The Silent Witness of Power: Ritual Communication and Semiotics of the Lembing Sembuana in Modern Political Oath-Taking Ceremonies

[*1]Muhamad Adha Abd Jalil, [*2]Ros Mahwati Ahmad Zakaria, [3]Zuliskandar Ramli,

[123]Institute of the Malay World and Civilisation, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia

*** Corresponding author**

DOI: https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.102100225

Received: 14 October 2026; Accepted: 19 October 2026; Published: 13 November 2026

ABSTRACT

Oath-taking ceremonies in constitutional monarchies bring legally regulated appointment procedures into contact with inherited material symbols. This qualitative case study examines the Lembing Sembuana as a non-verbal medium during the oath-taking of ten Selangor State Executive Council (EXCO) members at Istana Alam Shah on 21 August 2023. Data comprise three separate formal interviews with palace-related informants (approximately 45 minutes each, conducted in person with signed consent, video recording, written notes and verbatim transcription), comparative direct observation of a 2018 dignitary ceremony, and visual records of the 2023 EXCO event. Combining James W. Carey's ritual view of communication with Roland Barthes' denotation, connotation and myth, the study differentiates observable actions, meanings attributed by customary sources and the researcher's ideological interpretation. The researcher confirms an identical protocol among all ten EXCO members: standing at a prescribed position, receiving the spear before the oath, holding it upright in the right hand while reading from a written text held in the left, and returning it after recitation. At the denotative level, this is a coordinated sequence of bodily and material signs; connotatively, palace accounts associate the spear with daulat, allegiance, moral accountability and tulah. At the mythic level, ritual repetition can naturalise the coexistence of elected administration and inherited royal custom without showing that the artefact confers legal office. Comparison with the fuller Istiadat Menjunjung Duli practice highlights the distinct protocols of administrative officeholders and titled dignitaries. Although public protocol was uniform across a diverse group, the study does not infer identical private beliefs or measured spatial distances. The findings locate the spear's role in institutional communication rather than independent constitutional authority.

Keywords: Ritual Communication, Semiotics, Lembing Sembuana, Non-Verbal Communication, Royal Customs.

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia's constitutional monarchy and parliamentary democracy bring electoral administration and royal ceremonial practice into a shared institutional setting. At the state level, the appointment and oath-taking of executive councillors make this relationship publicly visible. The Balairung Seri is therefore examined here not as evidence of absolute monarchical power, but as a ceremonial environment in which legally constituted office and inherited symbols of the royal institution are brought together.

In Selangor, the oath-taking and presentation of instruments of appointment for the State Executive Council (EXCO) bring the constitutional appointment process into a formal royal setting. On 21 August 2023, ten EXCO members took their oaths at the Balairung Seri, Istana Alam Shah, Klang, in a ceremony that included the Lembing Sembuana. The state's constitutional framework governs political appointment, while the use of this royal regalia forms part of the ceremony's non-verbal communication. This study therefore examines the spear's observable use and culturally attributed meanings as expressions of institutional

continuity and public accountability, without treating the object as an independent source of constitutional authority (Bernama, 2023; Selangor State Government, 2023).

The present study asks how a royal artefact communicates without words during an identifiable modern political event. Rather than assuming that a spear has legal agency, the analysis investigates its placement, handling and attributed meanings in the 21 August 2023 EXCO oath-taking ceremony, using comparative palace customs only where they help explain its distinctive protocol.

Problem Statement

Existing treatments of royal regalia emphasise history, material culture and court custom, while analyses of executive appointments usually foreground formal rules and political office. The specific issue addressed here is the interaction between these registers in a recorded event: how the Lembing Sembuana is handled beside a written oath, which meanings palace sources attribute to it, and what can reasonably be inferred about constitutional legitimacy from the ritual.

The analysis distinguishes (i) what can be seen in photographs and event recordings, (ii) interpretations supplied by interview participants and historical accounts, and (iii) the researcher's theoretically informed readings. This distinction is necessary because symbolic centrality is not equivalent to an independent constitutional power to appoint or remove elected officeholders.

Research Questions

The following research questions guide the analysis of the 21 August 2023 Selangor EXCO ceremony:

- How does the Lembing Sembuana function as a medium of non-verbal communication (visual semiotics and proxemics) in manifesting the symbolism of power, hierarchy, and the Sultan's sovereignty during the Oath-Taking Ceremony?
- How does the Lembing Sembuana operate as a symbolic witness to the EXCO oath, and what does the ceremony communicate about the coexistence of customary royal authority and constitutionally regulated political office?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Royal Artifacts and Material Culture in the Context of Cultural Communication

Royal regalia in Malay customary settings can serve as material signs of political hierarchy, shared memory and public responsibility. Rather than assuming that objects communicate universally, this study treats meanings as historically and socially attributed. The Lembing Sembuana is therefore examined through its documented ceremonial use, the testimony of palace-related informants and interpretive frameworks that distinguish visible action from cultural association (Wahyuni & Musdalifah, 2025).

The presence of artefacts in customary ceremonies is embedded in culturally specific norms and belief systems. Manafe (2011), in a study of ritual communication among Atoni Pah Meto farming communities, shows how ritual objects and symbolic actions acquire meanings within particular communities. This comparative insight supports a contextual reading of ritual communication, but it is not evidence about the specific beliefs or protocols of the Selangor palace. Those meanings are examined here through Selangor-focused interviews, historical accounts and the 2023 ceremony.

In the context of the Malay royal institution, regalia such as the keris (dagger), nobat (royal traditional ensemble), royal seal, and royal spears play highly significant cultural communication functions. These artifacts are not merely aesthetic symbols of the palace but represent the material manifestation of the concepts of daulat (divine sovereignty), legitimacy, and the continuity of the Malay ruling heritage. The use of regalia in official ceremonies such as coronations, the conferment of honors, and oath-taking ceremonies

demonstrates that these objects act as symbols of power legitimacy. Their presence in the palace space creates a sacred atmosphere that distinguishes the royal institution from ordinary social structures.

Theoretical Framework: Ritual View of Communication (James W. Carey)

This study utilizes the Ritual View of Communication introduced by James W. Carey as a theoretical basis for understanding the symbolic functions and cultural rituals surrounding the use of the Lembing Sembuana in the Selangor Sultanate institution. Carey (2009) rejects the traditional view of communication that solely sees communication as a process of transmitting information from sender to receiver for the purposes of social control and message dissemination. Instead, he asserts that communication must be understood as a cultural process that functions to maintain the continuity of society over time through the repetition of shared symbols, rituals, and beliefs.

According to Carey (2009), communication in a ritual perspective is not aimed at producing new information, but functions to maintain and renew the social reality shared by community members. In this context, communication becomes a cultural mechanism that forms a sense of togetherness, collective identity, and social consensus. Rituals, symbols, and ceremonies play an important role as they connect society with traditional values inherited across generations. For this reason, a ritual cannot be viewed merely as a ceremonial activity, but as a process of cultural communication that strengthens the social structure and legitimacy of societal institutions.

Carey (1989) characterises ritual communication as a culturally shared process through which institutions, values and collective identities are represented and renewed. In the present case, this perspective explains why a traditional spear remains communicatively salient in an official oath even where the officeholder's legal responsibilities are defined by contemporary constitutional procedures.

Carey's framework directs attention to the repeated public performance of an oath rather than treating the ceremony as the transfer of information alone. In the 2023 Selangor EXCO event, the presence of the Lembing Sembuana beside the spoken pledge and written text can be analysed as a recurrent cultural form through which officeholders affirm responsibilities in the presence of the royal institution. This is an interpretive claim about communication, not a substitute for the legal requirements of appointment.

Within the Selangor palace accounts considered here, daulat and tulah form part of the customary vocabulary through which the Lembing Sembuana is interpreted (Tengku Sulaiman Shah, personal communication, 24 March 2022; Tengku Azlan Shah, personal communication, 8 May 2022). Carey (1989, 2009) helps explain the renewal of shared institutional meanings through ceremony. These attributed meanings should not be equated with proof that every EXCO participant accepts the same spiritual interpretation.

Theoretical Framework: Roland Barthes' Semiotics

To analyse the symbolic meaning of the Lembing Sembuana more comprehensively, this study adopts Roland Barthes' semiotic framework, which conceptualises culture as a system of signs embedded with meanings, values, and ideology. Barthes argues that every object, image, ritual, and cultural practice functions as a sign capable of conveying social messages that extend beyond their literal appearance (Amoian & NamvarMotlaq, 2022). Consequently, cultural artefacts are never ideologically neutral; instead, they operate as symbolic systems that connect observable forms with the broader cultural values and power structures of society.

According to Barthes, signification emerges through the relationship between the signifier (the material or physical form of a sign) and the signified (the concept or meaning represented by that sign). Their interaction produces a sign whose meaning is socially and culturally constructed. This analytical perspective is particularly relevant to the present study because the Lembing Sembuana is not merely a ceremonial object of royal regalia but also functions as a symbolic medium embodying political, spiritual, historical, and cultural meanings within the Selangor Sultanate institution.

Barthes further explains that signification operates at three interconnected levels: denotation, connotation, and myth. The first level, denotation, refers to the literal or descriptive meaning of a sign that can be observed directly without requiring deeper cultural interpretation (Garnita & Suryanto, 2025; Wahyuni & Musdalifah, 2025). Within the context of this study, the denotative meaning of the Lembing Sembuana refers simply to its identity as a piece of royal regalia employed in official ceremonies of the Selangor Sultanate. At this level, it is understood merely as a ceremonial spear with a specific physical form, placement, and protocol function.

The second level, connotation, encompasses the cultural and ideological meanings that extend beyond the object's literal function. Connotative meanings are shaped by collective emotions, historical experiences, cultural memory, and shared ideological values (Garnita & Suryanto, 2025; Mansor & Lubis, 2026; Wahyuni & Musdalifah, 2025). Accordingly, the Lembing Sembuana signifies far more than a ceremonial weapon; it symbolises daulat (royal sovereignty), loyalty, sacred oaths, and the traditional belief in tulah. The widespread belief that the spear possesses spiritual essence illustrates how its symbolic meaning has become embedded within the collective consciousness of Malay society, linking royal regalia with sacred authority and monarchical legitimacy.

The third level, myth, concerns a second-order system of signification through which historically produced arrangements come to appear natural and self-evident (Barthes, 1972). At the first level, a royal spear is seen being held during a constitutional oath; at the second level, that complete sign becomes a signifier for the familiar coexistence of elected state administration and inherited royal custom. Myth in this sense is not interchangeable with the connotative meanings of daulat or tulah. Rather, it concerns the ideological effect of presenting a particular institutional relationship as enduring and ordinary. This is a critical interpretation of ceremonial representation, not a finding that the monarch exercises unlimited executive power or that every politician personally embraces the associated cosmology.

Accordingly, Barthes' semiotic framework provides a comprehensive analytical lens for examining how the Lembing Sembuana functions simultaneously as a material artefact, a symbolic medium, and an ideological mechanism through which meanings of sovereignty, legitimacy, loyalty, and political authority are continuously produced, negotiated, and sustained within contemporary Malay society.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study uses a qualitative approach in the form of a case study to examine the symbolic, semiotic, and ritual functions of the Lembing Sembuana within the institution of the Selangor Sultanate. The qualitative approach was chosen because this study involves examining cultural meanings, symbolism, ritual experiences, and social interpretations that require in-depth and contextual analysis (Creswell, 2014). The case study method is appropriate because it allows researchers to study a cultural and institutional phenomenon in detail within its actual context (Yin, 2018), particularly regarding the implementation of Malay royal ceremonies laden with symbolic communication elements.

This study is also grounded in a combination of the Ritual View of Communication Theory by James W. Carey (1989) and Roland Barthes' Semiotic Theory (1977). The Ritual Communication Theory is used to understand the ceremony's ritual as a cultural communication process functioning to maintain values, legitimacy, and the continuity of social institutions. Meanwhile, Barthes' semiotic approach is applied to examine the symbolic meaning of the Lembing Sembuana through the denotative, connotative, and cultural myth dimensions embedded in the royal customs of Selangor.

The unit of analysis is the 21 August 2023 EXCO oath-taking event, with particular attention to the oath-taker, the spear, the written pledge and the institutional setting. The 17 March 2018 ceremony involving titled dignitaries is used as a comparator, not as direct evidence of what EXCO members themselves did in 2023.

Data Collection Methods

The research data was obtained through primary and secondary sources to ensure a comprehensive and triangulated collection of information. Primary data was collected through semi-structured interviews with Palace Dignitaries (Orang Besar Istana), Malay customs experts, and individuals directly involved in the execution of royal rituals. This interview method allowed researchers to obtain in-depth, reflective, and interpretative information regarding the symbolic functions and cultural values of the Lembing Sembuana in the context of the royal institution.

Three formal and separate semi-structured interviews were conducted in person with Tengku Sulaiman Shah Alhaj (24 March 2022), Tengku Azlan Shah (8 May 2022), and Tengku Jamaluddin, the Orang Kaya Maha Bijaya Sepang (8 May 2022). Each session lasted approximately 45 minutes. All informants signed consent forms; sessions were video-recorded, supported by written notes and transcribed verbatim. The principal interview theme was Istiadat Menjunjung Duli di Negeri Selangor. Relevant interview material addresses the meanings and customary handling of the Lembing Sembuana, oath-taking and obligations in royal ceremonies. Because these interviews primarily concerned Menjunjung Duli, they provide contextual interpretations rather than eyewitness accounts of the ten EXCO members' actions in August 2023.

The researcher directly observed the Istiadat Menggelar, Mengangkat Sumpah dan Menjunjung Duli for Selangor palace and district dignitaries and royal datos throughout its full duration at Istana Alam Shah, Klang, on 17 March 2018. Observational attention covered the position of the Lembing Sembuana, the movements and ritual sequence of title recipients, and the spatial arrangement of the Balairung Seri. This 2018 observation is used as comparative evidence for dignitary protocol; it is not presented as direct observation of the EXCO oath-taking in 2023.

The primary contemporary case was studied through the visual record of the ceremony of 21 August 2023, including the public recording distributed by Buletin TV3 (2023), with Selangor TV credited as the original source of that broadcast, and selected images credited to Media Selangor in the source manuscript. Analysis focused on hand use, posture, spear orientation, the written oath, the sequence of receiving and returning the regalia, and the visible ceremonial setting. The researcher confirms that all ten EXCO members received the spear before the reading, held it upright in the right hand while holding the oath text in the left, stood at the same prescribed station with comparable posture, and returned the spear once the reading ended. Identical protocol is a researcher-confirmed observation; this study does not claim numerical measurements of spatial distances or timecodes that have not been documented. Secondary material includes royal-customs texts, historical accounts, official statements and relevant scholarship.

Table 1. Source inventory for interviews, observation and archival visual material

Source and scope	Date / location	Analytical use	Documentation status
Tengku Sulaiman Shah Alhaj; Head of Selangor Royal Customs; cited personal communication	24 March 2022	State emblem, upright spear, protocol and customary meanings	Confirmed: separate formal in-person interview; approximately 45 minutes; signed consent; video recording; written notes; verbatim transcription.
Tengku Azlan Shah; cited personal communication	8 May 2022	Bugis mengaruk tradition and meanings associated with loyalty	Confirmed: separate formal in-person interview; approximately 45 minutes; signed consent; video recording; written notes; verbatim transcription.
Tengku Jamaluddin; Orang Kaya Maha	8 May 2022	Moral significance of the oath	Confirmed: separate formal in-person interview; approximately

Bijaya Sepang; cited personal communication		and symbolic witnessing	45 minutes; signed consent; video recording; written notes; verbatim transcription.
Researcher's direct observation of the title, oath and Menjunjung Duli ceremony	17 March 2018; Istana Alam Shah	Comparative observation, throughout the entire ceremony, of the Lembing Sembuana's position, title recipients' movements and ritual sequences, and the Balairung Seri spatial arrangement; not evidence of 2023 EXCO actions.	Confirmed: observation took place throughout the ceremony, with the stated focus. No claim is made here that field notes, photographs or video from 2018 are extant.
Selangor EXCO appointment / oath-taking visual record; ten EXCO members	21 August 2023; Balairung Seri, Istana Alam Shah	Principal 2023 visual case: researcher-confirmed sequence and standardised gestures; spatial features limited by frame coverage.	Researcher confirms the same ten-person protocol (right-hand spear, left-hand text, common posture and reading station, spear returned after reading). Exact timecodes and a scaled spatial plan are not available.
Figure 3: selected photographs credited as Media Selangor in the source manuscript; comparison broadcast by Buletin TV3 (2023)	21 August 2023	Illustrative evidence for the spear, script and bodily posture	Images illustrate selected EXCO members, not a frame-by-frame record of all ten. Original image rights and definitive credit should be checked before publication.

Table 1 separates the 2022 interview testimony, the 2018 first-hand comparison, and the 2023 video and image materials. This source distinction is maintained when interpreting symbolic meanings: palace custodians' accounts explain customary associations, while the visual material and researcher's confirmation establish the EXCO protocol.

Detailed transcript identifiers and minute-and-second recording annotations are not included in the present documentation.

Data Analysis Process

The material was examined through a source-sensitive, theoretically guided sequence. First, the 2023 ceremonial actions were described at the level of observable or researcher-confirmed features: the upright spear, right-hand grip, written oath in the left hand, standing station, and the stages of receipt, recitation and return. Second, interview material and historical texts were compared to identify culturally attributed meanings, including daulat, allegiance, mengaruk and tulah. Third, the two evidence groups were read through Barthes' distinction between first-order description, connotative association and second-order ideological myth (Barthes, 1972, 1977), and through Carey's account of the social continuity generated by ritual performance (Carey, 1989, 2009). Finally, the 2018 dignitary observation was used solely to compare the scope and sequence of customary protocol with the 2023 EXCO event. Table 3 makes the passage from descriptive evidence to interpretation explicit.

An explicit evidence-to-interpretation chain was maintained in preparing the revised findings. For example, the right-hand grip on the upright spear, the written oath in the left hand and the common standing position are recorded as first-order procedural descriptions, supported by the visual material and the researcher's

confirmation. The attribution of allegiance, daulat and moral responsibility to the spear is then grounded in the named palace interviews and historical sources, rather than inferred from gestures alone. Finally, the suggestion that recurring ceremonial use normalises continuity between inherited royal custom and constitutional government is identified as the researcher's second-order Barthesian interpretation. This sequence clarifies which claims are empirical observations, which are reported cultural understandings and which are analytical inferences; it does not purport to reconstruct an unverified original transcript-level codebook.

The labels D1 (denotation), C1 (connotation), M1 (myth), P1 (proxemics) and X1 (comparison and diversity) in Table 2 organise the analytical presentation of this article. They are transparent interpretive categories rather than a claim that an independently preserved, transcript-level codebook using these exact labels was produced at the time of the interviews. The available documentation does not identify original software settings, coder comparisons or recording-by-recording code assignments; none is invented. This distinction preserves a reproducible analytical rationale without overstating the surviving coding audit trail.

Carey's ritual view of communication provides a complementary interpretive lens: the recurrent public oath represents and renews institutional expectations, rather than simply transmitting information (Carey, 1989, 2009). The Lembing Sembuana can thus be understood as a symbolic communicator within the staged ceremony, while the officeholder's legal authority continues to be determined by constitutional procedures.

Table 2. Analytical categories used to organise the present interpretation (not a verified original codebook)

Interpretive category	Basis available for analysis	Analytical question and evidentiary limit
D1: visible denotation	Researcher-confirmed: right-hand spear, left-hand written oath, same standing posture and position; spear received before and returned after the reading.	What is visibly present or performed?
C1: cultural connotation	Interview testimony; history of daulat, tulah and mengaruk	Which meaning is attributed by whom, and on what basis?
M1: ideological myth	Recurring pairing of elected office, royal symbols and ceremonial form	How is an institutional arrangement represented as ordinary or enduring?
P1: proxemics and limits	Uniform standing station and protocol for ten EXCO; images of Sultan, participants and audience; no scaled plan or exact video timestamps.	Which spatial relationships can be described? Numerical distances and a complete seating plan have not been established.
X1: comparison / diversity	Researcher-confirmed 2023 EXCO protocol and photographic frames, contrasted with full-duration 2018 observation of title recipients' movement and ceremonial space; diverse officeholder backgrounds.	What is shared, what differs, and what cannot be inferred about reception?

Data Validity and Reliability

Triangulation was pursued by comparing three video-recorded, consented and verbatim-transcribed interviews with the 2018 comparative observation, the 2023 visual documentation, historical works and official reporting. Following the logic of source triangulation (Denzin, 1978), the interpretation distinguishes what is directly observed or confirmed from what is reported by informants and inferred through theory.

In terms of the data-condensation and display principles of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), Table 1 identifies the sources, Table 2 records the categories used for the present analysis, and Table 3 shows the connection between evidence and Barthesian signification. No claim is made that these tables document an original formal codebook, independent second-coder agreement, or measured spatial coordinates.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The 2023 EXCO Case and the Distinction Between Observation and Interpretation

The empirical focus is the Istiadat Angkat Sumpah Jawatan dan Ikrar Aku Janji serta Pengurniaan Surat Cara Pelantikan for ten Selangor State Executive Council members at the Balairung Seri, Istana Alam Shah, Klang, on 21 August 2023 (Bernama, 2023; Selangor State Government, 2023). A publicly available recording provides a contemporary visual record (Buletin TV3, 2023). The analysis first describes the oath-taker's interaction with the regalia and written text, then examines cultural interpretations supported by palace interviews. This distinction limits the inference that may reasonably be drawn from ceremonial images alone.

Figure 3 contains selected images of Ng Sze Han, Izham Hashim and Jamaliah Jamaluddin performing the oath. The images illustrate a shared reading station, upright spear and written pledge. The researcher additionally confirms that all ten EXCO members held the Lembing Sembuana in the right hand and the written text in the left, with the same standing protocol.

The written oath performs the verbal and legal-administrative dimension of the occasion; the spear renders inherited court symbolism visible. This coexistence is a communicative relationship rather than evidence that the spear independently creates an officeholder's constitutional authority.



Figure 3. Selected EXCO oath-taking images, Balairung Seri, Istana Alam Shah, Klang, 21 August 2023. From left: Ng Sze Han, Izham Hashim and Jamaliah Jamaluddin. Still-image source credited as Media Selangor in the source manuscript; independent ceremony broadcast available from Buletin TV3 (2023).

Across the ten EXCO members, the confirmed sequence comprises receiving the Lembing Sembuana immediately before the oath, standing at the prescribed station, holding the upright spear in the right hand and the written text in the left during recitation, and returning the spear afterwards. The posture, hand

allocation and sequence were uniform. These features allow a close kinesic reading: the right and left hands coordinate material royal symbolism with a written, spoken undertaking in a single performance. Proxemically, the repeated standing station signals prescribed ceremonial positioning rather than free movement through the throne room. The event takes place in a royal setting with the Sultan and an audience, but a reliable seat-by-seat plan, measured distances and frame-specific timestamps have not been supplied. The analysis therefore addresses relational ordering only to the extent established by the source, without fabricating distances or exact video timecodes.

Figure 3 includes officeholders of different ethnic, religious and gender backgrounds. Since the researcher confirms the same ceremonial procedure for all ten EXCO members, the footage and interview context support a finding of standardised public participation rather than differentiated protocol by background. At the connotative level, this common performance can signify a shared civic responsibility undertaken in the presence of the royal institution. At the level of myth, the same repeated action may make the coexistence of plural political representation and inherited court regalia appear institutionally familiar. However, no EXCO participants were interviewed about their personal reception of daulat, tulah or Malay-Islamic cosmology. Neither their individual beliefs nor identical interpretations can be inferred from uniform bodily conduct; the cross-cultural conclusion is deliberately limited to shared, publicly visible ritual practice.

The result is an analytical distinction between procedural inclusion and subjective reception: the same object and gesture are prescribed to officeholders who differ in social background, but the study has not collected the individual testimony required to assess how each participant interprets the spear. This limitation does not negate the documented uniformity of the public protocol; it restricts claims about personal belief.

Denotation: Royal Regalia, Orientation and Material Placement

At the denotative level, the Lembing Sembuana is a ceremonial spear used in Selangor royal functions and represented between two keris in the Selangor State Emblem (Figure 1). A historical account cited in the original manuscript links the iron of the spear to nine territories during Sultan Ibrahim Shah's reign (1778–1826) (Muhamad Adha Abd Jalil & Ahmad Farhan Abdullah @ Zakaria, 2025). The dates given there for some of the named territories, notably Sepang (1834–1874) and Sungai Raya (1859–1874), extend beyond 1826. Consequently, this claim is treated as a historical attribution requiring archival corroboration, not as a verified metallurgical provenance. Such qualification preserves the source tradition without conflating it with an independently established manufacturing chronology.



Figure 1. The Selangor State Emblem, showing a representation of the Lembing Sembuana between two keris.

In palace customary accounts the spear is kept upright, including when placed in association with the royal nobat instruments (Tengku Sulaiman Shah, personal communication, 24 March 2022). The object's elongated form and vertical orientation are observable properties; the obligation to maintain the upright

position is a reported protocol rule. Distinguishing these descriptions prevents historical narrative or attributed taboo from being presented as a property that the camera alone can prove.



Figure 2. The Lembing Sembuana displayed in an upright position.

Connotation: Daulat, Allegiance, Moral Obligation and Tulah

At the connotative level the spear carries culturally situated associations with daulat, allegiance, integrity and the continuity of the Selangor ruling dynasty. Tengku Azlan Shah (personal communication, 8 May 2022) associates oath-taking with the Bugis tradition of mengaruk. Tengku Sulaiman Shah (personal communication, 24 March 2022) describes customary taboos surrounding the regalia, while Tengku Jamaluddin (personal communication, 8 May 2022) compares the moral solemnity of the oath to religiously framed oath-taking in a court. These are attributed explanations of the ritual's meanings rather than evidence of supernatural causation or uniformly held beliefs among all current political officeholders.

The historical idiom and stories recorded by Raja Nong Raja Husin (1961) further situate tulah within a local cosmology of sanction and restraint. In the 2023 EXCO setting, a cautious interpretation is that such inherited associations provide a moral vocabulary for loyalty and accountability. They do not establish that a breach of the political oath causes supernatural punishment, nor do they supersede the constitutional and legal mechanisms by which officeholders are accountable.

Myth: The Naturalisation of Institutional Continuity

For Barthes (1972), myth is a second-order semiological system: a complete sign at one level becomes the signifier of a broader ideological message. In this case, the first-order sign comprises a royal spear visibly integrated into a written oath-taking procedure. The second-order signification concerns the representation of inherited royal custom and democratic state administration as a coherent, enduring public order. Repetition may normalise that historically shaped relationship without proving that elected officeholders are feudally subordinate, that the Sultan exercises unrestricted political authority, or that all participants accept identical religious meanings. The mythological argument is therefore about how legitimacy is represented, not the legal cause of an appointment.

The two theoretical perspectives perform different tasks. Barthes helps distinguish physical form and gesture (denotation), attributed cultural values (connotation), and naturalised representations of institutional order (myth); Carey (1989, 2009) explains how collective ceremony renews such a recognisable symbolic world.

The Lembing Sembuana can accordingly be called a 'silent witness' as a metaphor for its visible ritual role: it neither speaks nor independently acts as a constitutional decision-maker, but frames the spoken oath within a culturally intelligible setting.

Table 3. Three-level semiotic reading of the Lembing Sembuana in the 2023 EXCO ceremony

Level	Observable or cited basis	Interpretation and boundary
Denotation (first-order sign)	Researcher-confirmed uniform standing position, spear held upright in right hand, oath text in left, receipt before reading and return after (Figures 1–3 illustrate selected visual details).	Identifies the regalia, gesture and setting; does not itself prove motive or constitutional effect.
Connotation (cultural association)	Daulat; Mengaruk/Bugis heritage; loyalty; tulah, reported by named palace interviewees and older texts	Shows culturally attributed responsibility and royal symbolism; personal acceptance by individual EXCO members was not interviewed.
Myth (second-order ideology)	Royal regalia repeatedly integrated into appointments of democratically selected state administrators	Can naturalise the continued relevance of royal custom within constitutional government; not evidence of absolute monarchical supremacy or legal causation.

Ritual Comparison: EXCO Members and Customary Dignitaries

Direct observation throughout the 17 March 2018 Istiadat Menggelar, Mengangkat Sumpah dan Menjunjung Duli provides a contextual comparison with the 2023 EXCO oath. During the entire 2018 ceremony, the researcher focused on the Lembing Sembuana's position, title recipients' movements and ritual sequence, and the arrangement of the Balairung Seri. The 2018 event concerns customary dignitaries and is not an extension of the dataset documenting the actions of the ten EXCO members in 2023. The original account notes that title recipients may undertake the more elaborate Istiadat Menjunjung Duli, including prescribed acts of homage, contact with the Keris Kebesaran/Bawar and, for relevant categories, Adat Menyorok (Abd Jalil et al., 2022). By comparison, the 2023 EXCO oath did not entail that full sequence. This difference suggests distinct ritual forms for customary status and political-administrative office; it does not justify transferring dignitary-specific taboos or movements to EXCO members.

The public oath is nonetheless significant as ritual communication. Its spoken pledge, regalia, visible posture and royal setting assemble a recognisable performance of responsibility. This reading concerns the communicative construction of legitimacy: the elected mandate, formal legal appointment and symbolic recognition before the Sultan remain analytically distinct. The spear therefore links registers of authority without being treated as an autonomous constitutional actor.

Limits of Inference

The findings rely on three individual in-person palace-related interviews, approximately 45 minutes each, conducted with signed consent, video recording, written notes and verbatim transcription; direct observation of the full 17 March 2018 dignitary ceremony; and the public visual record and researcher-confirmed protocol for ten EXCO members on 21 August 2023. The original 2018 photographic and video holdings and any surviving contemporaneous field notes have not been documented for this article. A transcript-level historical coding log, detailed interview schedule, exact video timecodes and scaled layout of the Sultan–

EXCO–audience configuration are also unavailable in the materials reviewed. Accordingly, the present D1–X1 analytical categories are explanatory, and spatial claims are restricted to the standardised oath-taking station rather than measured distances. The study reports customary meanings attributed by interviewees, not the personal beliefs or private reception of EXCO participants, none of whom were interviewed for this purpose.

The study's evidentiary design supports an interpretation of publicly standardised ceremonial conduct, but not first-person reception among the ten EXCO members. This boundary is methodologically important: uniform handling of a royal artefact does not demonstrate uniform religious assent, nor does ritual co-presence demonstrate an autonomous legal power of the object. The absence of a measured floor plan or verified minute-and-second annotations prevents stronger spatial or temporal claims.

CONCLUSION

This case study establishes the Lembing Sembuana's continuing non-verbal role in the Selangor EXCO oath of 21 August 2023. Across ten officeholders, the researcher confirms a common sequence: the spear is received before reading, held upright in the right hand while the written oath is held in the left, and returned following recitation, with a uniform standing station and posture. Such coordinated verbal and material actions present a reproducible ritual form in which constitutional office is publicly articulated alongside inherited royal symbolism. Barthes' three levels distinguish the observable object and gestures (denotation), meanings of daulat, allegiance and tulah attributed by customary sources (connotation), and the possible naturalisation of royal-constitutional coexistence (myth). These interpretations do not grant the spear an independent constitutional role.

The contrast with the fuller Menjunjung Duli procedure for titled dignitaries demonstrates that customary status and political office follow distinct forms of ritual performance. The 2023 EXCO procedure was shared across participants of different backgrounds, although their individual reception of royal symbols was not established. Carey's ritual view further clarifies why the continued, public staging of the spear can renew a recognisable institutional vocabulary of responsibility. Future work may examine surviving annotated footage, the precise spatial layout, and first-person EXCO perspectives; the present conclusions remain limited to observed or researcher-confirmed practice and explicitly attributed cultural interpretation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors thank YAM Tengku Sulaiman Shah Alhaj, Tengku Laksamana Selangor and Head of Selangor Royal Customs, YM Tengku Azlan Shah, and YDM Tengku Jamaluddin, Orang Kaya Maha Bijaya Sepang, for their time and contributions to the interviews. The authors also acknowledge the support of the Institute of the Malay World and Civilisation (ATMA), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), and others who facilitated this research.

Ethics and Informed Consent

This study employed a qualitative research approach involving three formal, separate, face-to-face semi-structured interviews with individuals possessing direct knowledge and experience of Selangor royal customs. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes. Written informed consent was obtained from all three informants prior to their participation. The interviews were video-recorded, supplemented by written field notes, and subsequently transcribed verbatim for academic analysis.

The interview data were used to examine the ceremonial practices, symbolic meanings, and institutional functions associated with the Lembing Sembuana. The research distinguishes information obtained from interviews, direct observation, historical documentation, and visual analysis. The identities and interview contributions of the informants must be presented in accordance with the scope of their documented consent.

Copyright and Permissions for Visual Materials

The visual materials presented in this study, including the Selangor State Emblem (Figure 1), the Lembing Sembuana (Figure 2), and selected photographs of the Selangor State Executive Council oath-taking ceremony held on 21 August 2023 (Figure 3), are used to support historical, ceremonial, and semiotic analysis.

The images are attributed to their identified sources wherever such information is available. Figure 3 is credited to Media Selangor in the source manuscript, while a public recording of the ceremony is available through Buletin TV3. Source attribution does not, by itself, constitute copyright permission.

Reproduction of third-party visual materials in the published article is conditional upon obtaining the necessary permissions from the relevant rights holders or establishing an applicable copyright exception. Any images for which publication rights cannot be substantiated must be removed or replaced with appropriately authorised materials before publication.

Informed Consent

Written informed consent to participate was obtained from all three interview informants. Each interview was conducted separately in person, video-recorded with supporting notes and transcribed verbatim. The consent process is documented here; it should not be read as a claim of institutional ethics committee approval or exemption, for which no confirmation has been supplied in the available research records.

Data Availability

The public recording of the 21 August 2023 EXCO ceremony is identified in the reference to Buletin TV3 (2023). The interview videos and verbatim transcripts are not supplied as supplementary files with this article. Any sharing of identifiable interview material must be assessed against the signed consent conditions, privacy obligations and relevant institutional requirements.

REFERENCES

1. Abd Jalil, M. A., Saludin, M. R., & Zakaria, R. M. A. (2022). Adat menggelar membentuk perubahan stratifikasi sosial masyarakat Selangor: Title customs shape changes in Selangor society's social stratification. The Sultan Alauddin Sulaiman Shah Journal (JSASS), 9(2), 111–131.
2. Amoian, F., & NamvarMotlaq, B. (2022). Semiotic analysis of Barbie dolls using Roland Barthes' mythologies. Bagh-e Nazar, 19(112), 59–72. https://doi.org/10.22034/BAGH.2022.242064.4618
3. Barthes, R. (1972). Mythologies (A. Lavers, Trans.). Hill and Wang. (Original work published 1957)
4. Barthes, R. (1977). Image, music, text. Fontana Press.
5. Bernama. (2023, August 21). 10 S'gor exco members sworn in. https://bernama.com/en/news.php?id=2218238
6. Buletin TV3. (2023). [PENUH] Istiadat angkat sumpah jawatan EXCO Kerajaan Selangor | 21 Ogos 2023 [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6-ZCudlbGRo
7. Carey, J. W. (1989). Communication as culture: Essays on media and society. Unwin Hyman.
8. Carey, J. W. (2009). Communication as culture: Essays on media and society (Rev. ed.). Routledge.
9. Creswell, J. W. (2014). Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
10. Denzin, N. K. (1978). The research act: A theoretical introduction to sociological methods (2nd ed.). McGraw-Hill.
11. Garnita, N. W., & Suryanto, S. (2025). Representasi disabilitas dalam film anime "Josee, the Tiger, and the Fish" menggunakan analisis semiotika Roland Barthes. Jurnal Ilmiah Multidisiplin Ilmu, 2(5), 145–156. https://doi.org/10.69714/mewxvd66
12. Gibraltar, M., Mohd Adnan, H., & Rahamad, M. S. (2023). The semiotic analysis of countermyths and dominant myths in three Indonesian horror movies. SEARCH Journal of Media and Communication Research, 15(2), 101–118.

13. Manafe, Y. D. (2011). Komunikasi ritual pada budaya bertani Atoni Pah Meto di Timor-Nusa Tenggara Timur. Jurnal ASPIKOM, 1(3), 287–298. https://doi.org/10.24329/aspikom.v1i3.26
14. Mansor, M., & Lubis, F. A. (2026). Reinterpretasi madaih nabawiyyah: Analisis semiotik Roland Barthes terhadap lagu The Chosen One Maher Zain. Jurnal 'Ulwan, 11(1), 33–45.
15. Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldaña, J. (2014). Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.
16. Muhamad Adha Abd Jalil, & Ahmad Farhan Abdullah @ Zakaria. (2025). Sejarah pewarisan dan peranan Orang Besar Daerah Selangor. Astaka Merchu Alam Resources.
17. Pirnanda, R. P. (2023). Analisis semiotika Roland Barthes pada lirik lagu "Aisyah Istri Rasulullah" Syakir Daulay. Communications, 5(1), 280–300.
18. Raja Nong Raja Husin. (1961). Buku cenderatama istiadat pertabalan dan kemahkotaan Sultan Salahuddin Abdul Aziz Shah. Pejabat Sultan Selangor.
19. Selangor State Government. (2023, August 21). Pelantikan Yang Amat Berhormat Dato' Menteri Besar Selangor dan Yang Berhormat Ahli Majlis Mesyuarat Kerajaan Negeri Selangor 2023. https://portalsuk1.selangor.gov.my/index.php/pages/view/6217
20. Wahyuni, L. S., & Musdalifah, L. (2025). Unveiling symbolic meaning: A semiotic analysis of ritual objects in the Munggah Suwunan tradition. Bahasa dan Seni: Jurnal Bahasa, Sastra, Seni, dan Pengajarannya, 53(2), 303–314. https://doi.org/10.17977/2550-0635.1240
21. Yin, R. K. (2018). Case study research and applications: Design and methods (6th ed.). SAGE Publications.