

Free Expression and Human Dignity: Looking into the Malay Cultural Expression

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ABSTRACT

Much of the recent literature on freedom of expression focuses on human rights. This study argues that discussions about free expression in Malay Muslim society, especially regarding political expression, should include the fundamental value of human dignity. From a Western perspective, the meaning of human dignity has a limited manifestation, often subsumed under the concept of human rights. However, in Malay culture, human dignity is the highest value that demands protection not just by individuals but through the collective responsibility of society. This is reflected in their communication and expression, which are guided by Akhlak (Islamic moral guidelines) and customary conduct. Therefore, understanding this cultural approach to human dignity is vital for addressing issues of immoral expression in Malay Muslim society, including inflammatory remarks and problematic speech. This study used a qualitative approach, analyzing secondary data from books and journal articles to explore the Malay philosophical and cultural background. It also examined Hikayat Hang Tuah and Sulalat Al-Salatin to understand how these works illustrated Malay expressions of human dignity in communication and political expression. The findings indicate that Malay expression is characterized by a high level of politeness, which upholds the

dignity of individuals and the community. This cultural expression is integral to Malay identity, highlighting the necessity of reaffirming human dignity in today's political discourse, which has strayed from these core cultural teachings.

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INTRODUCTION

The Malay civilization is deeply rooted in Islamic values, which have profoundly shaped its cultural and social identity. Before the advent of Islam, Malay traditions were influenced by Hinduism. However, the arrival of Islam introduced the principle of equality, which resonated strongly with Malay society and became a driving force behind its rapid Islamization. According to W.F. Wertheim, Islam emphasizes individual worth and rejects social hierarchies, fostering a sense of equality among people (Ishak & Abdullah, 2012). This principle has evolved into the Malay Muslim identity, characterized by peace, purity, and submission to Allah. Malay culture is also known for its gracefulness, tolerance, humility, and hospitality, deeply tied to their sensitivity towards others' feelings and commitment to harmony (Ibrahim & Hamdan, 2020; Swift, 1965; Zakaria, 2015).

These values are reflected in Malaysia's legal framework, where the federal constitution, under Article 10, guarantees freedom of speech and expression yet permits restrictions to ensure public order and security (Federal Constitution, 2016). The concept of free expression in Malaysia is not solely rooted in liberal human rights. However, it is also shaped by Asian values that emphasise harmony, respect for authority, and cultural conformity. Former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad popularised this concept, critiquing Western human rights models for prioritising individualism at the expense of social stability (Karunan, 1997; Manan, 1999;

Mohd Sani, 2017). In Malaysia, freedom of expression is therefore balanced against the necessity of preserving the Malay Islamic cultural framework, which prioritises communal harmony and dignity.

However, contemporary Malay Muslim society has observed a decline in ethical and moral expression, particularly on social media platforms. Inflammatory remarks, hate speech, and politically motivated rhetoric centred around racial and religious bigotry have become increasingly prevalent (Chin, 2022; Saleem, 2021). This moral decline is partly attributed to the diminishing reliance on the Malay moral system, which emphasises the protection of human dignity. This study argues that discussions on freedom of expression in Malaysia should be grounded in human dignity and shaped by religious and communal values.

While Malaysian regulations have generally adhered to international human rights principles, they have neglected the unique dynamics of Malay cultural expression that embody the integration of Islamic moral values. Through qualitative research and document analysis, this paper explores Malay cultural expression, emphasising the significance of human dignity and drawing on examples from Malay literature to illustrate its distinctive cultural values. This paper stresses that reinstating these values necessitates re-examining the foundational principles of Malay civilisation and its cultural aspects, and it also suggests greater academic integration among civilisation, cultural, and

political studies in Malaysia's political and social analysis, particularly as the Malay community possesses values that can be collectively applied to the common good.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature discusses the dynamics of freedom of expression in Malaysia by pointing out the attitude of the government and the citizens toward the right. It is an important aspect in helping to map the moral discourse of expression that would ultimately link to Malay's cultural expressions and the concept of human dignity. Western philosophers such as Cicero, Thomas, and Kant have long discussed the concept of human dignity. Stoic philosopher Marcus Tullius Cicero and Christian philosopher Thomas Aquinas emphasise that the value of dignity is derived from the theological understanding that human reasoning abilities are created in the likeness of God (Lebech, 2004; McCrudden, 2008) and bestowed by God as part of Creation (Lee, 2008), which is what makes humans dignified beings. In recent developments, the German philosopher Immanuel Kant has often been regarded as a key figure in developing the modern concept of human dignity. Kant's fundamental notion regarding human dignity is that every rational individual is inherently dignified due to their capacity to act autonomously and self-regulate, thereby creating moral laws to uphold each person's dignity (McCrudden, 2008).

At present, human dignity is discussed within the field of Human Rights. The concept of 'human dignity' is equated with

the value of human rights, suggesting that safeguarding human rights is also a way of safeguarding human dignity. The Universal Declaration of 1948 proclaimed that human rights are based on the intrinsic dignity of individuals and that all people are born free and equal in dignity and rights (Habermas, 2010).

For the Malay-Muslim society of Malaysia, human dignity is integral to the cultural moral system and character development. The foundational Islamic values, derived from the Quran and Hadith, shape social conduct, relationships, attitudes, and perspectives. This connection is encapsulated in the Malay proverb, "*adat bersendi hukum, hukum bersendi kita Allah*," meaning "custom is linked to law, and law is linked to God's command." This intertwined with Malay identity, which comprises three elements: *Adat* (custom), *Adab* (virtues), and Islam (Ali, 2022). It is evident that Islam has been intricately woven into the Malay cultural and social framework, and the notion of human dignity is not foreign to Malay society. As noted, *Adab*, or in Arabic, *Akhlak*, all convey similar meanings related to good conduct and behaviour that form an essential part of Malay identity, has been uniquely interpreted within Malay cultural expressions. *Adab* serves as the primary symbol of the social stance of Malay society, often emphasising a kind expression such as *halus* (soft), *budi bahasa* (tact), *sopan santun* (well-mannered) that aims at protecting *harga diri* (self-esteem) and *nama baik* (one's good name) (Mohd Sani, 2020; Wilson, 1967) has significantly

influenced the framework of Malay customs and moral systems.

The significance of human dignity is also recognised in discussions surrounding free expression. In Western culture, freedom of expression is protected by law. Upholding the principle of free speech and deliberative interest, everyone possesses the political right to free speech, and any restriction violates individual rights (Cohen, 1993; Young, 1982) as cited in Bousquet, (2022). However, the dignity approach to regulating articulation and expression that causes harm, proposed by Bousquet (2022) and Langos and Babie (2021), emphasises that the principle of dignity can provide a legal rationale for restricting expressions of racial hate speech. Such expressions can potentially undermine the rights and social status of others, as they can portray a person or group as less deserving of humanity, thereby fostering a hostile environment. Consequently, the harm inflicted by these expressions far outweighs the principle of free speech, which John Stuart Mill argues should not restrict any form of speech in the pursuit of truth, which Bousquet (2022) disagreed with, as for him, hate speech lacks the intellectual and truthful elements that warrant such protection. Furthermore, Langos and Babie (2021) noted that due to the myriad types of immoral expressions lacking legal definition introduced via social media platforms—such as religious speech that conveys harmful messages and impugns the dignity of targets—the Australian court has recognised human dignity as a decisive legal principle in safeguarding against

such expressions. This argument shares that the values of dignity are vital not only in addressing fundamental human rights such as the right to life and shelter, but also concerning free expression. In contemporary Malaysia, the discourse regarding human dignity has been overlooked, with strict regulations imposed on such expressions, including hate speech, justified in the name of protecting social harmony in its multi-racial society.

The Malaysian government has a substantial historical record of strict regulations on the freedom of expression. Given Malaysia's multi-ethnic society and multicultural background, the restrictions were deemed essential to maintain racial harmony and safeguard political stability. In terms of Internet and media regulation, Lent (1978) introduced the concept of "guided media" to characterise the press system in Malaysia, wherein the nation's authorities emphasise the importance of the mass media, particularly broadcasting, to refrain from critically evaluating government policies and actions (Wok & Mohamed, 2017). This has led to consistent scrutiny from international media watchers over the level of media freedom in Malaysia and scepticism towards the justifications provided by the state. Besides that, Malaysia faces the same challenges of breeding unvaried information on social media. The government passed the Anti-Fake News Act 2018 when the issue of fake information became so severe that it inflicted significant harm on society. Furthermore, Ries et al. (2018, as cited in Yatid, 2019) stated that due

to the enormous amount of information in social media, Malaysians are experiencing heightened confusion and a lack of ability to differentiate between authentic and fabricated news and information that is further borne into political propaganda pieces that could stir racial harmony.

According to Brown (2018), the sanctity of anonymity profoundly complicates efforts to curtail the proliferation of such remarks on the platform. Zamri et al. (2023) argued that the increasing hate speech in Malaysia is due to its inconclusive definition, making it hard to identify and categorise it. Moreover, digital populist remarks have opened the door to a cultural confrontation that produced racial and religious hate speech in Malaysia. Shukri and Smajljaj (2020) stated that cultural populism is a political approach that emphasises the promotion of Malay Islamic identity and values through rhetorical remarks and religious sentiment at the expense of minorities and other ethnicities. Similarly, Yilmaz and Morieson (2022) discovered that religious populism had taken hold in Malaysia but with distinct hues. It suggested that Malaysia's legislative structure, which is Malay and Muslim, with Islam as the country's official religion, provides space and allows the government to justify authoritarian moves in orchestrating the issues of race and religion.

With such leverage, Malaysian politicians frequently make false claims, disseminate fake news, and issue defamatory remarks about one another. Every Malaysian Prime Minister since 2009 has faced at least one such allegation, often raised by political

opponents (“Malaysia’s politicians,” 2023). The latest incident occurred on 3 May 2023, when Mahathir initiated legal proceedings against Anwar Ibrahim for allegedly suggesting that an unidentified former leader amassed wealth during his tenure. However, Malaysia’s regulations remain responsive and uphold the values of protecting dignity within its justice system by ensuring that those who instigate harmful expressions towards others face legal consequences. A notable example is when former Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin was ordered by the court under the Defamation Act 1957 to pay RM 1.4 million to former Finance Minister Lim Guan Eng over defamatory remarks posted on Facebook (“Muhyiddin pays”, 2025), demonstrating that the law applies to everyone, including politicians who attempt to undermine an individual’s dignity and reputation through harmful expressions in political speech. This illustrates that Malaysia is a country that makes every effort to ensure its culture aligns with Islam, making it the ideal candidate to adopt a dignified approach to expression and champion a concept that is not foreign but has long been part of its culture and practices.

The literature above has shown that Malaysia's free expression dynamic remains progressive. The government believes in freedom of speech and respects citizens' free articulation of views and expression. Nevertheless, the values of dignity in expression have not been given as much attention as its culture has emphasised, as Malays have misused it by instigating

harm contradicting their identity as Malay Muslims. Therefore, this study argues that this factor must be considered when researching Malay society regarding expression. This study would like to discuss the concept of human dignity more deliberately, as it is the foundational value of Malay cultural expression that stresses the duty to protect each other's dignity instead of depending on an 'open book', inconclusive definition of right.

METHODS

This paper adopted a qualitative approach by utilising secondary data, including literature reviews from books, journal articles, and other online databases. The analysis employed document analysis, which involved examining and interpreting data to derive meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge (Bowen, 2009). To understand the Malay concept of human dignity in expression, the paper first investigated the background of Malay civilisation and how its cultural expressions significantly shaped its identity. Secondly, it examined Malay literary works to uncover how Malay society appreciated and integrated the teaching of cultural expression into their daily conversations. The literary works were selected based on prior studies that explored Malay expression in linguistic terms, drawing on many selections cited from *Hikayat Hang Tuah* by Muhammad (2014, 2018) and *Sulalat Al-Salatin*, which was studied by Faizal et al. (2020). This paper enriched the discussion by analysing them through the

lens of human dignity. It demonstrated that such expressions have been employed and evolved into unique cultural instruments for addressing high-intensity scenarios. This reinforces the argument of this paper that Malays should embrace this cultural aspect of expression, particularly in political speech and expression, which can be justified through the values of dignity.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

'*Bangsa Melayu*,' or the Malay nation, is a group of human societies broadly classified as Malays. It is mainly concentrated in a Southeast Asian region known as the *Malay Archipelago*, which shares these four factors: the Malay language, Malay works of literature, the religion of Islam, and the Malay government, making it a greater unity of civilisation (H. Ahmad, 2004; Musa et al., 2006). Of the four, Islam has become a significant complement to the formation of the Malay custom and one of the most essential structures (Borhan et al., 2006; Musa et al., 2006). Therefore, the central part of Malay identity is shaped by diverse cultural elements guided by the principle of *Tauhid* (oneness of God), which upholds Islamic values and fulfils the purpose of its existence.

Islam also introduced some values that did not exist in Malay society then. In *The Other Malaysia*, Farish Noor stated,

In time, Islam introduced notions and values of individualism, humanism, and a rational agency to a society that was stultified and static. It gave a new life

to a people who had until then come to accept their political situation as final and given (cited in Matzger, 2007, p. 52).

Similar to Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who stated that “religion is the first principle of the Malay people's value system” (cited in Matzger, 2007, p. 56). The Federal Constitution of Malaysia solidified the prominence of Islam by establishing a clear link between Malay ethnicity and religion. “*Malayness*” is defined in Article 160, Clause 2, which specifies that a Malay individual practises the Islamic faith, regularly uses the Malay language, and adheres to Malay customs (Federal Constitution, 2016, p. 198). Accordingly, Hamayotsu (2002) has expressed similar characteristics regarding the evolving concept of *Malayness* throughout time, as Malay was previously primarily associated with three key elements: language, religion, and royalty, and has now shifted towards a greater emphasis on Islamic principles.

Besides that, the enculturation process is one of the fundamental elements in Malay society (Bujang et al., 2006). The process focuses on integrating cultural values and traits to ensure that a person acts within the rules, norms, and values of the society he is a part of. In Malay society, the principal moral value is politeness, which is based in Islam called *Akhlak*. Frank Sweetenham in *Malay Sketches*, Henry Fauconnier in the novel *Malaisie* and Victor Purcell, an Asian researcher, have highlighted this trait of the Malays by respectively stating that ‘*for the Malays their manners are polite*’,

‘*the Malay people are so polite because they are proud*’ and ‘*(the Malay's) good manners are famous*’ (cited in Matzger, 2007, p. 27). However, the socialisation process is equipped with social control and social sanction. The purpose is to ensure that members of society comply with all rules and act within the environment that their culture allows. Society will impose pressure (sanctions) through insults, ridicule, or fines if a violation occurs. Accordingly, for Malays, prioritising religiosity, morality, and virtue is central to socialisation and acculturation.

The Islamic moral system embedded in Malay society has also captured Malay's cultural expression. This study contended that when discussing Malay expression, the concept of human dignity has significantly influenced the moral psyche of the Malays, which many scholars argue has not been found in other societies (Ali, 2022; Mastor et al., 2000; Rashid, 2005; Richardson et al., 2016; Zakaria et al., 2017). The concept of human dignity mirrored Islamic principles, emphasising Islamic moral values to strive for a benevolent personality and manners. Protecting one another's dignity is embedded in every aspect of Malay culture's value system and character development process. This is demonstrated by the Malay proverb ‘*adat bersendi hukum, hukum bersendi kita Allah*,’ or custom is linked to law, the law is linked to God's command. It is also evident that Malay expression culture has long been marked by the Islamic ethics and moral system (Atoh & Idris, 2013; Rashid, 2005). This strong emphasis on this

politeness is attributed to the duty of every Muslim to '*Amar makruf nahi mungkar*' or enjoining good and preventing evil, which has shaped these courteous characters of Malays (Sariyan, 2015).

Politeness of language and expression can be defined as the use of language based on a set of rules and conduct that follows the rules of language, such as linguistic rules, sociolinguistics, and pragmatics or implicature (Omar, 2002). In Malay society, politeness and the use of language are intertwined concepts and have become one of the core essentials in their traditional cultural teaching and values. Malays consider politeness based on how one communicates and expresses oneself. It shows that even though the communication aspect is not directly related to politeness, a person's conduct and way of expression have become a measurement of one good characteristic and behaviour as it is an essential medium in shaping good personality and moral conduct (Kiram & Ariffin, 2012; Mahshudi et al., 2013).

One of the ways for Malays to express themselves with politeness is by inducing the traits of *Malu* or shyness into their personality traits. Zakaria et al. (2017) stated that shyness is intrinsic to Malay culture and a form of emotion that must be worn to maintain one's dignity. Tangney (1991, as cited in Furukawa et al., 2012) states that self-experienced feelings such as shyness, shame, guilt, and other self-conscious emotions are the type of emotions that are felt by oneself. Conversely, Tomkind et al. (1995, as cited in Wong & Tsai,

2007) characterised shame as a feeling resulting from a loss of dignity, defeat, and transgression. Usually, shame arises when others criticise someone for behaving in a way that goes against cultural norms (Lewis 1974, as cited in Wong & Tsai, 2007). In this sense, culture enormously affects what people perceive internally as self-conscious emotions.

Moreover, as Fessler (2004) suggests, cultural conformity significantly influences the motivation for feelings of shyness and shame. In Malay society, these emotions encompass many aspects of understanding, including the most important ones concerning the morals and dignity of the individual, family, and society. The Malay proverb '*menconteng arang di muka*', or scribble black coal on the face, is a metaphor for dishonouring one's family or oneself due to shameless behaviours. This shows how important the concept of shame is in the culture, extending beyond an individual's internal experience to encompass the social and cultural consequences of one's behaviour.

The concept of shyness and shame in Malay society is also linked to the use of language and expression. Malaysian culture considers it rude to make derogatory comments about another person. The things one says, even if true, should be said politely to avoid embarrassing oneself and others. The Malay proverb '*kerana mulut badan binasa*' or because of the mouth, the body could perish warns that careless or thoughtless speech can disgrace oneself and others. Therefore, keeping one's honour

is prioritised in the culture to prevent social strife and the erosion of high ideals in favour of social cohesion. Secondly, the concept of '*face*' is prominent to the Malays. Omar (2000) suggested that Malay culture has introduced the term '*air muka*' or personal honour. The term '*air muka*' carries a profound meaning in that it covers not only expression but whole moral conduct, including behaviour that is not only in public but also in private and not only for individuals but the whole society needs to be self-caution about it (Faizal et al., 2020; Kiram & Ariffin, 2012; Omar, 2000).

Thirdly, Malays avoid and impose self-restraint when it comes to any conflict related to being aggressive with language (Abdullah, 1996; Omar, 1992; Sariyan, 2015). According to Omar (1992), indirectness is a rule of speaking among Malays. Indirectness or implicature, or in the Malay term '*mesej tersirat*', can be defined as a subtle way of delivering a message that might not carry the original intention or may have used a complete opposite of words or phrases from what is supposed to be used. As Mastor et al. (2000) stressed in Malay cultural expression, it is important to analyse who speaks what to whom, where, why, and how to understand the message's true meaning (Horn, 2004; Jalaluddin, 1992). Thus, to be considered a refined person in Malay society, a person must express indirectly that a verbal expression must be constructed gently and politely to avoid sounding aggressive.

Besides that, Malays frequently use *beating-about-the-bush* or BAB to offer

indirectness and be polite (Omar, 1992). Malay is known for its non-straightforward character that would not be straight to the point in conversation. However, the Malays would greet and talk about things before moving slowly into the main topics. Even at rejection, Malay society would utilise implicature as their polite strategy in rejecting, as it is more impactful to the receiver and will not harm the future relationship of both parties (Omar, 1992; Yaakub & Mohamed, 2018; Yusof, 2000).

Furthermore, this paper analyses literary works as evidence to highlight the uniqueness of Malay cultural expression. Malay literature is renowned for its exquisite language style, academic components, rich emotional content, and emphasis on imparting knowledge. It has served its society as a medium for delivering and shaping cultural values. Besides that, it is interesting that Malay literary works are called '*al-Adabi*', denoting sophisticated intellectual creations intended to enlighten public consciousness with virtuous principles, refining and nurturing their souls (Jamian & Radzi, 2015).

Firstly, through the work of *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, Hang Tuah practised polite expression and highly strategised interpersonal communication, together with an honorary salutation. Muhammad (2018) discovered that Hang Tuah had utilised excellent interpersonal communication to resolve conflict and establish diplomatic relations with other countries. Interpersonal communication functions to solve a dispute between two parties. It is not only

the exchange of information but also a psychological factor that involves eye contact, body posture, and facial expression, appearance, tone, and language during conversing, and a skill that allows the other party to give feedback and ensure two-way communication is established (Pearson & Nelson, 2000; Yusof, 2000).

In the story, Sang Jaya Nantaka, who is the brother of the Sultan of Malacca, was faced with an unfair punishment when he was the victim of slander that said he was after power and control, which caused him to be thrown out of office and live as an ordinary citizen. This matter became tense when Parmadewan, a wealthy businessman and merchant from India, wanted to make Sang Jaya Nantaka the king of India. When this news reached the Sultan of Malacca, he welcomed and agreed to let his younger brother become King of India. The Sultan of Malacca also gave Sang Jaya Nantaka a gift of appreciation for his services. However, this appreciation gift also conveys that the Sultan of Malacca wants to contain his brothers' influence and always be in control, which has strained the cold war between the two sides.

Nevertheless, the Sultan of Malacca did not intend to continue this cold war. He sent Hang Tuah as an envoy to represent him to ease the situation and resume diplomatic relations between the two kingdoms and brotherly ties. One of Hang Tuah's ways to improve the relationship between these two kingdoms, apart from successfully taming a wild horse as commanded by the Kisna Rayan (Sang Jaya Nantaka changed his

name to Kisna Rayan after becoming the King of India) and being fluent in a foreign language, is to show a friendly and polite character. One of Hang Tuah's attractions is in his beautiful, well-articulated language and eloquent words that "*everyone who sees him loves him*," and many sultans or kings who meet him are attracted to Hang Tuah's courteous manner (Borhan, 2010; Muhammad, 2018).

As mentioned below:

Setelah dilihat oleh Kisna Rayan akan Laksamana datang itu, maka diperamat-amatinya oleh Kisna Rayan Laksamana berjalan itu, terlalu muhtasyam dengan merendahkan dirinya, terlalu baik barang lakunya dan sikapnya berjalan di hadapan Kisna Rayan itu. Maka fikir baginda, 'Adapun Laksamana itu terlalu baik sekali sikapnya, patut menjadi hulubalangku dan seratus buah negeri dipegangnya dan duduknya di atas segala hulubalangku'

[When Kisna Rayan saw the Laksamana approaching, he observed how the Laksamana walked, with a great honour through humility, his manners exceedingly fine and courteous, as he passed before Kisna Rayan. And His Majesty thought to himself, 'The Laksamana is very fine, I should make him my warrior, and one hundred territories under his command, and he chief among my warriors'] (K. Ahmad, 1997, p.397)

Hang Tuah has also showcased his humbleness through an honorific salutation to the king of India, as illustrated below:

Maka Laksamana pun menyembah lalu duduk. Maka titah Kisna Rayan, "Lain daripada Laksamana tiada kita bawa masuk ke dalam taman kita bermain dengan permaisuri ini." Maka sembah Laksamana, "Daulat tuanku, patik ini hamba yang hina".

[Hang Tuah gave a title of respect to Kisna Rayan, and the admiral bowed and sat down. So Kisna Rayan said, "Other than the Admiral, we will not bring anyone into the garden to play with this queen." So, the Admiral prayed, "My lord, I am a lowly servant."] (K. Ahmad, 1997, p.402)

Hang Tuah's interpersonal communication skills helped resolve the conflict between Kisna Rayan and the Sultan of Malacca. This is proven when Hang Tuah are awarded suits of gold cloth, given a place to stay, and shown the most excellent hospitality in the Indian kingdom (K. Ahmad, 1997). From this, Hang Tuah's interpersonal skills, from his physical ability to emotionally impress the King to his fluent and beautiful language of politeness, can heal the tension between these two nations, shadowed by the darkest of slander and fabricated betrayal. Other than that, Hang Tuah has also utilised an honorific salutation as a sign of humility and modesty. Honorific salutation is a form of greeting and part of a communication strategy used according to

one cultural norm and the norms of a society (Sariyan, 2015).

According to Muhammad (2014), the utilisation of honorific salutation by Hang Tuah not only exemplifies the civilised and moral uprightness of the Malay society but also garnered the government's attention in establishing close diplomatic ties. Other than that, the Malay polite language and expression announce a universal value. The King of India, after seeing Hang Tuah's quite simple but gentle attitude, becomes very affectionate with such an attitude that the King does not take advantage of the kindness, but becomes well respected and honoured in the eyes of the King of India.

Secondly, in the same work, Hang Tuah displayed his brilliance by giving elusive responses that demonstrated indirect speech and implicature. He encountered cultural and religious conflict when he was sent to Siam to purchase an elephant. King Phra Cau, the King of Siam at the time, instructed Hang Tuah to meet him alone and not with the entourage from Malacca. He also instructed Hang Tuah to crawl and bow while approaching him.

As mentioned below:

...maka kata Syahbandar, "Adapun hamba datang ini disuruhkan Oya Bagelang mengajar perintah mengadap Phra Cau, kerana perintah Siam lain, Melayu lain. Pertama, masuk ke dalam itu dengan seorang dirinya, tiada boleh masuk dengan budak-budak. Apabila sampai ke hadapan raja, merangkak sambil menyembah.

[...then Syahbandar said, "As for the servant who came here, Oya Bagelang was told to teach the order to face Phra Cau because the orders of the Siamese are different from those of the Malays. First, go there by yourself. No one can go in with the entourage. When you reach the king's front, crawl while worshipping the king.] (K. Ahmad, 1997, p.436)

Nevertheless, the cultural and religious differences between Hang Tuah and the king of Siam were resolved when Hang Tuah used a clever, elusive, yet subtle response technique without offending the king. With his wisdom, Hang Tuah explained that it was customary for Malays to live in groups with a leader to guide them. Thus, all the entourage and followers from Malacca needed to accompany him to meet the king. Secondly, Hang Tuah explained that his health prevented him from crawling to meet the Siamese king.

For instance:

Maka kata Laksamana, "Yang syahbandar mengingatkan hamba itu benarlah sudah. Adapun akan hamba segala Melayu ini umpama perahu; adapun perahu itu, apabila tiada terkemudi, nescaya tiadalah betul haluannya. Dan seperkara pula, tiada dapat hamba merangkak, kerana ada penyakit pada tubuh hamba ini. Jika ada kasih syahbandar, persembahkan ke bawah Duli Oya Bagelang, minta persembahkan ke bawah Duli Phra Cau".

[Then the Admiral said, "It is true that the mayor reminded the servant. As for the slaves of all the Malays, they are like a boat; as for that boat, if there is no rudder, it will not be heading in the right direction. Moreover, one more thing: the servant cannot crawl because there is a disease in the servant's body. If you have any love, present it to Your Highness Oya Bagelang to ask to present it to Your Highness Phra Cau."]

(K. Ahmad, 1997, p.436-437)

In Malay culture, the implicature strategy in communication has become customary for conveying messages that may not be favourable to the listener while maintaining politeness. According to Omar (1992), Malay expression encompasses four types of implicature: convoluted or twisted speech, figurative speech, indirect speech, and using representatives to communicate the message. In this story, Hang Tuah utilised figurative and indirect speech through his brilliant and rational responses, which enabled him to meet the Siamese king without the imposed conditions. Consequently, his primary aim of acquiring the elephant was successfully achieved. The story illustrates how the Malay polite expression strategy became a problem-solving technique, particularly when relations between two nations are at stake. Furthermore, despite differing cultural and religious backgrounds, Hang Tuah's elusive yet eloquent response led the King of Siam to perceive Hang Tuah as a person of principle and politeness, thereby earning the

King of Siam's respect for Malay customs without further disputes.

Lastly, the work of *Sulalat Al-Salatin* from the story of Sultan Mansur Syah and Puteri Gunung Ledang showcases a high degree of politeness through the Malay art of polite rejection. According to Faizal et al. (2020), the story exemplifies the height of manners and the value of politeness when conveying a rejection message through her representative, employing figurative language and indirectness, as well as 'Bahasa pelunak' or soft language. In the story, Sultan Mansur Syah's marriage proposal is rejected by Puteri Gunung Ledang subtly and courteously. Her rejection method involved requesting something nearly impossible for anyone to fulfil, even a king. Puteri Gunung Ledang also asked Sultan Mansur Syah to provide a bridge of gold and silver, seven trays of mosquito hearts, seven trays of germ hearts, and a bowl of the blood of a king and prince, among other impossible tasks.

This can be illustrated through the following excerpt:

Maka kelihatan pula seorang perempuan tuha, bongkok lipat tiga dibelakangnya. Maka ia berkata kepada Tun Mamad, "Adapun segala kata tuan hamba itu telah sudah dipersembahkan oleh Dang Raya Rani pada Puteri Gunung Ledang. Akan titah puteri, "Jikalau Raja Melakahendak akan daku buatlah aku jambatan emas satu, jambatan perak satu, dari Melaka datang ke Gunung Ledang. Akan peminangnya hati nyamuk tujuh

dulang, hati kuman tujuh dulang, air pinang muda{h} setempayan, air mata setempayan, darah raja sema(ng)kuk dan darah anak raja-raja sema(ng)kuk. Jikalau demikian maka kabullah pada hamba akan kehendak Raja Melaka itu." Maka titah Sultan Mansur Syah, "Semuanya dapat kita adakan, tetapi akan mengeluarkan darah anak kita itulah yang tiada dapat kita adakan, karena tiada sampai hati."

["If the King of Malacca wants to marry me, make me one gold bridge, one silver bridge, from Malacca come to Gunung Ledang." The suitor must obtain seven trays of mosquito hearts, seven trays of germ hearts, a pot of young betel nut water, a pot of tears, and the blood of kings and sons of kings. If such is indeed the situation, bestow upon me the determination and desire of the ruler of Malacca." So, Sultan Mansur Syah said, "We can do everything, but it will be the blood of our son that we cannot do because it is not up to the heart."] (Borhan, 2017, p.125)

Sultan Mansur Syah responded to Puteri Gunung Ledang as below:

"Semuanya dapat kita adakan, tetapi akan mengeluarkan darah anak kita itulah yang tiada dapat kita adakan, karena tiada sampai hati."

["We can do everything, but it will be the blood of our son that we cannot do

because we could not bear to do it.”] (Borhan, 2017, p.125)

According to Faizal et al. (2020), Sultan Mansur Shah accepted the rejection gracefully after comprehending the messages. This is because, as emphasised by Anis and Esa (2016, as cited in Faizal et al., 2020), Malay culture places significant importance on politeness and courtesy in communication, often employing figurative language to convey the speaker's true intentions to the listener without offending, much like Puteri Gunung Ledang communicated with Sultan Mansur Shah. Furthermore, through his writings and choice of language, the book's author aims to enlighten readers about the subtleties of the Malay language and culture in polite discourse, ensuring that mutual respect, the preservation of dignity, and strong relationships can be maintained in any situation.

THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTION

This study provides new theoretical perspectives on freedom of expression in Malaysia. It shows that understanding free expression should not depend solely on human rights; the values of dignity must also play a crucial role in fostering a safe, prosperous, and democratic environment while promoting speech, expression, and ideas for the public good. The prevailing theories of human dignity depend on a universal understanding grounded in liberal-democratic traditions. This stems from the uniform and indifferent definitions of

human rights and human dignity, which have repercussions that limit the values of dignity and diminish its significance both as a concept and in practice (McCrudden, 2008; Steinmann, 2016). On the other hand, some scholars argue for the importance of human dignity as an alternative to human rights, as it can bridge the gap in arguments when defences of human rights are limited and exhaustive, mainly when rights conflict (Habermas, 2010; Lewis, 2020). Liberal human rights have established the standard for freedom of expression, striving for absolute freedom and protecting all types of speech (Bonotti, 2014; Bousquet, 2022). In contradiction, scholars argue that the liberal concept of absolute free speech fails to safeguard against harmful speech, asserting that restrictions are justified through the ethical and moral concept of human dignity, which limits the right to free expression to address hate speech and harmful expression (Bousquet, 2022; Simpson, 2013; Soutphommasane, 2006).

Considering the contradictory views of Westerners, this study introduces the concept of human dignity in expression, reflecting Malay cultural values as its foundational philosophy in daily communication. Works related to '*expression with dignity*' through Malay literature above illustrate the uniqueness of Malay culture and how this concept has become ingrained in the norms individuals navigate regarding self-expression within communal and religious boundaries. This challenges existing assumptions: first, that human rights are a universal concept applicable to all

cultures, and second, that in the context of Malaysia, the Malay-Muslim society should begin to re-navigate its approach to free expression and shift from a ‘right-centric’ to a ‘duty-centric’ perspective. As this study reveals, Malays are well-informed about the rationale behind their community-oriented concept of dignity, which interweaves Islamic values that promote harmony and modesty. This approach reflects their manifestation to align with the aspiration to become the best form of *Ummah* or society (Wahid, 2017), a concept that has always been at the heart of Malay philosophy, though less consciously reflected in recent public discourse. Therefore, this study suggests that a thorough cultural context is necessary to understand the values of dignity in Malay culture and can help shape a productive landscape for free expression in Malaysia.

CONCLUSION

This study argues that Malay cultural expression has long been established based on human dignity and cultural landscape according to Islamic moral values. The integration of Islam into Malay culture was accomplished through a sophisticated and intricate process to foster a cohesive and unified society that appreciates and respects each other. One crucial component in this culture is that one must express oneself with manners and courtesy. The practices of polite language and expression, such as interpersonal communication, elusive response, and the subtle art of rejection, have made the Malay cultural expression

distinguish itself from others by strongly emphasising preserving one's dignity and prioritising diplomacy over incivility. It emphasises the importance of carefully choosing words to prevent offending others. This study also highlighted the Malay moral system, crafted to harmonise differences through refined expressions of courtesy elegantly, but now demands relearning by many Malays.

As informed, Malaysia has always shaped its laws and policy conduct in an Islamic way and should also consider the installation of dignity values. One aspect of this is in the realm of freedom of expression. The success of incorporating values of dignity into the practices of Malay expression necessitates the collective efforts of policymakers and Malay society to help integrate these values into the dynamic discussion surrounding free expression in Malaysia. As we observe today, the topic of free expression in Malaysia remains politically charged concerning the “right to express,” which has not adequately addressed inflammatory and harmful expressions that persist as barriers to achieving social cohesion. Furthermore, this inclusive concept of dignity, rooted in Malay culture and Islam, risks alienating and marginalising non-Muslims in the country. Hence, this poses a challenge for Malays, as the ethnic majority, to integrate universal values to effectively serve society, making recognising dignity values relevant to current issues. This is because a ‘polite expression,’ as introduced, is not intended to restrict political and public discourse but

serves as an effective tool in navigating the myriad societal demands without jeopardising unity and diversity.

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