

## REVIEW ARTICLE

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# The Soul of Unity: Malay Language and Its Role in Culture, Identity, and Peace

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## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history

RECEIVED: 25-Jul-25

REVISED: 08-Sep-25

ACCEPTED: 13-Sep-25

PUBLISHED: 15-Nov-25

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**Citation:** Vijayaletchumy Subramaniam, Sharala Subramaniam, Wan Iman binti Wan Salim, Pavitira Nagaraju and Gokilavani (2025). The Soul of Unity: Malay Language and Its Role in Culture, Identity, and Peace. Horizon J. Hum. Soc. Sci. Res. 7 (2), 22–31. <https://doi.org/10.37534/bp.jhssr.2025.v7.n2.id1309.p22>



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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the significant function of Malay as a nation-building language in advancing cultural identity, social unity, and peaceful coexistence in Southeast Asia. As the ancient lingua franca, Malay has united different ethnic, cultural, and geographical communities from Srivijaya to contemporary Malaysia, Brunei, and Indonesia. Beyond communication, Malay is a vehicle of critical values of respect, modesty, and cooperation that have endured to shape social behaviour. Adopting a narrative review approach, this study interweaves policy documents, historical texts, and academic sources in examining Malay's role in cultural conservation and peacebuilding. The research highlights how Malay tradition—expressed through oral literature, proverbs, and community practice—nurtures shared understanding and collective identity. It does so simultaneously while globalization, English language hegemony, and the influence of new media challenge its vitality. Against such pressures, Malay demonstrates resilience in the face of state policy, social activism, and revived appeal among younger generations. New developments, including digitization of resources, inclusion into school curriculum, and creative deployment of social media, add further to its currency. Indeed, the language is compatible with regional peacebuilding agendas, like ASEAN's program of intercultural dialogue and cultural cooperation. The findings verify that Malay is not merely a language but a unifying cultural power. By maintaining and reinforcing the use of both its ancient and modern forms, Malay can maintain heritage, unify identity, and be an effective vehicle for harmony in an increasingly globalized world.

**Keywords:** Cultural, Malay Language, Peace, Social Unity, Southeast Asia

## 1. INTRODUCTION

A child in Malaysia today can communicate in Korean due to the widespread influence of Korean entertainment products such as music and drama (Adlina et al., 2020). While this reflects the benefits of globalization, it also raises concerns about cultural shifts. Adlina et al. (2020) observed that exposure to foreign media has altered language preferences and influenced the cultural practices of Malaysian teenagers. Scholars further caution that technology, while creating borderless communication, has simultaneously contributed to cultural erosion and identity loss in many parts of the world (Tanulku & Pekelsma, 2024; Mattelart et al., 2024).

Before the rise of digital technology and global geopolitics, languages played a central role in carrying culture, history, and identity across generations. Even today, languages continue to serve as strong markers of identity despite changes in communication platforms (Levisen & Fernández, 2021). The global spread of English, beginning in the 19th century through colonial expansion, illustrates how a language can gain worldwide dominance (Li, Haider, & Callison-Burch, 2024). Nevertheless, regional and national languages such as Mandarin, Malay, and Javanese remain indispensable within their own sociocultural contexts (Shair-Rosenfield et al., 2021). The Indian subcontinent provides a clear example of how languages have long supported cultural identity and peaceful coexistence.

Against this backdrop, a key research question arises: How does the Malay language function as a cultural unifier and peacebuilder in Southeast Asia? This paper addresses this question by tracing the historical and contemporary roles of the Malay language in sustaining

cultural identity, fostering unity, and contributing to regional peace.

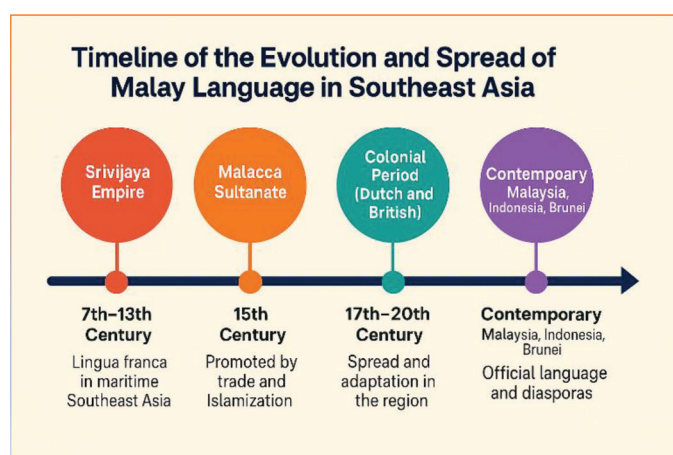
## 2. BACKGROUND / LITERATURE CONTEXT

### Historical Foundations

The Malay language belongs to the Austronesian family, spoken by more than 328 million people today (Thao et al., 2024). Its spread and early prominence are closely linked to the Srivijaya Empire in the seventh century, which elevated Malay to the status of lingua franca across Southeast Asia. Through trade and diplomacy, Srivijaya fostered what Manguin (2021) describes as a “Malay world” in which language, commerce, culture, and politics were interwoven. This historical foundation established Malay as not only a medium of communication but also a carrier of identity and cultural cohesion across the region.

### Cross-border Unity

Contemporary studies demonstrate Malay’s continuing role as a bridge among diverse communities. Sutikno, Kartolo, and Asnawi (2024) showed that in Deli, Indonesia, Malay fosters inter-community relationships between Javanese and Malay sub-communities, providing a shared linguistic space that supports cultural integration. Their study of 112 respondents highlights how Malay functions as both a practical communication tool and a marker of collective identity. Beyond Deli, Malay has historically united communities across Sumatra, Borneo, the Malay Peninsula, and parts of the Philippines, serving as a lingua franca for trade, cultural exchange, and governance (Zulkifli & Yusoff, 2022). Similarly, Yamirudeng (2017) observed that Malay enables Thai-Malay Muslims to



**Figure 1.** Timeline of the Evolution and Spread of Malay Language in Southeast Asia

Source: Authors, 2025.

*The historical development of the Malay language from the Srivijaya Empire to its contemporary role across Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei, and diaspora communities.*

retain cultural identity and cross-border solidarity despite pressures from dominant languages in Southern Thailand.

### Cultural Symbols

The unifying role of Malay extends beyond daily communication into the realm of cultural symbolism. Shared identities across the Malay Archipelago are rooted in traditions carried by the language, including *pantun* (poetic quatrains), *adat* (customs), and *tatasusila* (ethics). These cultural symbols embody values such as respect, humility, and cooperation, ensuring that Malay is not merely spoken but lived as a framework for coexistence (Idrus et al., 2014). Communities in Selangor, for example, including *Acheh*, *Boyan*, and *Banjar* groups, continue to be linked through Malay, which facilitates not only cultural ties but also economic and social exchanges (Zulkifli & Yusoff, 2022).

### Comparative Perspectives

The significance of Malay in fostering unity can be better understood when compared to other languages with similar integrative roles. Arabic, for instance, spread widely through Islam, uniting Muslim communities across continents and influencing Malay vocabulary, cultural practices, and greetings in Malaysia (Mahfud et al., 2022; Soliman & Khalil, 2024). Similarly, German functions as a unifying language across multiple European countries, shaping cultural and administrative interactions (Abdumannonovna, 2022). These parallels highlight that Malay, like Arabic and German, has acted as a vehicle for cultural continuity, identity formation, and socio-political integration.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative narrative review design with documentary analysis rather than fieldwork.

Narrative review is an appropriate strategy because the research seeks to integrate the existing scholarship, policy, and historical records about the Malaysian Malay language's role in cultural identity and peacebuilding, rather than creating new empirical data (Merzali Celikoglu & Hamarat, 2022).

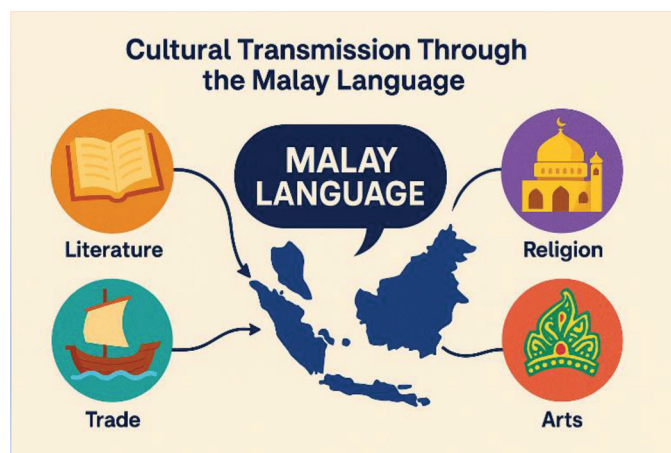
A total of approximately 45 sources were consulted, comprising peer-reviewed journal articles, historical texts, national language policy reports, ASEAN and UNESCO reports, and chosen ethnographic studies applicable to Southeast Asia. The inclusion criteria were such that sources had to directly address the Malay language in terms of cultural identity, peacebuilding, sociopolitical cohesion, or interethnic communication. Exclusion criteria excluded non-peer-reviewed articles, opinion articles, and research studies not immediately related to language, identity, or peace studies.

Document analysis proceeded along three keyword sets, namely "Malay language and identity," "Malay and peacebuilding," and "language and cultural heritage in Southeast Asia." This procedure enabled the bringing together of literature along history, sociolinguistic, and policy domains so that a comprehensive report regarding the function of the Malay language as a cultural unifier and as a tool of peace was established.

## 4. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

### 4.1. Malay Language and Cultural Identity

Bahasa Malaysia is not just a tool of communication; it is a world view that embodies respect, humility, harmony, and spirituality. As what Yamirudeng (2017) observed, Malay is not just an informative tool but a manifestation of values that regulate how communities live, communicate, and interact. Terms like *budi bahasa*



**Figure 2.** Cultural Transmission Through the Malay Language

Source: Authors, 2025

*A symbolic representation of the Malay language's role in transmitting values that underpin multicultural cohesion and peace.*

(proper language), adat (customs), and tatasusila (ethics) span centuries of moral wisdom and cultural norms.

Cultural representations such as pantun (poems), proverbs, and cerita rakyat (folk tales) have always been at the centre of the 'value creating' process within a community. These oral traditions are not merely artistic; they educate. Kozakh is a humorous and educative story in the form of Pantun (Pantun, 2025), containing metaphors and rhythmic formation, that are used as a teaching material media and entertainment. Idrus et al. (2014) observed that *sabar* (patience), *rendah diri* (humility), and *rukun* (harmony) are transmitted through these traditions, and continue to inform national identity and public values in Malaysia, Brunei, Singapore, and parts of Indonesia. The language wraps itself around daily life, learning, and ritual, subtly shaping.

#### 4.2. Language as a Tool for Peaceful Coexistence

With time, Malay has shown to be more than just a national tongue; it has served as a link between cultures. Historical documents and studies by Hiranpaisitkul et al. (2022) and Ayob (2012) indicate how Malay facilitated communication in commerce, diplomacy, and daily exchanges throughout Southeast Asia. Its openness and impartiality made it perfect for bringing together individuals from various ethnic and religious communities.

Furthermore, the language embodies what many view as a kind of "soft power," particularly in the ASEAN area. Collins and Ahmad (1999) emphasize that Malay fosters peace not through coercion but via the values inherent in the language. Terms such as *gotong-royong* (collaborative effort) and *muafakat* (consensus) are more than mere words; they reflect a mentality grounded in communal values. In addition, Islamic values like *rahmah* (compassion), *aman* (peace), and *adil* (justice) are seamlessly woven into daily Malay dialogue. These values aren't merely stated; they're enacted, taught in educational settings, conveyed through the media, and evident in how individuals settle disputes and foster relationships.

Importantly, these linguistic and cultural values resonate with regional frameworks. The ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC) Blueprint 2025, for example, explicitly calls for the promotion of a "culture of peace and moderation" through education, intercultural dialogue, and shared values (ASEAN Secretariat, 2016). Aligning Malay linguistic traditions with such peacebuilding policies strengthens its role as both a cultural heritage and a contemporary instrument for fostering unity in Southeast Asia.

#### 4.3 Role in Multicultural Societies

In multicultural nations such as Malaysia, Brunei, and certain regions of Indonesia, the Malay language remains a unifying element that connects individuals from diverse backgrounds. According to Zulkiflee and Suhaimi (2023), Malay serves not only as the national language but also as the medium through which varied communities can communicate with one another on an equal basis. In Malaysia, for example, it links Malays, Chinese, Indians, and Indigenous groups, serving as a routine resource in education, public services, and mass media.

Festivities and artistic displays also embody this welcoming essence. Occasions such as *Hari Kebangsaan* and *Hari Malaysia* unite individuals, with the Malay language being pivotal in speeches, songs, and communal practices. In Singapore, despite the prevalence of English, Malay continues to be recognized as an official language and plays an important role in heritage education. In both formal ceremonies and community events, Malay frequently serves as the expression of common identity and shared history.

Parallel models are found in other multicultural societies. Mandarin, for instance, is the language bridge across China's diverse ethnic groups and brings them into national identity without displacing most regional languages. Similarly, Hindi is a lingua franca in India that brings together different speakers of other mother tongues in governance, media, and popular culture. These parallels reinforce the argument that Malay, along with Mandarin and Hindi, has a key role of ensuring togetherness and intercultural understanding in advanced multicultural communities.

#### 4.4 Resilience Against Linguistic Hegemony

Even with the dominant influence of English and other worldwide languages, Malay has demonstrated a remarkable capacity to evolve and persist. Numerous minority languages globally face significant challenges to exist in the current digital and globalized environment. However, as described by Collins and Ahmad (1999), Malay has continued to be significant due to robust government policies, public involvement, and its deep connections to religion and tradition.

Its power resides in the emotional and cultural bond it cultivates. In educational institutions, religious centers, government assemblies, and across social media platforms, Malay remains vibrant. Global organizations such as UNESCO and ASEAN acknowledge their importance, enhancing its credibility internationally (e-IR, 2023). The revival of the Jawi script in educational institutions and signage, previously considered to be declining, is now experiencing a resurgence. For numerous



individuals, Jawi represents more than merely a script; it's an emblem of pride and a reminder of the abundant cultural heritage associated with the Malay language.

Regional recognition further attests to such resilience: Malay (in its standard forms of Bahasa Malaysia, Bahasa Indonesia, and Bahasa Brunei) is an officially or nationally recognized language in three ASEAN nations which are Malaysia, Indonesia, and Brunei collectively representing more than 300 million speakers. Beyond these national borders, Malay is constitutionally recognized as part of Singapore's four officially recognized languages, thereby attesting to its wider sociopolitical function.

International institutions have also acknowledged this role. UNESCO declared 2019 the International Year of Indigenous Languages, flagging activities to promote preservation of language diversity, and from that point on has supported programs that protect Malay as Southeast Asia's intangible cultural heritage. UNESCO collaborations with ASEAN recently have emphasized digitization and intergenerational passing on of regional languages, including Malay, as key to sustainable development and peace building (UNESCO, 2022).

#### 4.5 Revival and Hope

A subtle resurgence is happening, particularly among younger people who are reengaging with the Malay language through innovative and imaginative methods. Instagram accounts advocating pantun and YouTube channels instructing in Jawi are actively aiding in the resurgence of linguistic pride within digital realms. Efforts to bring back Jawi in educational settings and on signs (Jawi Script, 2025) represent a significant move towards reconnecting with cultural roots, seen not merely as a formality, but as an active tradition. While specific hashtag metrics for Malay poetry or Jawi writing are not publicly available, TikTok dominates social media engagement in Southeast Asia with the region accounting for nearly one-quarter of the platform's global ad-viewership (China Daily, 2025) and some countries like Malaysia recording over 28 million users and a 48.6% annual increase in reach (Meltwater, 2024). This underscores the platform's potential for cultural content such as Malay poetry or Jawi revival to reach and influence a wide audience.

Beyond Southeast Asia, this drive persists. The Malay diaspora is displaying a revived interest, frequently utilizing the language to maintain a connection to their cultural identity. Within academic communities, Malay is attracting interest for its linguistic depth and prospects in peace education. According to Zulkiflee and Suhaimi (2023), the future of the Malay language isn't just about conserving the past; it's about redefining how it can

promote empathy, communication, and harmonious living in a globalized society. With community engagement and educational changes, Malay is reaffirming its significance, not only historically but also currently and in the future.

The implications of this research can be situated in existing theoretical frameworks. Sociolinguistically, the Malay language offers proof for the linguistic relativity principle, such that language not only affects communication but also worldview and social interaction patterns (Levisen & Fernández, 2021). Its role as a unifier likewise translates well into Joseph Nye's soft power theory, since Malay affects cooperation and coordination through values of harmony, respect, and consensus and not coercion. Also, the support function of Malay as an overarching medium across Southeast Asia is in line with Benedict Anderson's imagined communities' theory, where shared language enables individuals of varying backgrounds to envision themselves to be part of an encompassing cultural and political community. Pitting the Malay language under such theoretical constructs underscores both its cultural heritage and practical role as a tool for peacebuilding and social integration in Southeast Asia.

#### 5. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The Malay language, described as *Bahasa Jiwa Bangsa* (Language of the Nation's Soul), serves as a tool to connect generations, transmit ancestral wisdom, foster cultural identity, and unity. The Malay language acts as a bridge for communication and cultural expression (Othman et al., 2022), ensuring the transmission and preservation of cultural values, wisdom, tradition, and artistic expressions among its multicultural societies. Positive values such as working together for a good cause (*gotong royong*) and reaching consensus (*muafakat*) are integrated into the lexicon to promote peace and harmony (Ayob, 2012; Misa Melayu, 2025) and the *talibun, Hikayat Awang Sulung Merah Muda*, beautifully captures imagery of this communal unity, cooperation and respect through verses like,

*Yang pekak pembakar meriam, (The deaf lights the cannon),*  
*Yang buta penghembus lesung, (The blind blows the mortar),*  
*Yang lumpuh penghalau ayam, (The crippled repels the chicken),*  
*Yang pekung penjemuran, (The scarred dries the crops),*  
*Yang kurap pemikul tabuh. (The one with ringworm carries the drum).*

On a broader scale, the Malay language serves as an agent of peace, uniting nations, races, religions, and ethnicities in Southeast Asia and beyond, including Malay-speaking communities in Southern Thailand, Southern Philippines, Sri Lanka, and South Africa. Bound by shared history, culture, and linguistics, the

Malay language has remained a powerful unifying force (Ayob, 2012; Zulkiflee & Suhaimi, 2023), evident in events such as *Sumpah Pemuda* 1928 that united Indonesia, and its survival in Southern Thailand despite political and linguistic pressures. This study reaffirms the Malay language as the soul of unity, preserving wisdom, values, and identity despite colonialism and globalization. As Pantun (2025) declares, *Bahasa menunjukkan bangsa* (Language defines a nation), reminding us that Malay is never a barrier to success, unity, and harmony, and must continue to remain relevant and enduring.

To ensure the sustainability of the Malay language in serving its functions as the tool to preserve culture, enhance national identity and foster peace, the following actions are proposed:

### 1. Digitizing the Malay Language and Cultural Heritage

In today's era where the world massively embraces advanced technology, the Malay language must make full use of digital advancement to persevere and remain relevant. The transmission of culture, wisdom, and artistic traditions can now be done digitally to reach a wider range of audiences while making the preservation and transfer process more appealing and engaging. Highly interactive game-like applications, for instance, can attract young people while literary enthusiasts can collaborate to initiate a digital bank for collections of oral and written traditions from various ethnicities and races, to include Indigenous communities.

### 2. Popularizing Cultural Pride and Unity through social media

Younger generations who communicate through social media need to develop pride in using and advocating the Malay language. Platforms like TikTok, Facebook, and Instagram can position the language and its values at the center, promoting identity and unity. Sharing pantun and *sajak* fosters unity among Malay-speaking communities worldwide, including the diaspora in Cape Town and Sri Lanka, proving the saying "*jauh di mata, dekat di hati*" (far from the eyes, close to the heart).

### 3. Integrating Malay Language and Values in Education for Peacebuilding

Language can support the United Nations' SDG 16 on peace, justice, and unity. ASEAN nations may consider adopting Malay as a second or third language for diplomacy, starting with schools where children learn it as a second or foreign language and are introduced to traditions and values through literary traditions. Values

such as *bertolak ansur* (tolerance), *bergotong royong* (working together), and *berbudi bahasa* (polite speech) can be fostered, while folklores rich in positive messages can be included in the syllabus. Schools can also revive traditions via *pantun*, *syair*, and *sajak* competitions while at another level, enthusiasts producing modern works inspired by tradition should receive media coverage and government funding so that writings promoting peace can flourish.

### Acknowledgements

The authors would like to express their gratitude to the editors and editorial staff of JHSSR for their assistance during publication period.

### Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research.

### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

### Declaration of Generative AI and AI-assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author(s) did not employ any of the Generative AI and/or AI-Assisted technologies for Language refinement, drafting background section and did not perform any Task of the technology.

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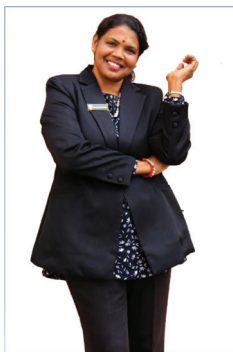
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### Vijayaletchumy Subramaniam

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Her distinguished career spans over two decades, focusing on **Malay language education, psycholinguistics, literacy development, translation studies, and educational technology**. She has played a pivotal role in



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Passionate about language education, she is often invited to motivate students to use English confidently.

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Beyond her academic and organizational contributions, Gokilavani has co-authored several **books and scholarly articles**, lending her knowledge and insight to the advancement of language and education. Her research interests include psycholinguistics, bilingual learning strategies, and inclusive language pedagogy.

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