." Figure 6 illustrates a lok three shape on the blade. The aesthetic appeal of this blade derives from the well-maintained and stable design of the lok. Generally, the blade resembles an elongated triangle, as seen in Figure 7. In terms of balance, the blade exhibits asymmetrical balance, evident in Figure 6 where the weight distribution between the left and right sides is uneven. This characteristic is common among all kerises, regardless of their curvature. The imbalance arises from the presence of filigree on the right side and the elephant trunk motif on the left side. The philosophy is that despite lacking symmetrical balance, a perfectly crafted keris blade can stand upright on its own.



Figure 6. A curved (lok) blade with a red central line.

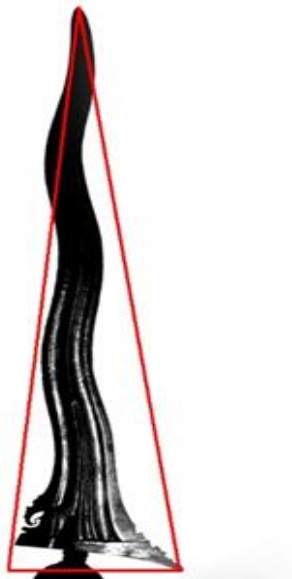


Figure 7. A triangle shape of Malela Keris.

Blade Fearuring 'Akut'.

Akut is positioned beneath the Kepala Cicak or 'head of the lizard,' encompasses various variations such as akut belalai gajah (elephant trunk), akut bisu (mute), akut kuku garuda (phoenix's nails), and akut paruh burung (bird's beak). Typically, the Malela keris blades crafted by Pandai Saras, Semenanjung, and Bugis feature the elephant trunk akut. Figure 8 illustrates the placement of akut, while Figure 9 offers a close-up view of the elephant trunk akut on the Malela keris, closely resembling the elephant's trunk. The philosophy behind crafting akut has its own unique aesthetic form resembling an elephant's trunk but with sharp serrations. The

asymmetrical balance is evident as there is no corresponding feature on the left-hand side, with the trunk solely attached to the blade's side.



Figure 8. 'Akut' is situated on the left side.



Figure 9. Close up on the elephant trunk akut on the Malela blade.

Blade Featuring a Bone

The prominent feature of the Malela keris blade is the presence of a central bone. This bone is visible on both the front and back sides of the blade, protruding next to the groove on both the left and right sides. Upon closer inspection, it can be observed that the bone follows the curvature of the blade's lok. The philosophy of

highlighting both the strength and aesthetic appeal of the blade. Figure 10 depicts the placement of this bone on the Malela keris blade.

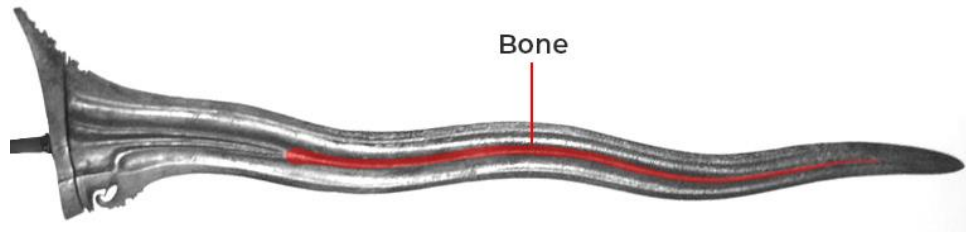


Figure 10. The bone located on the Malela blade.

Blade Featuring a Canyon

The Malela Keris features a canyon on both its left and right sides, pressing against the central bone. This canyon extends from the base of the blade, following the ganjar or lizard, all the way to the blade's end (tuntong). Apart from enhancing the keris's aesthetic appeal, the philosophy of these canyons also facilitate better blood flow when the keris is used for stabbing. Moreover, the physical structure of these canyons conforms to the curvature of the lok. Figure 11 illustrates the presence of these canyons on the Malela keris blade, and they are also clearly visible in Figure 5 above.

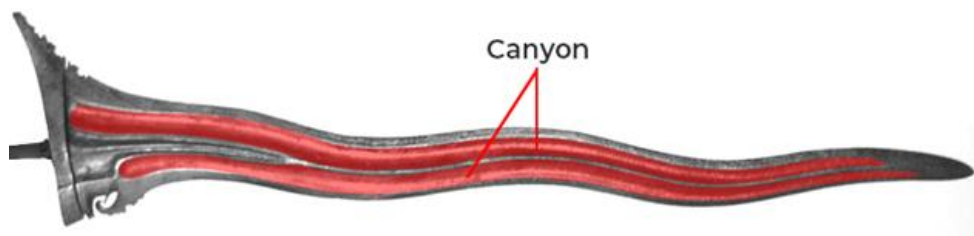


Figure 11. Canyon spot on the left and right sides of the Malela blade

Blade Featuring a Groove

In addition to the canyons on both sides of the blade, the Malela keris also features a groove. This groove supports the blade's tip, extending from the ganja or cicak to the middle of the blade tip. It then merges with the keris's central bone. Upon close examination, the groove appears to have a subtle curvature, with the top side exhibiting an asymmetrical shape compared to the underside. The philosophy behind this elongated groove, it resembles sharp fine lines that ease wounds on the middle part of the blade. The groove also extends further than the side of the blade embellished with filigree, while a shorter groove is situated on the side of the elephant trunk's akut. Physically, the Malela blade appears as a thin, sharp line with a pronounced indentation at the center where it meets the bone. The shape of the groove conforms to the blade's curvature, enhancing the keris's aesthetic appeal. Figure 12 below depicts the curved shape of the groove on the keris blade, characterized by its slender form resembling a line. This groove is prominently displayed in Figure 5 above.

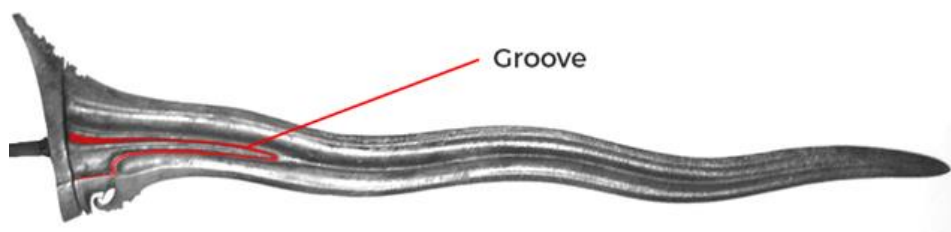


Figure 12. The shape and location of the groove present on the Malela blade.

Blade Featuring a Cliff.

The Malela keris also features a cliff, clearly visible in Figure 13. Positioned on both the left and right sides of the blade, adjacent to the groove, this cliff serves as the central part separating the groove from the sharp tip of the blade. Upon closer inspection, it conforms to the curvature of the blade, formed during the forging process. The philosophy behind the cliff is that it is a raised structure, sharp and protruding, designed to facilitate and enhance the effectiveness of wounds caused by the keris.. Figurely, the blade of the keris appears more prominent and contoured, showcasing the artistry of the Malela keris craftsmanship. The placement of the cliff on the Malela keris is depicted in Figure 13 below, and can also be observed in Figure 5 above.

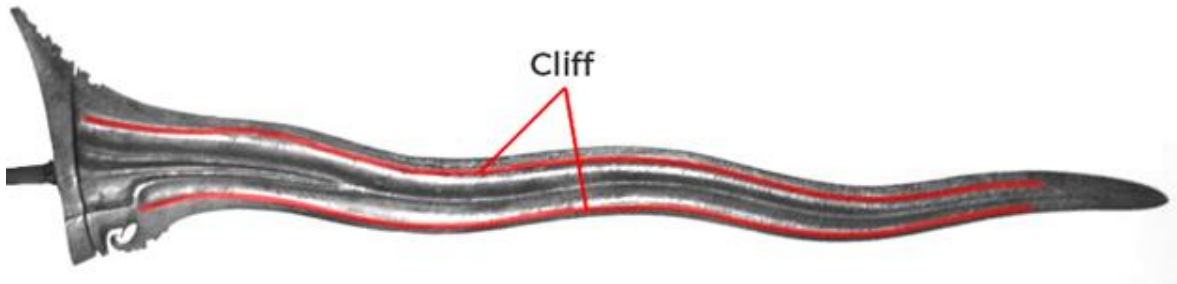


Figure 13. The location of the cliff on the Malela blade.

The Blade Adorned with Filigree Patterns Resembling Pandanus Artocapus Thorns, Arranged in The Shape of the Number 3.

The Malela Keris also features filigree on the right side of the blade, known as pandanus artocapus thorns, arranged in a pattern resembling the number '3'. Upon close inspection, the pattern closely resembles pandanus artocapus thorns with the number '3' at its center. This distinct pattern is depicted in Figure 14 below. Figurely, the filigree pattern on the blade of the keris mirrors the design of thorns commonly found in the environment. This pattern has been incorporated into the design of the Malela Keris. Apart from its aesthetic appeal, the philosophy behind filigree also serves a practical purpose as one of the sharp points of the keris, causing harm when the keris is thrust and withdrawn.

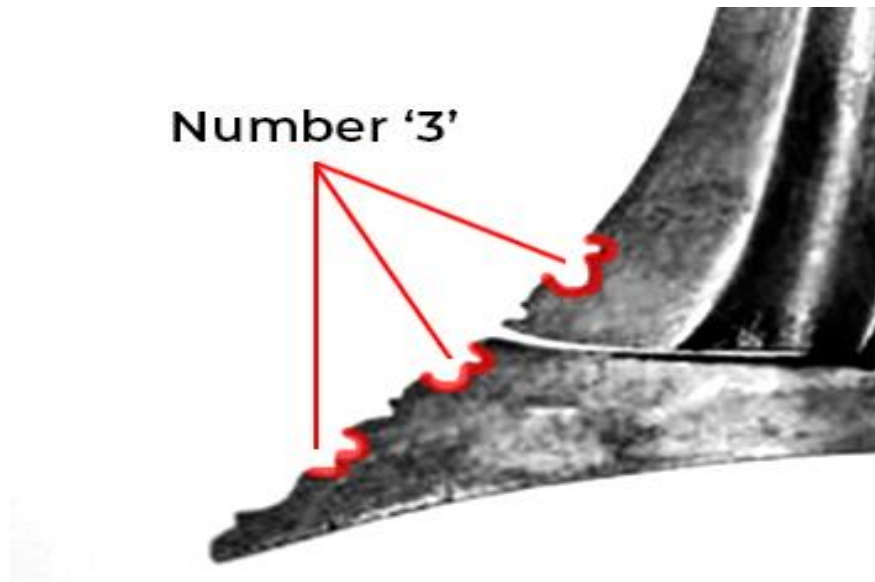


Figure 14. The placement of the pandanus artocapus thorn filigree featuring the number 3 shape on the blade of the Malela Keris.

In essence, the Malela Keris possesses several distinctive design elements that contribute to its unique identity dan philosophy. Unlike other keris variants, the Malela Keris shares a similar design with the Cerita Keris, with

the main difference being the presence of the lok in the Malela Keris, while the Cerita Keris remains straight without it. Examining the intricate blade, adorned with the lok, elephant trunk, bones, grooves, canyons, cliffs, and pandanus artocapus thorn filigrees featuring the number 3, it becomes evident that crafting the Malela Keris involves meticulous and precise metalwork, setting it apart from the simpler blades of other keris types.

CONCLUSION

The distinctive qualities of the Malela Keris have garnered significant attention and admiration from keris collectors and enthusiasts alike. The philosophy of the meticulous craftsmanship and attention to detail in the blade's forging and finishing processes have greatly enhanced its aesthetic appeal, which has become synonymous with this particular type of keris. Each blade possesses its own unique aesthetic value, shaped by the skill and craftsmanship of the forger. The ability of the forger to translate their ideas and experiences into artistic expressions, rooted in the characteristics of the object and the identity of the keris being crafted, contributes to the unparalleled uniqueness of the Malela Keris. Its design stands out as exceptionally distinctive, setting it apart from other keris variants, and can be easily recognized through surface observation.

Through the lens of artistic knowledge, the aesthetic value of the Malela Keris is evident in the various prominent shapes adorning its body, ranging from the lok at the base to the intricately shaped groove resembling a fine line along the curve. Despite its asymmetrical nature, the continuity and balance of these shapes contribute to the overall aesthetic appeal of the Malela Keris. This underscores the careful craftsmanship of highly skilled forgers involved in its creation, reflecting the refined quality of Malay weapon forging practices and the philosophy behind it during that era. This exquisite artistry finds expression in the form of the keris, with elements such as the lok, akut, spine, curves, grooves, and pandanus artocapus thorn latticework with the number 3 serving as distinct identifying features. The Malela Keris possesses its own unique aesthetic value, admired by enthusiasts for its beauty, creativity, cultural significance, and philosophy of craftsmanship.

Funding

This research is supported by Geran Galakan Penyelidik Muda, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (Grant number: GGPM-2021-062).

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