
Research Article

The Philosophy of Color in Malay Tradition Symbolism, and the Implementation of Cultural Values for Modern Society

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Abstract: This study aims to comprehensively examine the profound philosophical values and moral messages deeply embedded within the traditional color conventions of Malay customs. The primary focus is to critically analyze the historical and contemporary use of color as a powerful "silent language" that intricately represents cultural identity, hierarchical social stratification, and sacred spiritual values within Malay society (Samsudin & Mohd Khidzir, 2020). To achieve this, the method employed is a qualitative descriptive research design, utilizing an ethnographic communication study approach combined with a meticulous cultural semiotic analysis. Data analysis was systematically conducted through data reduction techniques, semiotic analysis to thoroughly examine the relationship between the signifier and signified, as well as a humanistic interpretation aimed at connecting traditional color meaning with modern human values and ethics (Ariyaningsih et al., 2023). Ultimately, the findings reveal that color in Malay custom functions as a vital medium of non-verbal communication that seamlessly integrates moral and spiritual values for modern society under the guiding cultural principle of "Adat bersendi Syarak, Syarak bersendi Kitabullah" (Custom grounded in Islamic Law, Islamic Law grounded in the Holy Quran) (Effendy, 2006). This integration underscores how traditional aesthetics continue to preserve societal harmony, ethical standards, and profound spiritual devotion.

Keywords: Color Philosophy; Cultural Values; Malay Custom; Semiotics; Symbolism.

1. Introduction

Malay culture stands as one of the world's richest symbolic civilizations, wherein every aspect of life carries implicit and profoundly philosophical meanings. From the perspective of the Malay community, the construction of aesthetic elements must be interconnected with ethics and social norms. One of the most fundamental forms of symbolism in Malay custom is the use of color. In this context, color is not merely a decorative element or visual embellishment; it constitutes a "silent language" that represents identity, social stratification, and spiritual values (Samsudin & Mohd Khidzir, 2020).

Historically, the use of color in Malay custom was governed by strict protocols, particularly within royal courts (*istana*) and throughout society at large. The color yellow, for example, has been consistently positioned as the supreme color symbolizing royal sovereignty and nobility, while red and green convey messages of courage and devotion to Islamic values respectively (Effendy, 2005). This phenomenon demonstrates that color functions as an instrument of visual communication that reinforces an individual's position within the customary structure and value system of society.

Within Malay civilization, color was never merely an aesthetic element. Malay color represents an image and the civilization of the Malay people of the past. Color was the earliest medium used by the Malay community. Malay colors exhibit the symbols and moral values of Malay society and demonstrate the expertise of the ancient Malays in forming images and

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beautiful meanings. Nature is the lifeblood in the development of Malay Visual Art. The patterns, designs, and colors found in this Visual Art all originate from the natural world (Raja Fuziah, 2001; Barthes, 1967).

However, amid the currents of modernization and globalization, the community's understanding of the philosophical essence of these colors has begun to shift. The use of color in traditional attire or ceremonial customs is often regarded as merely a fashion trend, without comprehending the moral and philosophical weight inherent within it. This process of desacralization, where color becomes only a matter of 'personal aesthetic taste', obscures its communicative function as a social status marker (Puspitasari, 2021). Consequently, this study aims to re-examine the symbolism of color in Malay custom and how these cultural values are implemented in contemporary life to maintain the continuity of Malay identity.

2. Literature Review

The Origins and Identity of the Malay People

Malay culture is a dynamic entity shaped by a long history of interaction between local traditions, Hindu-Buddhist influences, and the culminating deep assimilation of Islamic values. Etymologically, "Malay" refers to an ethnolinguistic identity inhabiting the Nusantara archipelago, particularly in coastal regions (Zainal Abidin Bakar, 1996). This characterization conveys that Malay culture is neither rigid nor sudden in its emergence; rather, it is a "living organism" that has continuously grown and transformed through various historical phases. The term "dynamic" also signifies that Malay culture is highly receptive to change and has never been closed to the outside world (Shamsul, 2004).

Throughout its history, the Malay people have interacted with various nations and civilizations. The capacity to absorb positive elements from the outside world without losing one's sense of identity is precisely what has kept Malay culture relevant to this day. The Malay community identifies itself through three principal pillars: speaking the Malay language, practicing Malay customs and traditions, and adhering to the Islamic faith. In the view of scholars such as Mahathir Mohamad (as cited in Shamsul, 2004), Islam is not merely a religion for the Malays but has become the core of their identity and way of life.

The foundational values of Malay society rest upon the integration of customary law with divine law. This concept is known as the philosophy of *Adat Bersendi Syarak*, *Syarak Bersendi Kitabullah* meaning that all customs must be grounded in Islamic jurisprudence (*Syarak*), which in turn must be based upon the Holy Quran (*Kitabullah*). This philosophy signifies that any cultural practice that contradicts Islamic teachings will automatically be abandoned or reformed in accordance with Islamic law (Effendy, 2006). This value system inevitably creates a social structure that is religious, decorous, and upholding of moral norms.

Cultural Semiotics Theory

Semiotics is the discipline that studies signs, the functions of signs, and the production of meaning. In the cultural context, color is not merely an optical phenomenon; it constitutes a "sign" that carries particular ideological and social messages. The semiotic approach also elaborates upon the foundations of general linguistic theory. What distinguishes this field lies in the fact that language is understood as a sign system. According to Saussure, signs particularly linguistic signs possess at least two fundamental characteristics: they are linear and arbitrary in nature (Budiman, 1999). The principal discussion within Saussure's theory essentially emphasizes that language is a system of signs, and each sign is composed of two components: the signifier and the signified (Fanani, 2013).

The signifier and signified are two elements that are always present to explain what is being referred to. The signifier, in Saussure's sense, is interpreted by Barthes as expression, and the signified as content. The two are subsequently linked by a relationship determined based on the context of usage in order to arrive at meaning. In general terms, there are two principal approaches within semiotics:

Ferdinand de Saussure: This approach emphasizes the relationship between the Signifier (physical form) and the Signified (mental concept). Within Malay culture, the color yellow (signifier) carries the signified meaning of nobility or the power of the sultan. Saussure regards the sign as akin to two sides of a coin that cannot be separated. The signifier represents the physical manifestation what is seen, heard, or touched while the signified constitutes the

concept or idea that arises in the mind upon perceiving that physical form. In application within Malay culture, the color yellow itself functions as the physical signifier, while the concept of "royal grandeur" or "symbol of the sultan" constitutes the signified. Without this cultural agreement, yellow would be merely a color; however, in Malay society, yellow is a symbol of sovereign power (Saussure, as cited in Budiman, 1999).

Charles Sanders Peirce: This approach proposes a triadic theory comprising the Representamen (sign), Object (reference), and Interpretant (the meaning that arises in the receiver's mind). The sign (Representamen) represents something else (e.g., the color yellow); the Object is the actual entity to which the sign refers (e.g., the figure of the Sultan or the institution of the Kingdom); while the Interpretant is the meaning that ultimately forms in the mind of the observer. The key distinction is that whereas Saussure focuses on 'what the relationship is', Peirce focuses on 'how humans process meaning'. In Peirce's theory, the meaning of yellow may differ for someone unfamiliar with Malay culture, which is why the Interpretant element is of paramount importance (Peirce, 1931).

Color symbolism in culture operates through a system of Connotation (Barthes, 1967). Color possesses a denotative meaning (the color itself) and a connotative meaning (the cultural meaning attributed to it). Research spanning 30 nations and 22 languages has shown that while color-emotion associations exhibit universal patterns, they are simultaneously shaped by linguistic and geographic proximity, affirming that the meaning of color is both culturally grounded and universally resonant (Jonaskaite et al., 2020). For example, within Riau Malay tradition: Yellow symbolizes grandeur and sovereignty (the color of the Sultan/King); Green symbolizes fertility and religious devotion (Islam); Red symbolizes courage and heroism.

3. Methodology

This article employs a Qualitative Descriptive approach using the Ethnographic Communication Study method and Cultural Semiotic Analysis. The authors not only gathered technical data but also endeavored to penetrate the deepest meanings through human experience and oral heritage. The methodological steps undertaken are as follows:

Research Approach (The Human Approach)

This study employs a Cultural Phenomenological approach, a method that seeks to understand the phenomenon of color not as an inanimate object, but as a lived experience of the Malay community. The authors endeavor to position themselves as "listeners" to the symbolic messages passed down through generations (Kurniawati et al., 2022).

Data Sources (Tracing the Roots)

Data were gathered from two primary sources to maintain a balance between theory and field reality. Primary sources refer to classical literature such as ancient manuscripts, Malay literary texts, and the intellectual works of major Malay cultural figures (such as Tenas Effendy's *Tunjuk Ajar Melayu*). Secondary data constitutes research data obtained indirectly through intermediary media, including books, academic journals, articles, and data previously collected by other parties (Alir, 2005). Secondary data may be acquired from various sources including documents, government publications, media industry analyses, websites, and internet resources. Researchers employed documentary methods to collect secondary data, encompassing the search and analysis of documents relevant to the research topic (Ariyaningsih et al., 2023; Kurniawati et al., 2022).

Data Collection Techniques (Gathering the Wisdom)

Library research was conducted through the examination of documents, journals, and historical texts to identify the philosophical foundations of "Adat Bersendi Syarak, Syarak Bersendi Kitabullah" in the context of color usage. Participatory observation was also employed to carefully observe the use of color in the daily life practices of the Malay community, ranging from the use of the *tanjak* (head covering) to the selection of decorative colors in wedding ceremonies (Hamidy, 2000).

Data Analysis Technique (Unveiling the Meaning)

The collected data were analyzed through three stages of interpretation: data reduction, with the aim of filtering the most relevant information concerning the principal color philosophies (Yellow, Red, Green, Black, White); semiotic analysis, examining color as a

"sign" possessing a signifier (the color itself) and a signified (the philosophical meaning or moral message behind it); and humanistic interpretation, connecting the meaning of these colors with modern human values exploring how these colors remain relevant in shaping the character and ethics of contemporary society (Fanani, 2013).

Data Validation

As an instrument to ensure the accuracy of meaning, the authors conducted Source Triangulation, comparing the findings from the literature with the statements of customary figures and the reality found within the community. This was done to ensure that the writing would not remain merely a personal opinion, but rather constitute a collective representation of the Malay community itself (Ariyaningsih et al., 2023).

4. Results and Discussion

Color transcends

Color transcends purely aesthetic function, serving as a semiotic system that depicts social hierarchy, theological principles, and the cosmological framework of its community. The application of color is bound by strict norms of custom and tradition, reflecting the worldview and social stratification structure of the Malay community. As formulated by Tenas Effendy in *Tunjuk Ajar Melayu* (Effendy, 2006), these colors are not mere ornamentation, but rather "customary garments" that reflect identity and adherence to Islamic law.

Yellow (Kuning): The Pinnacle of Sovereignty

The color occupying the highest position within the Malay color hierarchy is yellow. Historically, this color became the symbol of nobility and sovereignty, restricted exclusively to the aristocracy or Sultan. Philosophically, yellow is associated with sunlight, which in Malay cosmology is regarded as the center of vitality and life energy. This analogy depicts the ruler as a radiance of justice for his people, akin to the sun illuminating the earth. The exclusive use of yellow in royal regalia is documented in numerous Malay historical manuscripts and reinforced by contemporary scholars of Malay aesthetics (Samsudin & Mohd Khidzir, 2020; Raja Fuziah, 2001).

Green (Hijau): Prosperity and Religious Devotion

The color occupying the next position in the hierarchy is green, which carries the meanings of fertility, prosperity, and religiosity. Green also represents the fusion of natural order and Islamic values; Islamic literature depicts green as the characteristic of the inhabitants of paradise (QS. Al-Kahfi: 31), thereby forging a connection between worldly well-being and divine piety that has become an integral part of Malay identity. Philosophically, green implies regeneration and growth, referring to the productivity of the land in the Malay peninsula and islands, which has long depended upon agriculture and maritime activities (Effendy, 2006; Puspitasari, 2021).

Red (Merah): Courage and Social Solidarity

The color red within the Malay tradition symbolizes vital dynamism and the energy of life, manifested in the steadfast defense of truth and social bonds. In the context of Malay custom, red is commonly found in the bridal attire and military equipment. Red is also employed as a marker of the people's loyalty to their leaders. Historical records from the era of Malay knighthood cite red as the identity of military commanders (*panglima*) and frontier guards (*hulubalang*) who were willing to sacrifice for the honor of their homeland. Red also reflects responsibility toward communal life (Effendy, 2006; Hamidy, 2000). This association between red and social authority is not exclusive to Malay culture cross-cultural research demonstrates that red is implicitly linked to high social status across different societies, reinforcing the universality of red as a symbol of power and hierarchy (Wu et al., 2018).

Black (Hitam): Firmness, Dignity, and Customary Authority

The color black symbolizes steadfastness of heart, authority, and wisdom—differing markedly from Western societies, which tend to associate black with mourning. In the Malay perspective, black is a symbol of maturity, protection, and capable customary authority. In its connection to customary guardians, black is the most practical color for *Datuk* figures, customary custodians, and *pencak silat* practitioners, representing "the earth" that is stable yet resilient. Black symbolizes adherence to Islamic law and the identity of the Malay nation (Effendy, 2006; Zainal Abidin Bakar, 1996).

White (Putih): Spiritual Purity and Moral Transcendence

The color white symbolizes deep spiritual resonance. If yellow represents worldly authority (the King), white is frequently regarded as the representation of spiritual sovereignty and inner purity. Philosophically, white reflects the state of human *fitrah*—free from defect and bias. White acts as a marker of transcendence and moral integrity. Hamidy (2000), in his seminal work on Malay culture and transformation, analyzes white as a symbol of honesty in customary ceremonies, while cultural scholars have affirmed its moral authority as standing apart from practical politics. The use of white in ritual and ceremonial contexts across Malay communities underscores its role as a boundary marker between the profane and the sacred (Hamidy, 2000; Shamsul, 2004).

Color Combinations and Regional Implementation

Color combinations form a "visual narrative" that implies social structure. The color syntax of Yellow-Red-Green symbolizes the concept of "Tali Berpilin Tiga" (The Threefold Twisted Rope), representing the synergy between government, people, and religion. The implementation of these colors varies across regions: in coastal areas (Siak), gold-yellow predominates as the former center of a kingdom, while in the highland regions (Kampar), black and red are more prominent as symbols of the customary authority of the *Ninik Mamak* (Effendy, 2006; Kurniawati et al., 2022).

The color philosophy is preserved in modern life through wedding ceremonies using gold-yellow bridal attire, traditional architecture with green or red accents, and formal dress etiquette through the selection of colors for the *tanjak* and *kain samping* (waist cloth). These practical manifestations illustrate that Malay color symbolism has not merely remained a relic of the past, but continues to serve as a living cultural expression in contemporary Malay society (Puspitasari, 2021; Barthes, 1967).

5. Conclusions

Summary

Color in Malay custom represents a form of local wisdom that teaches etiquette, social hierarchy, and the harmonious relationship between human beings, nature, and God. Understanding this symbolism means understanding the character of a people who hold honor and spiritual devotion in the highest regard. The five principal colors yellow, green, red, black, and white each carry specific philosophical meanings deeply rooted in Islamic values and the cosmological worldview of Malay civilization (Samsudin & Mohd Khidzir, 2020).

The semiotic analysis of these colors, informed by the frameworks of Saussure, Peirce, and Barthes, reveals that color in the Malay tradition operates as a sophisticated communication system that encodes social, political, and spiritual information across generations. This system of color symbolism is not static but dynamically adapts to the changing contexts of modern society while retaining its core philosophical underpinnings (Budiman, 1999; Fanani, 2013).

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