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The perception of "Honour and Shame (Malu)" in Malay society

Malay toplumunda "Şeref ve Utanç (Malu)" algısı

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Abstract

Malaysia is a Muslim-majority society that measures everyday life through malu, an emotion of shame, yet honour killings are almost unknown there. This study asks where and how the moral order of malu departs from orders that defend honour through violence. Reading the Mediterranean honour and shame literature with Bourdieu's notion of symbolic capital and the anthropology of emotions, it sets against positive honour, claimed through display and retaliation, the concept of negative honour, a regime of gaze and self-control that prevents violation in advance. A thematic analysis of eight semi-structured interviews conducted in Kuala Lumpur shows that malu operates as a preventive discipline taught early within the family and that it produces unequal costs along gender and hierarchy. Responses to violation are directed towards means that manage visibility, such as concealment, shelter homes and adoption. The judicial authority of the modern Western state eroded honour based on retaliation, whereas the Malaysian state finds no private jurisdiction to seize and may, tentatively, lend malu new objects such as conferred titles, suggesting that modernisation may select among forms of honour culture. Confined to urban, educated Muslim Malays, the study suggests that the link between honour and violence may not be a necessary one and proposes negative honour as a counter-model to be tested further against the Mediterranean-centred literature.

Keywords: *Malu, negative honour, honour and shame, honour killing, anthropology of emotions*

Öz

Malezya, gündelik hayatı Malu adı verilen bir utanma duygusuyla ölçüp tartan Müslüman çoğunluklu bir toplum olduğu hâlde namus cinayetini neredeyse tanımadığından, bu çalışmada malu'nun kurduğu ahlaki düzenin şerefi şiddetle savunan düzenlerden nerede ve nasıl ayrıldığı sorulmuştur. Akdeniz merkezli şeref-utanç literatürünün Bourdieu'nün sembolik sermaye kavramı ve duygu antropolojisiyle birlikte okunduğu çalışmada, kendini gösterme ve karşılık verme yoluyla talep edilen pozitif onurun karşısına, ihlali baştan önleyen bir bakış ve öz-denetim rejimi olarak negatif onur kavramı yerleştirilmiştir. Kuala Lumpur'da yürütülen sekiz yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmenin tematik çözümlemesi, malu'nun aile içinde erken yaşta öğretilen önleyici bir disiplin olarak işlediğini, toplumsal cinsiyet ve hiyerarşi boyunca eşitsiz bedeller doğurduğunu ve ihlale verilen tepkinin gizleme, sığınma evleri ve evlat verme gibi görünürlüğü yöneten araçlara yöneldiğini göstermiştir. Modern Batı'da devletin yargı yetkisi misillemeye dayanan onuru aşındırmış, Malay bağlamında ise devlet el koyacağı özel bir yargı alanı bulamamıştır. Devletin verdiği unvanlar gibi nesnelerin malu'nun koruma alanına girebileceği ihtiyatla öne sürülmüş, buradan modernleşmenin şeref kültürlerinin biçimleri arasında bir ayıklama yapabileceği sonucuna varılmıştır. Kentli ve eğitimli Müslüman Malaylarla sınırlı tutulan çalışma, şeref ile şiddet arasındaki bağın zorunlu olmayabileceğini düşündürerek Akdeniz merkezli literatüre sınanmaya açık bir karşı model önermiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Malu, negatif onur, şeref ve utanç, namus cinayeti, duygu antropolojisi*

Introduction

Malaysia is a Muslim-majority society that measures even the most ordinary moments of everyday life by an emotion of shame called *malu* (Collins & Bahar, 2000, p. 35). Yet it leaves almost entirely outside its experience the form of violence known from Turkey and the Middle East as honour killing (U.S. Department of State, 2015), at least as a recognised pattern in the available record. If honour is a capital that must be restored through violence whenever it is violated, how is the Malaysian silence to be explained? The question gains in sharpness because the Malay world does not speak with one voice on this matter. Across the border, in South Sumatra, which belongs to Indonesia, men are expected to respond with violence when they are placed in a shameful situation (Collins & Bahar, 2000, p. 48; Röttger-Rössler, 2013, p. 413). The present study therefore asks where and how the moral order constituted by *malu* on the Malay Peninsula departs from orders in which honour is defended through violence.

The literature approaches this question from two separate fronts. Studies of honour killing tend to confine the debate to whether religion or culture is the decisive factor, while the anthropological tradition rooted in the Mediterranean has constructed honour as a competitive value claimed by men through a reputation for aggressive masculinity (Karadeniz, 2018, pp. 846-848; Stewart, 2015, p. 181). Objections raised from within the same tradition then showed that shame could function as a positive virtue in Greek villages and in Oman (Herzfeld, 1980, p. 344; Wikan, 1984, pp. 647-648). The question thus turned into one of how central such a virtue is within a society, and whether it operates alongside a competitive field of honour or in its place. In the modern West, honour and shame lost much of their force as the central state grew stronger. The place that *malu* (shame, reticence, embarrassment) retains in the everyday moral vocabulary of an urbanised and educated Malay society therefore brings the problem face to face with the question of modernity as well.

The claim of this study is that such a capital may operate in two distinct modes. Alongside a showy and competitive capital that is reclaimed through violence once it has been violated, one may conceive of a capital that appears as a regime of gaze and self-control, seeks to render violation impossible from the outset and turns its own reticence into a virtue. Because *malu* corresponds to the second of these, we call it "negative honour", and we name the honour claimed through self-display, challenge and retaliation "positive honour". We use the two concepts as ideal types that may coexist within the same society in varying proportions. In negative honour, as a value acquired through withdrawal, invisibility itself becomes a virtue and quietude itself becomes a claim. In Mediterranean and North African orders the fear of shame mostly serves as a disciplinary complement to competitive honour, and the article asks whether in the Malay context it becomes a source of honour in itself.

Drawing on eight semi-structured interviews conducted in the Kuala Lumpur area, the study confines its claim to the urban and educated Muslim Malays of Peninsular Malaysia. It asks three questions. Is *malu* an honour that demands a response after violation, or a regime of self-control that forestalls violation in advance? Does this regime operate in the same way across gender and hierarchy? And how can the absence of violence be distinguished from a displacement towards concealment, exclusion or women's shelters?

Method

The study follows an interpretive qualitative design that tests a theoretically formulated claim about *malu* against a limited number of interviews gathered in the field. The small size of the sample rests on a purposive choice that gives priority to richness of information, since in qualitative research the size of a sample is determined by the focus of the research and the amount of data obtained (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2013, pp. 142-143). The restriction of the sample to urban and educated Muslim Malays is grounded in the question the article asks. The account that ties the decline of honour to

the growth of the central state leads one to expect honour and shame to have weakened most in precisely this group, so the persistence of *malu* among them offers a harder test of the modernity thesis at the article's centre. The comparative design, which asked participants to set *malu* against the framework of *namus*, likewise required participants able to reflect on both registers. Since the aim is to secure the transferability of findings with due attention to their contextuality (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, pp. 170-171), the conclusions should be read as a field test of a theoretical reading concerning this group.

Malay participants aged between 23 and 55, four of them women and three men. The eighth belongs to a participant from Turkey who has lived in Malaysia for more than twenty years and speaks Malay. His comparisons therefore reflect an insider's view of the Turkish side and a long acquaintance with the Malay one. His interview is used as an outside voice that corroborates or sets in relief the accounts of the Malay participants, and no finding about Malay views rests on it alone. Four interviews were conducted in Turkish and four in English, and participants were free to resort to Malay terms.

Table 1. Participants

Code	Age	Gender	Education or occupation	Language	Words	Note
K01	23	Woman	University graduate (theology)	Turkish	5,276	Studied in Istanbul for five years
K02	26	Woman	University graduate	English	6,893	
K03	28	Man	University graduate	Turkish	5,764	Former teacher at an Islamic school
K04	51	Woman	Academic, lawyer	English	7,014	Legal counselling, shelter home
K05	55	Man	Academic	English	5,022	
K06	48	Man	Resident from Turkey (outside observer)	Turkish	6,121	From Turkey, in Malaysia for over twenty years
K07	25	Woman	University graduate, research assistant	English	7,268	
K08	27	Man	University graduate (history)	Turkish	7,546	Studied in Turkey for nine years

The effect of this choice on the richness of the data cuts in two directions. The accounts reach beyond the participants' own milieu. A lawyer who counsels members of the public and works with a shelter home reports cases from the wider society, a former teacher recounts a case from an Islamic school, and several participants contrast villages with cities. The rural *kampung*, however, is present only through such indirect accounts. As the participants themselves suggest that sanction weighs more heavily where kin know one another, the findings may understate the intensity of *malu* in rural settings.

The corpus consists of eight recorded semi-structured interviews conducted in the Kuala Lumpur area in 2022, during the second stay of the researcher's one-year research fellowship, six in person and two online. Participants were reached through snowball sampling, each through a different intermediary, and their profiles are summarised in Table 1. Seven of the interviews belong to

The translations of quotations from the Turkish interviews preserve the non-standard phrasing of speakers who are mostly not native speakers of the language. The transcripts together amount to about 51,000 words, from about 5,000 to 7,500 words per interview. Discussing an emotion-laden concept in a second language may have flattened nuances or led participants to translate their experience into the interviewer's categories. The freedom to use Malay terms offset this risk in part, and the recurrence of *malu*, *segan*, *aib* and *maruah* in the answers shows that participants made use of it.

The instrument of data collection was an open-ended, semi-structured interview framework. It was developed from a draft reviewed in advance and tested through a pilot interview, in line with the phases recommended for such guides (Kallio, Pietilä, Johnson & Kangasniemi, 2016).

Table 2. Theme-participant matrix (● clearly present, ◐ present with qualification, ○ not discussed)

Theme	K01	K02	K03	K04	K05	K06*	K07	K08
Malu taught early as self-restraint	●	●	◐	●	●	●	●	●
Gender asymmetry in the cost of violation	●	●	●	◐	●	●	◐	●
Hierarchy (*segan*, superiors, titles)	●	◐	○	●	●	◐	●	●
Maruah as worth and dignity	●	◐	●	●	◐	◐	●	●
Limits of honour (bribery)	○	●	●	○	●	●	○	●
Violence rejected or limited	●	●	◐	●	◐	●	●	◐
Displacement (concealment, marriage, shelter, adoption, relocation)	●	●	●	●	◐	●	●	●
Repair (repentance, apology, reintegration)	●	●	●	●	●	◐	●	●
Comparison with Turkey or the Middle East	●	○	●	●	●	●	○	●

Note: **K06 is the outside observer from Turkey, whose accounts are used to corroborate or set in relief those of the Malay participants.*

The framework allowed participants to answer in their own words and asked about *malu*, honour and dignity in comparison with the framework of *namus* (Patton, 2014, pp. 342-343). A short fictional vignette about marital infidelity was read at the opening of most interviews to frame the topic. Its rating items were left out of the analysis, and only the participants' open-ended answers and the remarks they made while discussing it were analysed. Because the automatic transcripts do not separate speakers, passages in which the interviewer read the vignette, posed questions or described the situation in Turkey were excluded from coding. Direct quotations were taken only from passages whose speaker could be identified with confidence. The transcripts were then analysed through thematic coding (Neuman, 2014, pp. 662-672). Initial codes kept close to the participants' own expressions were developed into themes along the axes of prevention, gender and hierarchy, the limits of honour, responses to violation, repair and comparison, and were brought together in the theme-participant matrix given in Table 2. As the coding was carried out by a single researcher, no inter-coder reliability was calculated. This limitation was offset as far as possible by checking each direct quotation against the transcripts at the level of speaker and wording, and by including cases that run against the main pattern, such as accounts that allow for beating or qualify the gender asymmetry, in the analysis. Because automatic transcription can misrender non-native speech and Malay terms such as *malu* or *segan*, each direct quotation, together with the Malay terms it contains, was also checked against the audio recordings.

Data collection was concluded in the final weeks of the fieldwork, an endpoint set by the duration of the fellowship. By then the principal themes summarised in Table 2 had recurred across the interviews, and the later interviews were mainly adding new illustrations to existing themes. Since no formal record of the emergence of codes was kept, the study does not claim saturation in the strict sense. The pattern it observed nevertheless corresponds to the experiment in which Guest, Bunce and Johnson (2006) traced code development across sixty interviews. They found that thirty-four of the thirty-six codes that proved most frequent had already appeared in the first six interviews (p. 73), and that, where the interest lies in a few overarching themes, "enough data existed after six interviews to support these four themes" (p. 78). The same authors note that saturation is reached sooner the more similar participants are in their experience of the research domain (p. 76). Their result depends on a relatively homogeneous population, fairly narrow objectives and a similar set of questions asked of all participants (p. 75). The present study meets these conditions with its narrow aim, its common interview framework and a sample that, although varied in age and interview language, shares an urban, university-educated Muslim milieu. Eight interviews can therefore carry an analysis of a few overarching themes, while remaining unsuited to claims about Malay society as a whole. Observational notes from everyday life (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018, pp. 384-385) are not verbatim records and, like transcripts themselves, pass through a selective and interpretive filter (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 2011, pp. 8-9), so they are cited only occasionally as supporting examples.

The researcher entered the field within the framework of a one-year research fellowship and stood close to the participants by virtue of a shared Muslim identity. This position facilitated access, and it also created a setting in which participants explained *malu* to a familiar identity (Kümbetoğlu, 2005, p. 194). In qualitative interviewing such closeness is treated as an acknowledged perspective that brings particular dimensions to the fore (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, pp. 169-170), and it has been taken into account as part of the interpretive setting. The comparative framing may also have sharpened the contrast. Two Malay participants had studied in Turkey for several years, the outside observer, himself from Turkey, was interviewed in Turkish, and the questions set *malu* against *namus*. The participants' comparative statements are therefore read as their own perceptions of the two settings. The fellowship project was approved in 2019, and its first stay, during which the interview framework was piloted, began before the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic interrupted the fieldwork, which resumed in March 2022, and the eight recorded interviews were conducted during this second stay. Since the project was approved and the fieldwork begun before 2020, when ethics committee approval was not required for such research, and the host university did not require it, no ethics committee approval was obtained. Participants were informed of the purpose of the research, gave their oral informed consent to the interview and to its recording, and have been kept anonymous by being referred to only by the codes K01 to K08.

Theoretical Framework

Honour and shame are often invoked side by side as two poles that account for human conduct, yet this very juxtaposition carries a problem of classification. Casimir and Jung (2009, p. 230) show that dividing societies into those in which honour and shame determine most norms and those in which they carry little or no weight is a distinction that cannot be rigorously sustained across history and geography. The question of where Malay society falls between the two poles therefore first requires an inquiry into how stable the category itself is. The literature on honour killing does not ask why violence ceases to be an expected response in a particular society. The article thus takes the anthropological tradition of honour and shame as its point of departure, in order to ask what kind of moral order *malu* itself establishes.

In the Peristiany volume, regarded as the founding text of the field, honour and shame are defined as “two poles of an evaluation” (1965, p. 9). Pitt-Rivers (1965, p. 21) constructs honour as a person's value both in his own eyes and in the eyes of his society. He deepens this definition through the distinction between honour “claimed” and honour “paid” and through Hobbes's reading of honour as a kind of *pecking-order* (1965, pp. 22-23). Honour thus appears from the outset as a concept interwoven with hierarchy, which offers a point of departure for thinking about the bond *malu* forms with relations of age, status and teaching in Malay society.

The critical turn in the field opens this binary itself to question. As Herzfeld (1980, pp. 343-344) shows for Cretan villages, *filotimo* (the sense of honour) may point to “dignified self-restraint”, overt aggression is not regarded as the basis of honour in a settled and law-abiding village, and *dropi* (shame) may be seen as a positive virtue in men and women alike. Wikan (1984, pp. 636, 647-648) argues that honour refers to an aspect of the person and shame to a particular act, and shows that in Oman shame rests on local conceptions of the self. The *hasham* that Abu-Lughod (2000, pp. 107-108, 117) studied among the Bedouin appears both as an inner feeling of shame and as a voluntary code of self-restraint, sustained through lowering the eyes and withdrawing oneself. It cannot be compelled by the powerful, and it functions as the honour of the weak while reinforcing hierarchy. What establishes the distinction, then, is whether the valuation of shame as a virtue is central to a society or a local subtype, and whether it operates alongside a competitive field of honour or in its place.

To name this distinction, the article employs two terms. "Positive honour" refers to a competitive capital claimed through self-display, challenge and retaliation. "Negative honour" refers to a status that appears as a regime of gaze and self-control, in which withdrawal and invisibility themselves become virtues. The adjectives carry no value judgement and are borrowed from Berlin's (1969) distinction between negative and positive liberty. Just as negative liberty is a domain to be defended in its own right, negative honour is a status claimed, sustained and rewarded within its own terms. As descriptive ideal types, both may be found in varying proportions in the West and in the Malay world alike. The closest precedent lies in Campbell's (1965, p. 146) analysis of the Sarakatsani, where female sexual shame (*dropē*) accompanies male manliness (*andrismos*) as a complementary virtue. Whether in the Malay data the negative pole remains confined to women or extends across hierarchy as well is one of the questions examined below.

Bourdieu's (1979, 1977) analysis of Kabyle society sets this distinction within a sharper conceptual frame. The point of honour forms there the basis of a morality appropriate to an individual who always sees himself through the eyes of others. Its negative counterpart, the fear of collective censure and shame (*el'ar*, *lahya*, *el'ib*), is strong enough to compel even the man least endowed with it to obey the dictates of honour (1979, p. 113). *Nif* designates the outward-facing honour that requires a response to every challenge, and *hurma* corresponds to the inviolable domain of the sacred, such as the house and the women (1979, pp. 117-118). The more vulnerable a family's sacred is, the more *nif* it needs to defend it. The Kabyles accordingly cite with approval the head of a great maraboutic family who killed his guilty daughter (1979, pp. 119, 121), which shows how directly this order binds honour to violence. Honour functions there as symbolic capital that makes it possible to acquire allies through marriage and to turn the defence of land into a matter of honour (1977, pp. 179-185). The guardianship of *hurma* thus extends beyond the female body to land and property, and whether *malu* operates as a similar value that can be gained, lost and inherited will be examined below. In Kabylia this negative counterpart remains a disciplinary device bound to the challenge and riposte of *nif*. Negative honour derives from its side that is left without *nif*. The Arabic root that *lahya* shares with *haya*, a term recurring in the Malay interviews, shows that the two contexts have been shaped through a shared Islamic register.

In Wikan's Sohar, a woman who has a series of affairs keeps her place among her neighbours. They call her conduct very shameful, yet continue to describe her as good and hospitable, because sanctions operate so implicitly that a person is regarded as dishonoured only when forced to acknowledge it (Wikan, 1984, pp. 639-646). Scheff's (1988, p. 395) theory of social control gives this implicitness a general form. Pride and shame arise from the continuous monitoring of the self through the eyes of others, are usually of low visibility, and produce conformity even in the absence of overt sanctions. *Malu* can be read precisely as a version of this low-visibility, preventive mechanism.

The anthropology of emotions provides a direct basis for carrying this distinction into the Malay context. Collins and Bahar (2000, p. 35) present *malu* as "a highly productive concept" in the construction of gender differences and in the culture of hierarchy. They find "a striking difference" between the agonistic competition for honour in the Mediterranean and the emphasis on harmony and group solidarity in Malay societies, where competition for status is not openly acknowledged (2000, p. 42). According to Röttger-Rössler (2013, p. 412), Makassar society knows no concept of "honor" as a socio-symbolic status designed to be permanent, whereas in the Malay context *malu* stands alongside a relatively permanent concept of worth (*marwah*/*maruah*). Goddard (1996, pp. 432, 434) shows that Malays regard *malu* as a social good, "something akin to a 'sense of propriety'". In his explication, a person who feels *malu* thinks that others may come to know something about him or her and think and say something bad, does not want

this, and therefore no longer wishes to be near others (1996, p. 434; 1997, p. 187). *Segan* names a milder reticence felt before anything has happened (1996, pp. 434-436). As Chua (2019, pp. 112-113) summarises, feeling *malu* implies a loss of *maruah*, while protecting *maruah* forestalls *malu* from the outset, so that the two concepts work like "two sides of the same coin". A recent survey shows that 95.5 per cent of Malay and Chinese adolescents in Selangor continue to experience shame and shyness (Muhammad et al., 2022, p. 2493). A study of Malay employees in Riau reports that in Malay culture, rooted in Islamic values, shame safeguards one's own dignity and that of others (Cucuani et al., 2022, p. 928). Both indicate that this register persists in contemporary settings.

Uskul and Cross (2020, pp. 177-180) summarise a typology in which honour cultures protect reputation through retaliation, face cultures through humility and ingroup harmony, and dignity cultures through inherent worth. Negative honour shares with face precisely the means that might seem to place *malu* in that category. Restraint, deference and the avoidance of conspicuousness are its everyday techniques, and Collins and Bahar (2000, p. 42) themselves stress the Malay emphasis on harmony. What negative honour guards, however, belongs to the logic of honour. Its object is *marwah*, a value tied, like Bourdieu's *hurma*, to sexuality and the family, borne unequally by women and men, and lost through a violation that implicates the kin group. In the same typology, face concerns a standing maintained through humility within the ingroup. Negative honour thus joins the object of honour to the means of face, which is why it belongs within the concept of honour as a negative subtype. This does not license placing Malay society as a whole in the category of "shame cultures" that Benedict (1947, pp. 222-223) set against guilt cultures. Piers and Singer (1953, p. 36) show, moreover, that shame too works through an identification formed in comparison and rivalry with peers. Wikan's (1984, p. 635) caution that honour is often a construct of the analyst, while shame remains more faithful to the native's point of view, holds the article's terms to account. The word recurring in the interviews is *malu*, and "negative honour" has the character of an analytical designation.

The framework yields two criteria. The first asks whether *malu* is central, whether it operates across gender and hierarchy, and whether it stands alongside a competitive field of honour or in its place. The second is a test of displacement. It asks whether the absence of violence means that violation remains without consequence, or whether sanction shifts to concealment, exclusion or women's shelters. Counter-evidence makes this test a necessity. Collins and Bahar (2000, p. 48) report that men in South Sumatra are expected to respond with violence in situations that produce *malu* and that the knife is regarded as part of male attire. Röttger-Rössler (2013, p. 413) notes that in Makassar, and especially among the Pasemah of Sumatra, customary law expects men to respond to grave violations of norms concerning their families with anger and aggression, if necessary to the point of killing. These sources, like the examples Fessler (2004, pp. 220, 224) collected in Bengkulu, derive mainly from Sumatra and Sulawesi. This suggests both that non-violence is a regional differentiation within the Malay world and that a Sumatran depiction of *malu* predominates in the literature. The article therefore carries the criteria derived from these sources over to the urban and educated Muslim Malays of Peninsular Malaysia only as hypotheses to be tested against the interviews.

The contribution of this framework lies first in applying a theory of honour and shame built on Mediterranean and North African concepts to a Muslim society of Southeast Asia. As McBrien (2021, p. 463) observes, most anthropologists working on the Mediterranean and Muslim societies abjure investigations of shame, because the honour-shame complex focused excessively on female sexuality and produced Orientalist caricatures. The framework also addresses a geographical gap, since the empirical studies of *malu* cited above concentrate on Sumatra and Sulawesi, while the interviews Chua (2019, pp. 115-116) conducted in Peninsular Malaysia focus on a particular question of identity negotiation.

Findings

Asked what *malu* means, the participants answered with a sense of measure that marks what one should refrain from doing. K02 put it in these terms, "*Malu* is something that you shouldn't do [...] Or something that you wish you not do it". She illustrated it with someone who shouts in a restaurant on seeing a cat, which is *malu* "because you just attract attention from others". For K07 the concept carries both a negative and a positive connotation, and its positive side lies precisely in self-restraint, since "when you have *malu* [...] you actually you have a border [...] you have a control over yourself so you don't [...] do the bad things". K04 placed it in the register of good manners ("normally when we talk about *Malu*, it is more of etiquette, adab"). As an example she noted that Malays "don't simply just become very talkative whenever we see someone [...] unless it is necessary". K05 located its seat in the relation between persons ("The idea of *Malu* is I and you. You know? Between people."), and K01 explained that *malu* comes closer in meaning to the words respect and reticence. These definitions describe the emotion as a restraint exercised before any transgression, much as Goddard's explication suggests.

The participants also placed *malu* within a graded vocabulary. K02 ranked *segan* below *malu* and *aib* above it, since *aib* "is really something worse that [...] less the respect people towards you, compared to *malu*". K07 reserved *segan* for the discomfort felt before someone of higher status, "It's the same feeling, but it's not [called] *malu*. It's called *segan*." K03 offered the expression *malu-malu kucing* (cat-like shyness) as an approved attitude, describing a woman who withdraws shyly when a man approaches her. K07 agreed that such shyness is good, "It's nice. It's positive. [...] But if this is over, then it will be bad for you." She added that the opposite of *malu* is *berani* (brave), as when someone dares to ask a question in a crowded lecture hall. The vocabulary thus rewards withdrawal while leaving room for a measured courage.

Maruah appeared as a weightier register of worth. K04 defined it as "The dignity that should be based on the Islamic principles" and added that "anything which is considered as involving like sexual related offenses. So that actually affects the *marwah*". K07 listed *marwah*, *kehormatan*, *harga diri* and *jati diri* as related terms and described *harga diri* as status in the eyes of others. K01 equated *marwah* with a person's worth, saying "*Harga diri*, or we define it as a person's price". K08 observed that the word *maruah* hardly comes up in everyday life and is reserved for extreme events. K03 drew a distinction between the two English renderings that is particularly telling for the argument of the article. In his account *marwah* is rather something one guards, as a woman guards her chastity, whereas dignity is what one receives when the king grants a title and one is honoured. The participant's own vocabulary thus separates an honour that is protected through restraint from an honour that is conferred from above.

Malu as Preventive Self-Control

The participants describe the learning of *malu* as an early and constantly repeated instruction that forestalls violation before it occurs. K01 recalls that when her mother or elder sister raised the children the word *malu* always came up, for instance when someone spoke loudly. K06 lists eating with unwashed hands, leaving the body uncovered and disrespect towards elders as occasions for the same warning. K07 gives the scene of a noisy child in front of a guest, to whom the parent says "don't do that *malu* because it's [...] embarrassing". K05 presents the same instruction as an inheritance he passes on. Brothers and sisters are given separate rooms, he explains, because "it's the culture is what my parents told me. You know. So I pass it down". K08 remembers that his mother gradually forbade him to spend time at a neighbour's house, since staying and eating there was very shameful and meant burdening the neighbour. This early and repeated teaching recalls Ibn Khaldun's principle that "man is the child of his habits" and the understanding of dispositions that take root before the person, which Gökdağ (2021, pp. 140, 169) brings together with Bourdieu's concept of habitus. *Malu* is

thus acquired as a disposition settled in the body and the gaze. The researcher's field notes record a father calling out "*malu*, *malu*" at a picnic to a daughter too young to grasp the admonition, which shows that this teaching recognises no lower age limit.

The mechanism that sustains this restraint in adult life is a gaze that seldom needs to speak. K08, explaining why people hesitate to speak in public, said, "Everyone sees there anyway. Everyone has eyes. If you do something faulty, we see it". Asked whether people actually say anything, he answered, "They don't say it, but now it is known. We now know that it is known. That is how we fear." He also pointed to prisoners on the news who cover their faces of their own accord because it is *malu*. K01 noted that exposure itself is shameful, since when someone's fault is spoken of openly in a crowd, "the person who says it should feel ashamed too, because people would say, why are you saying it openly". K08 extended this to gossip, observing that people do talk behind one's back, but that "talking is shameful too". The fault, the one who exposes it and the one who repeats it are thus held within the same economy of shame, which keeps sanction at the level of the knowing gaze. K01 adds that a person who has been shamed does not show it at the moment, and that the effect appears later in their work and motivation.

The participants do not present this restraint as costless. K07 told of a father who is entitled to zakat for his children's education yet does not apply for it, because "he feels *malu*, he feels ashamed to ask for zakat". She judged this a loss (*rugi*) for his children. In her account *malu* appears as a virtue whose excess can harm those it is meant to protect.

A Regime Differentiated Across Gender and Hierarchy

The preventive working of *malu* weighs more heavily on women. K01 put this in the participants' most direct terms, "the word *malu* is used more for women [...] Sitting on the stairs is a bit shameful. They will say *malu*. Then singing loudly in the kitchen, they will also remind you of it as *malu*." K07 recalled her mother's warning that a woman should not laugh or talk loudly in public "until it attract the attention". Both she and K01 noted that smoking, which men do, is not done by Malay women, K07 saying, "I've never seen a single Malay woman smoking." Where violation is concerned, the participants located the asymmetry above all in visibility. K02 observed that "for women, they are the ones who will get pregnant, right? The effect, the consequence will be worse to that girl compared to the boy". K01 and K08 likewise explained that pregnancy makes the woman's transgression visible while the man's remains unknown. K03 agreed that infidelity weighs more heavily on the woman, explaining, "Because the man can marry a second time, I mean, in Malaysia", and the outside observer K06 likewise noted that a woman's infidelity meets a harsher response. K05 gave a critical reading of the same asymmetry, "men is less malo than women. Because men by nature, we think that we are great, but we're actually not great."

Several participants nevertheless qualified the asymmetry. K04 holds that an illegal relationship "affects the dignity [...] of the man and the woman as well". K07 states that in her own experience going out together is judged "the same for both". K08 notes that Malay families seldom object to a son's or a daughter's dating as long as it does not lead to *zina*, and adds that there is no beating. What emerges is an unequal cost, which falls on women because the consequences of a violation become visible on their bodies. K04 adds that the gendered weight of *maruah* can also work in women's favour. A wife whose husband has an illicit relationship often seeks a divorce through the courts, asking "how could i live with someone who commit sin", and so defends her own *maruah* through the law.

Hierarchy adds a separate axis to the domain of *malu*. K07 explains that the older generation would change their route on seeing their teacher, because "When they face and when they look in the eyes, they have to give salam, they have to ask for their conditions [...] And they feel a bit *malu* right there". K05 says that "i have to *malu* to my boss for

example" and that one makes room for one's superior. K04 traces this culture of respect to the sultanate, in which "you need to respect the elderly, you need to respect the sultans". The state enters this hierarchy as a source of honour. K05 describes the titles granted by the government, such as Dato and Tan Sri, as honours that come "from hierarchy", and K01 adds that a title earned through service is respected, whereas one bought with money is regarded as a bad thing. K08 observes that the civil service, long regarded as security, is losing its appeal to better paid work such as delivery. The state's place as a source of status is therefore not fixed, and the state appears here as one source of symbolic capital whose value fluctuates with other paths to status.

Maruah, Honour and the Limits of Honour

The domain over which *maruah* is at stake is narrower than the domain of sin. K02, discussing bribery, said that it is a bad thing "as a Muslim, as a Malay, as a person" and yet widely practised. She concluded that "it's not about our knowledge because we know" and that it is a matter of character. K03 remarked that "when it comes to bribery, it's normal. Normal". K08 explained that because people cannot get their affairs done through ordinary channels, bribery has come to be treated as a necessity (*zaruret*), so that its sinfulness is suspended in practice. K06, asked about the same point, attributed it to a deficiency in the practical side of faith. K05 voiced the most critical judgement in connection with a major corruption scandal, saying, "People are not ashamed." Corruption is thus recognised as a sin and even as a disgrace without being drawn into the register of *maruah*, which remains concentrated on sexuality and the family. A survey in which adolescents in Selangor ranked showing off on social media among the most shameful acts, alongside abandoning babies, abortion and promiscuous sex (Muhammad et al., 2022, p. 2497), confirms both this concentration and the association of putting oneself forward with shame.

This limited scope also has an institutional side. K04 emphasises, in comparison with Turkey's secular law, that the statutory regulation of Islamic law in Malaysia makes the boundaries of *marwah* known ("I think that is quite clear-cut things"). K08 notes that because a conviction for *zina* requires four witnesses, legal sanction is almost never applied. The domain most heavily regulated in formal terms is thus the one in which actual sanction is rarest, and the social mechanism of honour comes into play in the gap this leaves. The limits of honour appear to follow from religious and legal codification as much as from traditional preference.

Responses to Violation: The Absence and Displacement of Violence

The participants consistently rejected for their own society the violence, extending to stabbing, that the South Sumatran examples noted above associate with *malu*. K01 was asked whether a husband's threat to kill his unfaithful wife could happen in Malaysia. She answered, "we still don't do such things [...] But we hope more for good things. That they don't divorce. That they make peace". K02 said that a husband may get angry, "but not until, you know, you do the violence towards your wife", since infidelity does "not give the rights for the husband to kill you or to beat you". K07, discussing the vignette, said that resorting to violence in such a situation is not reasonable, since "no matter what you have to have a clear communication". K08, who studied in Turkey for nine years, summed up a husband's reaction to a wife who has betrayed him with the words "he may beat her, but, I mean, he won't kill her. He won't kill", and added that even the beating is "too much". K04 generalised the point, "killing is not actually the things in which our society will opt to", and attributed it to a history in which, as she put it, "we prefer more of negotiation". The outside observer K06 explained the difference by the absence of an expectation. In Turkey society expects a man to cleanse his honour, "But here, of course, there is no such thing. No such expectation", and the prevailing response is pity ("What a pity for this person").

Not every account is equally unequivocal. K03, after insisting that he knew of no example, allowed

that “There may be violence [...] He may beat, I mean”. K05 regarded the husband's anger in the opening vignette as understandable while ruling out killing. The line the participants draw thus falls at killing. They also located a stronger sanction outside the city. K08 said, “In the villages it would be terribly shameful, I think. But in the cities they don't care much [...] in the cities there are no relatives”. K04, who receives cases from members of the public, observed of rural families, “But rural area, it happens as well. But they keep to themselves”, and added that they do not go as far as killing. Urban anonymity may thus soften the sanction, while the rural accounts in the corpus point to concealment.

In the absence of violence, the response turns to managing visibility. K04 described the reaction to a teenage pregnancy in these terms, “they try as much as possible not to expose them openly to the public”. People “don't condemn. But it gives some kinds of signals. Like disapproval kind of a signal”, she added, so that families “try to hide it and at the same time, try to get help”. Even gossip about such matters stays general, since “when they talk about something that affects honor, they talk in general”. The participants listed the means through which this visibility is managed. These include marrying the couple off “in order to cover the shame” (K04, K02) and sending a younger girl to a shelter where she studies and gives birth (K04, K06, K07). They also include giving the child up for adoption, for which, as K04 put it, “There's so many people, childless couple who actually came out for adoption”, and abortion, which K07 called “the dark side of the society”. The last is relocation, which K08 described as moving elsewhere with a new identity while the child is registered with “Abdullah” as its father. K03's account of a pupil who became pregnant at thirteen or fourteen shows the motive that drives concealment, “Because they love their daughter very much. They hide it [...] But they don't show it outside. Because they are ashamed”. He linked this to the structure of Malay kinship, “there is no such thing like a tribe, like a clan, with us [...] it is a smaller family [...] they solve it within their own small family [...] So that no one else hears.”

The participants differed on whether families cut off a daughter. K01 and K08 spoke of disowning her (“we don't want to see your face”), whereas K07 said, “I've never seen where the parents cutting the relationship with their daughters”, and regarded such a rupture as itself “a shameful thing”. Repair, in any case, is widely regarded as possible. K01 said it is possible but takes a long time, through repentance and the fulfilment of religious duties. K03 said that a person can become honourable again “by repenting” and that if he draws closer to religion “society forgives him”. K02 insisted that “you already lost the [honour], but that is not the end” and that parents should “try not to blame the son or the daughter only, but, you know, to blame ourselves also”. K05 described a public apology after which relations continue (“Then we will be finished”). K07 noted that “because we are *malu*, we are shy, so whenever ask for forgiveness, we can say that that person is brave”. K08 summarised the community's stance in a sentence that captures the logic of the whole order, “What has happened has happened. Once it has happened, we don't go after it”. A person who leaves and starts again elsewhere, he added, becomes an ordinary person once more. The clearest example of displacement is a case K04 recounted from Kelantan. An illegitimate boy had been given his grandfather's name as his father's, and when the grandfather died the aunts and uncles were afraid to tell him that he was not a rightful heir. K04 advised that he receive the same share if no one objected, adding, “So this is how we attempt to, to cover a family.” The prevailing framework thus remains one of rehabilitation. It accords with Chua's (2019, pp. 113, 121) reading of *malu* as a tacit “Rousseauian social contract” whose threshold of tolerance lies in visibility, although Chua also records hostile reactions to visible sexual nonconformity (p. 114).

Comparison with Turkey: Participants' Perceptions

The comparisons that follow are the perceptions of participants and are read as such. K01 and K08 had studied in Turkey for several years, K06 is himself

from Turkey, and K04 and K05 spoke without having lived there. K08 said that Turks speak their minds when they are angry and the other side does not take offence, whereas Malays "keep it inside, keep it, keep it. One day it explodes". He added at once that he did not know of anger reaching the level of killing. K01 said that the outspokenness she came to value in Turkey triggers *malu* in Malaysia. She had heard of "honour killing" without knowing its precise meaning, which suggests that the term had little place in her own everyday vocabulary. K05, contrasting Malaysia with the Middle East, stressed that sanction there belongs to the state, "If you kill the court would catch you and put you to prison". K04 held that "in the context of the Malay society, religion of course is something which is high and above. Culture comes second", whereas in Turkey culture is stronger, "many times more than religion". The outside observer K06 suggested that the acceptance of second marriages in Malaysia may keep men from illicit relationships, in contrast to their disapproval in Turkey. These explanations point to religion, to a history of negotiation and to the absence of tribal structures. Read as perceptions, they support the study's effort to position negative honour as a tendency sensitive to institutional and social conditions.

Discussion and Conclusion

Read together with the findings gathered in the field, the two criteria proposed earlier converge on a single conclusion. They bring *malu* into focus as a central regulative principle in the Malay context, one that operates in a domain where positive honour plays little role. The way K03 separates *marwah*, which is guarded, from dignity, which is conferred from above, lends this conclusion support at the level of logic as well. In Kabylia the ultimate guarantee of honour always stands behind the threat of the violent defence of *nif*. In the Malay data the guarded side of honour rests precisely on the absence of that threat, and its claimed side is granted by authority. Since this distinction is voiced most explicitly by one participant, it is treated here as suggestive. The question whether *malu* operates like a symbolic capital that can be gained and lost (Bourdieu, 1977, pp. 179-185) thus finds an answer that preserves the logic of capital while reversing the direction of accumulation, for value here accrues through withdrawal. In the inheritance case recounted by K04, the record of descent is quietly adjusted so that the family's standing passes on intact, which suggests that what concealment protects is a standing the family expects to pass on. In the participants' accounts *malu* binds both sexes, while its rules are stricter for women and its cost falls on them. Together with the deference owed to teachers, superiors and sultans, these accounts show *malu* operating across hierarchy as well as gender. Titles granted by the state call for more care. In K03's distinction they belong to the conferred side of honour, to the dignity one receives, and not to the *marwah* one guards. They can enter the domain of *malu* only once they have been received, as a standing that must then be borne without disgrace. K01's remark that a title bought with money is regarded as a bad thing points in this direction, and so does the deference that places title holders within the field of *segan*. The data support no more than this suggestion, which rests on brief remarks by K05 and K01, while K08 observes that state positions are losing their appeal. If it holds, the reach of self-control widens as what is to be protected multiplies, much as in Bourdieu's extension of *hurma* to land and property.

The field data also confirm and complicate Wikan's caution, noted earlier, that honour is mostly a category constructed by the analyst. The participants' rare unprompted use of the word "honour" vindicates her. Yet K03's spontaneous distinction between a guarded *marwah* and a conferred dignity shows that the native category possesses a structure at least as layered as "honour". The designation "negative honour" therefore does no more than furnish a distinction the participants already observe with a name that can carry it into comparative debate. The shelters, early marriages, adoptions and relocations through which violation is handled manage its visibility. They give the low-

visibility control described by Scheff an institutional counterpart, and they allow the absence of violence to be understood as a transformation of sanction.

Campbell's (1965, pp. 146, 149) analysis of the Sarakatsani shows that the negative pole exists within the Mediterranean itself. There manliness (*andrismos*), together with self-regard (*egoismos*), corresponds to a positive claim, and female sexual shame (*dropē*) to a complementary virtue, so that the negative pole remains confined to women. The Malay data reveal a broader negative pole, extending across hierarchy through *segan* and the deference owed to teachers, superiors and titles. This lends the objections of Herzfeld and Wikan a support that comes from the field.

Negative honour also calls for a reconsideration of the contrast between the modern West and modern Malay society. According to Stewart (2015, p. 181), honour and shame had largely become extinct in Western societies by around 1900, as the central state and judicial control grew stronger. Ibn Khaldun had already observed a similar erosion in sedentary (*hadari*) civilisation, where the honour grounded in descent (*hasab*) survives only in a metaphorical sense (Gökdağ, 2019, pp. 132-133). This extinction is no evidence that shame had always been experienced in the West as an emotion to be avoided. The *shamefastness* that Flannery (2019, pp. 2-3) traces in medieval England, "a disposition towards and susceptibility to shame" that guaranteed female honour, stands remarkably close to Malay *malu*. In today's Euro-American societies, by contrast, persons who rapidly and frequently feel shame are considered, as Röttger-Rössler (2013, p. 415) reports, "insufficiently self-confident and too strongly dependent on others" and, beyond a certain level, "pathological and therefore requiring treatment". The masking goes so far that forty-eight native German speakers mentioned shame only seven times in their spontaneous lists of emotion terms. This coding of shame as a deficiency is a relatively recent product of the modern West's reconstruction of its own understanding of shame. Once this is recognised, the persistence of *malu* as an honourable virtue deserves to be read as another path that modernity is able to follow.

Why the two paths diverge becomes clear once it is recalled that in the Mediterranean model the ultimate guarantee of honour is physical violence. In Pitt-Rivers's (1965, pp. 28-29) words, a man is "always the guardian and arbiter of his own honour", and the sovereign becomes "the enemy of honour" insofar as he claims to arbitrate in regard to it. "The conflict between honour and legality", he adds, "is a fundamental one which persists to this day" (p. 30). The same logic is apparent in Ibn Khaldun's analysis of *asabiyya*, in which the bond of kinship obliges one to rush to the aid of a relative who has been wronged (Gökdağ, 2019, pp. 123-124). Every member who is wronged, in Gökdağ's words, "wounds the pride of all the members of the lineage" and necessitates a counter-response (p. 141). The participants' own explanations point to the absence of precisely this structure. K03 attributes the quiet handling of a violation to the fact that Malays have no tribe and settle such matters within the small family so that no one else hears. K06 names the absence of the corresponding obligation when he observes that in Malaysia there is "no such expectation". The modern state, gathering judicial authority into its own hands, therefore seizes the domain of private sanction on which positive honour relies. It enters into no comparable rivalry with negative honour, which never needed a private jurisdiction. Ibn Khaldun's classification of political power already grasps this widening of the reference of power towards an encompassing order of law, for it distinguishes natural power, resting solely on the naked force of *asabiyya*, from the forms of power that also have recourse to rational and religious laws (Gökdağ, 2024, p. 186). The sanction of negative honour consists of the gaze of others and self-control, and, as Abu-Lughod (2000, p. 117) observes of *hasham*, it forestalls the need of the powerful to display their power. Finding no right of retaliation to seize, modern institutions may instead become articulated with this order, for example when a title conferred by the state be-

comes a standing its holder must not disgrace, although in these data this remains a tentative reading. Modernisation thus emerges, as a hypothesis these data invite, as a process that may select among the forms of honour, pushing back positive honour while accommodating and even nourishing negative honour. As Scheff's (1988, p. 395) observation that pride and shame usually have "very low visibility" indicates, the West has masked shame without extinguishing it. The two modernities thus differ in what they keep out of sight, the Malay context the sanction and the West the emotion itself.

A more direct answer can now be given to the question posed at the outset, namely why Malaysia hardly knows honour killing at all. Violence is the instrument of an honour that must be repaired once it has been violated. As Pitt-Rivers (1965, p. 30) shows, a person in the Mediterranean who seeks redress in court thereby confesses publicly that he has been wronged, and the only path that can rescue him from this vulnerability remains the satisfaction he takes with his own hand. In the order established by *malu*, the principal effort is spent on preventing a violation from becoming visible, after it has occurred as much as before. The public moment that would demand repair therefore often never arises. When it does, sanction turns to means that manage visibility and leave the knife with no role to play, or, in K08's words, "What has happened has happened." Malaysia's quietude, then, stems from honour having been constituted otherwise. In an order that bears shame as a virtue and protects its dignity through withdrawal, little function remains for violence to perform.

This answer concerns lethal violence undertaken to restore honour, and the premise on which it rests calls for caution. Attitudinal data do not set Malaysia apart. In the Pew Research Center's survey of Muslims across more than twenty countries, as analysed by Aksoy and Szekely (2025, p. 442), Malaysian support for killing a family member to protect family honour falls in the middle of the range, close to that of Turkey, where about 20 per cent of respondents regard such a killing as at least sometimes justified (p. 441). What distinguishes Malaysia is therefore the rarity with which this approval is acted upon in the available record. That record is itself limited. No reliable estimate of the prevalence of honour killing exists (Aksoy & Szekely, 2025, p. 428), and public data on domestic violence cases that end in death in Malaysia remain fragmentary, with the Home Ministry and the police reporting different counts (Azlan, 2022). The beating that some participants allow for and the concealment that keeps cases within the family may also leave other forms of harm outside the record. Chua (2019, p. 114) suggests, moreover, that death threats received by a Malaysian man after coming out may be read through a *malu*-related logic of rectification. The premise is therefore best stated as the absence of honour killing as a recognised pattern in the available record, a pattern the participants' accounts confirm for their own milieu. The gap between a comparable level of approval and so different a practice is consistent with the argument of this article, since negative honour moves sanction towards the management of visibility.

An alternative explanation must also be weighed openly. Much of the literature on honour killing in Turkey and the Middle East concerns rural settings with dense kinship ties, while all the Malay participants are urban and educated. The absence of violence in their accounts could therefore stem from education, class and urban life as much as from *malu*. The data allow a partial answer. K04, who receives cases from members of the public, reports that rural families also keep such matters to themselves without going as far as killing. K03 traces the quiet handling of violation to a kinship structure without tribes, and K08 places the harsher sanction of the village within the register of shame. The participants' own accounts thus attribute restraint chiefly to the structure of kinship and to *malu*. The South Sumatran cases point in the same direction, since there the same vocabulary of *malu* sustains retaliation within a different social structure, which makes the kinship structure in which *malu* is embedded a plausible explanation, though not one these data can establish as deci-

sive. Only a study that includes rural and less educated Malays can separate these factors. South Sumatra and Sulawesi are likewise predominantly Muslim, so whether negative honour depends more on Malay ethnicity or on the shared Islamic register also remains a question for comparative studies. This reading, based on eight interviews, must remain confined to the urban and educated Muslim Malays of the Peninsula, and rural Malay settings, present here only through indirect accounts, call for a study of their own.

Within these limits, the Malay case suggests that the bond between honour and violence may not be a necessary one, and that an order in which honour rests on self-restraint can coexist with the modern state. Negative honour thus offers the Mediterranean-centred literature a counter-model that remains open to further testing.

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