

A Semantic Analysis of ‘Naga’ (Dragon) in Malay Proverbs

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ABSTRACT

The dragon is a universal symbol with varying meanings across cultures. In Malay proverbs, ‘naga’ (dragon) serves as a metaphor that conveys significant cultural insights. This article is based on a research study that explores how the Malay community conveys deeper meanings through proverbs, focusing on the dragon as a symbol. A total of 3,495 proverbs were analysed, identifying seven that feature dragon-related elements. Based on Semantic Theory, the findings reveal that the dragon symbolises power, nobility, and wisdom, which reflects Malay cultural and religious influences. These proverbs serve as vehicles for transmitting traditional knowledge and societal values across generations. Additionally, this article contrasts dragon-related proverbs with other animal metaphors in the Malay culture to highlight their unique symbolic significance. By exploring the intersection of language and culture, this article deepens the understanding of how metaphorical language shapes the identity and collective wisdom of the Malay community.

Keywords: semantics, proverb, Malay wisdom, symbol, metaphor

INTRODUCTION

In the Malay language, the concept of ‘naga’ (the dragon) holds a significant cultural weight in Malay proverbs, representing strength, status, and wisdom. Defined in Kamus Dewan Perdana (2020) and Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia (2023) as a mythical creature resembling a crocodile or snake with wings and claws, the dragon appears prominently in various cultural traditions. Various dictionaries define a dragon as a mythical creature often depicted as a large, fearsome reptile with wings, scales, and sharp claws. The Oxford English Dictionary highlights its reptilian features, combining ophidian and crocodilian traits, sometimes breathing fire. Merriam-Webster dictionary and Cambridge Dictionary describe dragon as a winged, scaly serpent-like creature with a crested head. Meanwhile, the Britannica Dictionary portrays it as a giant lizard-like being that is capable of breathing fire. Meanwhile, according to Chen, H. (2018), based on ancient texts, the dragon is a combination of fanciful images of the snake, lizard, deer, and horse.

In general, dragons are commonly regarded as mythical creatures and are often associated with folklore. However, Jones (2000) argues that the dragon has evolved into a universal symbol with different meanings across cultures. In Egypt, it is linked to the devil; while in India, serpent-like dragons are seen as water-related demigods in Buddhist beliefs. In Europe, dragons are depicted as fire-breathing demons, often representing evil and destruction in literature (Yusoff Bakri, 2022). Western portrayals emphasize their massive size, wings,

and fiery breath (Liu, 2013). Additionally, in Christian texts, particularly the *Book of Revelation*, the dragon symbolizes Satan, describing as a deceiver and adversary of humanity.

Unlike Western cultures, Eastern society- especially the Chinese, perceives dragons-Loong-as sacred creatures full of miracles and with the power to protect humans. The Loong is a symbolic figure in the Chinese zodiac, representing power, fortune, authority, auspiciousness, and similar traits (Chen, H., 2018). According to History Skill (2021), the ancient Chinese dragon was a composite creature with features from various animals, symbolizing deities to some extent (Liu, J., 2013). Dragons are associated with goodness, luck, and prosperity, and they are believed to control water (Riska, A. A., 2014). As a result, dragon imagery is commonly used in Chinese decorations. In Chinese culture, dragons also represent ambition, power, authority, and success.

Based on the Chinese community's depiction, dragons are winged creatures with four legs and claws, but they do not breathe fire. Overall, the Chinese community presents a more positive portrayal of dragons compared to Western society. Meanwhile, in Thai society, dragons are revered as protectors of the Buddhist faith and are believed to communicate with both the natural and spiritual worlds (Anh Tu, P., 2007). In 2022, the Thailand government officially elevated dragons as national symbols and mythological creatures of significance. One famous Thai myth is the tale of Mucalinda, which is about a dragon that protects a Buddhist temple from a violent storm. There is also a narrative in which a dragon aspires to become a Buddhist monk, but cannot meet the human requirements for monkhood (Ayutaya, T. S. N., & Tungtang, P., 2015). In Thai art, dragons are often depicted as multi-headed creatures (Rahim, N. S., 2015) that combine human and serpent-like features. Consequently, dragons are seen as both protectors and potentially destructive forces.

While in the Malay realm, dragons are depicted as creatures significantly larger than snakes, with scales and feelers on their heads. They do not have wings and do not emit fire. Regarding their habitat, dragons in the Malay realm are often described as inhabiting waters, especially lakes (Rahim, N. S., 2015). Dragons hold a significant position in the Malay community, as evidenced by numerous Malay treasures featuring dragon motifs. According to Shahrulnizam, A. (2022), the image of the dragon, which was widely used on royal emblems and accessories, represented noble status and position in the Malay society. Among the general populace, dragon motifs or symbols are also prominently featured in various carvings, such as those found on weapons and water transportation, including boats. These representations primarily serve moral and symbolic functions.

Despite the fact that all definitions and descriptions universally indicate that dragons do not exist as actual creatures, this does not imply that the concept of the dragon can be entirely dissociated from the animal kingdom. Rather, the image of the dragon has been 'animalized' in diverse ways across cultures. In the Malay society, the dragon was also utilized as a symbolic or metaphorical figure, including in language expressions such as proverbs.

Regarding the metaphorical figure, many studies have examined the symbolism of animals such as tigers (*harimau*), crocodiles (*buaya*), and pisces (*ikan*) in Malay proverbs, but the dragon's metaphorical role has received little attention. Unlike real animals, the dragon is a mythical being with strong cultural, historical, and symbolic meanings. Understanding how Malay proverbs use the dragon metaphor can provide valuable insights of the Malay *weltanschauung* or worldview on power, nobility, and moral values.

Furthermore, while Malay proverbs exist across Malaysia, Indonesia, and Brunei, previous studies rarely examined the extent to which dragon-related proverbs are shared or differ among these regions. A study has been conducted to address this gap in seeking to contribute a deeper understanding of how mythical symbols function within Malay linguistic traditions.

Thus, this article aims to analyze the semantic and cultural significance of dragons in Malay proverbs, highlighting their metaphorical roles and the broader implications for the perception of power and morality in the Malay society.

Proverb and the Malay Society

The term ‘Malay proverbs’ broadly refers to the traditional sayings of the Malay-speaking world (Malaysia, Indonesia, and Brunei). Proverbs have historically been employed to impart moral teachings, provide practical guidance, and reflect the values and beliefs of different societies. While there may be universal themes and parallels between Malay proverbs and those of other cultures, their unique cultural and linguistic characteristics give them distinct expressions of Malay wisdom and worldview. For instance, W. E. Maxwell (1878), a British resident in Malaya (former name for Malaysia), asserted that:

“To enable us to fully understand the national character of an Eastern people, who have no literature worthy of the name and who are divided from us to by race, language, and religion, a study of their proverbs is almost indispensable. An insight is then obtained into their mode of thought, and their motives of action, and, from the principles inculcated, it is possible to form some estimate of what vices they condemn, and what virtues they admire.”

(W. E. Maxwell, 1878: 87)

Although new proverbs continue to emerge and evolve in contemporary societies, the relevance of earlier proverbs remains significant. Understanding the meaning of proverbs requires a comprehensive interpretation of the words selected, as well as an appreciation of the symbols that encapsulate their essence.

Therefore, this article discusses how the Malay conveys latent meanings through proverbs, with particular emphasis on the dragon symbol. It is not enough to focus solely on its symbolic interpretations; instead, it is crucial to explore the underlying reasons for the dragon's emergence as a symbol within Malay proverbs. What is the relationship between the dragon and Malay wisdom? How has this mythical creature become embedded in the cultural and moral fabric of the Malay mind or the Malay wisdom? While this article may not offer definitive answers to all these questions, it aims to provide a nuanced perspective on the role of the dragon in Malay proverbs and its significance in reflecting the broader cultural worldview.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous studies have examined the use of dragons in proverbs. For instance, Liu, J. (2013) and Yi Ying et al. (2017) studied the differences in the metaphorical meanings of dragons compared to other animals in proverbs. Using a contrastive analysis approach, Liu, J. compared the use of dragons in English proverbs with those in Chinese proverbs, while Yi Ying et al. (2017) compared dragons in Chinese proverbs with those in Indonesian proverbs. It was found that the dragon element carried positive meanings for Chinese and Indonesian societies, while it carried negative meanings for the English society. These positive or negative meanings can be attributed to cultural beliefs and values shaped by history, mythology, and folklore.

In Chinese and Indonesian societies, the dragon is often viewed as a symbol of power, strength, good luck, and prosperity. Dragons are also associated with water, a vital element in these cultures that symbolizes life, growth, and purity. In Chinese mythology, dragons are seen as divine creatures that could control natural elements such as rain and wind and dragons were also revered as symbols of the emperor's authority. Similarly, in Indonesian mythology, the dragon-like creature, called ‘naga’ was also associated with water and often depicted as a protector of villages and crops. On the other hand, in the English society, the dragon is more commonly associated with negative connotations such as danger, fear, and evil. This negative perception can be traced back to European folktales and medieval Christianity, where dragons were often depicted as fearsome monsters that terrorized villages and represented the forces of darkness. This view was further reinforced by literature such as *Beowulf* and *The Hobbit*, where dragons were portrayed as fierce and greedy creatures that hoarded treasure and killed innocent people. Therefore, the cultural context and historical representation of dragons have influenced the different interpretations of their positive or negative meanings in different societies.

The similar interpretations of meanings of the images in different societies generally indicate the representation of the similar intuitive meanings. However, the psychological state of societies and different traditions have created different interpretations of meanings for the same images. Additionally, the geographical environment, social mindset, and traditions between Western and Eastern communities vary from one ethnic group to another, leading to varying cognitive perceptions of animals.

The symbolism of dragons has been widely studied across different cultures, highlighting the diverse

interpretations of metaphorical meanings shaped by history, religion, and societal values. In Chen, H. (2018), Liu, J. (2013) and Yi Ying et al. (2017) examine the differing metaphorical roles of 'naga' in proverbs across various cultures. Liu, J. (2013) compares dragons in English and Chinese proverbs, noting that while dragons symbolize power and auspiciousness in Chinese culture, they often represent negative forces in Western traditions. Similarly, Yi Ying et al. (2017) compares the dragon in Chinese and Indonesian proverbs, revealing shared positive associations with prosperity and strength, while the dragon in the Western contexts is seen as a symbol of fear and evil.

In Liu, Y. (2015), the authors discuss the obvious cultural differences between the Chinese "*loong*" and the Western dragon. They emphasize that while the Chinese loong is associated with auspiciousness, leadership, and divine power, the Western dragon is often depicted as destructive, monstrous, and a symbol of chaos. These symbolic differences are crucial in understanding how cultural contexts shape the meaning of the dragon across cultures and societies. The authors argue that these cultural representations reflect the contrasting roles that dragons play in the folklore, mythology, and societal structures of the East and West.

Yuan, L. & Sun, Y. (2021) expands this discussion by exploring the comparative history and cultural implications of dragons in both Chinese and Western traditions. The study highlights how both cultures use dragons metaphorically in political and economic discourse, but with very different connotations. In the Chinese culture, the dragon is seen as a benevolent, powerful figure symbolizing leadership and good fortune, while in the Western societies, the dragon is often used to symbolize evil, chaos, and the need for heroism. The article further explores how these metaphorical uses are deeply embedded in the political and economic language of both cultures, influencing perceptions of power and leadership.

In Tsai, P.W. & Depner, S. C. (2016), the focus shifts to the metaphorical use of dragons and phoenixes in Chinese political and economic discourse. The authors note that while the dragon often symbolizes leadership, strength, and good fortune, the phoenix represents rebirth, hope, and femininity. The dragon is frequently used to convey power, particularly in leadership roles, while the phoenix is associated with grace, recovery, and prosperity. This distinction highlights the cultural and gendered metaphors that are embedded in political and economic language. The article also touches upon the use of these metaphors in proverbs and how they reflect the broader societal values of China, particularly in relation to gender roles, status, and economic development.

METHODOLOGY

This article further discusses the methodology of the research study which employs a qualitative approach in examining the significance of analysing the connotative meanings within Malay proverbs. The primary data sources include two extensive compilations of classical Malay proverbs: Malay Proverbs, edited by W. E. Maxwell (1878), which features 462 proverbs, and Malay Proverbs with Translation and Explanation in English, edited by H. A. Atan (1962), comprising 674 proverbs. Additionally, supplementary data were gathered from the esteemed online repository Malaycivilization.com (<http://malaycivilization.com.my>), developed by the Institute of the Malay World and Civilization, University Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM). This platform is dedicated to promoting and preserving the rich cultural heritage and history of Malay civilization, offering insights into various domains such as art, language, literature, history, and traditions. Notably, its section on Malay proverbs serves as an invaluable resource for this study.

To analyse the data, this study employs Semantics Theory, a linguistic framework that studies the meaning of words and how they are used in language. It examines how words relate to each other and how meaning is conveyed through context, reference, and inference. According to the Semantics Theory, words are not isolated entities; rather, they exist within a network of relationships with other words, concepts, and situations.

Meaning is not simply a matter of memorizing definitions or looking up words in a dictionary; it is created through the way words are used within contexts. One of the main concepts in the Semantics Theory is reference, which refers to the relationship between words and the things or concepts they refer to. In essence, the Semantics Theory provides insights into how language conveys meaning and how words are used in different contexts to create meaning.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

From this repository, 3,495 Malay proverbs were identified; however, many of these proverbs were repeated across many of these proverbs were repeated across different sources. As such, only unique instances of proverbs containing the dragon element were considered for analysis. In total, only 7 distinct proverbs featuring the dragon symbol were selected, with duplicates excluded. Table 1 below lists all the proverbs that utilize 'naga' (dragon) as a symbol.

Table 1 Malay proverbs which contain 'naga' (dragon) as symbolism.

No	Proverbs	Literal Meaning	Figurative Meaning
1	Bagai cacing hendak menjadi naga	Like a worm wanting to become a dragon	A small person aspiring to greatness
2	Bagai cacing menelan naga	Like a worm swallowing a dragon	The weak defeating the powerful
3	Bagai cacing menjadi ular naga	Like a worm turning into a dragon snake	From humble beginnings to greatness
4	Bercintakan geliga di mulut naga	Desiring a thunderstone in a dragon's mouth	Desiring something impossible to obtain
5	Naga ditelan ular lidi	A dragon swallowed by a twig snake	A noble's child marrying a commoner
6	Seperti bulan dimakan rahu (naga)	Like the moon eaten by a dragon	Embracing a lover with intense passion
7	Pacat hendak menjadi naga	A leech wanting to become a dragon	Having an unrealistic aspiration

The data indicate that Malay proverbs frequently compare the dragon (*naga*) to smaller, weaker creatures such as worms (*cacing*) and twig snakes (*ular lidi*), reflecting themes of ambition, power, and social hierarchy. These proverbs demonstrate that the dragon, though mythical, serves as a representation of power struggles, ambition, and transformation within Malay cultural aspirations. Unlike real animals, the dragon carries a metaphorical weight beyond physical reality, making it a unique linguistic device in conveying wisdom.

The analysis goes beyond superficial interpretations, as every word carries its own justification. This is also true for proverbs created by past societies. In addition to employing symbolism through the figures of the earthworm and the dragon, these proverbs incorporate background narration, drawing comparisons between the characteristics of both creatures. The implicit interpretations of meanings within these proverbs align with their expressions, particularly in terms of traits. In this context, "traits" refers to both the inherent qualities of the animals used as symbols and the human characteristics conveyed through the proverbs' literal meanings. Figure 2 illustrates the cognitive processes that motivate Malay speakers in the creation of the proverb 'Bagai cacing hendak menjadi **naga**.' (Like a worm wanting to become a dragon); "Bagai cacing menelan naga" (Like

a worm swallowing a dragon); “Bagai cacing menjadi ular naga” (Like a worm turning into a dragon snake); and “Pacat hendak menjadi naga” (A leech wanting to become a dragon).

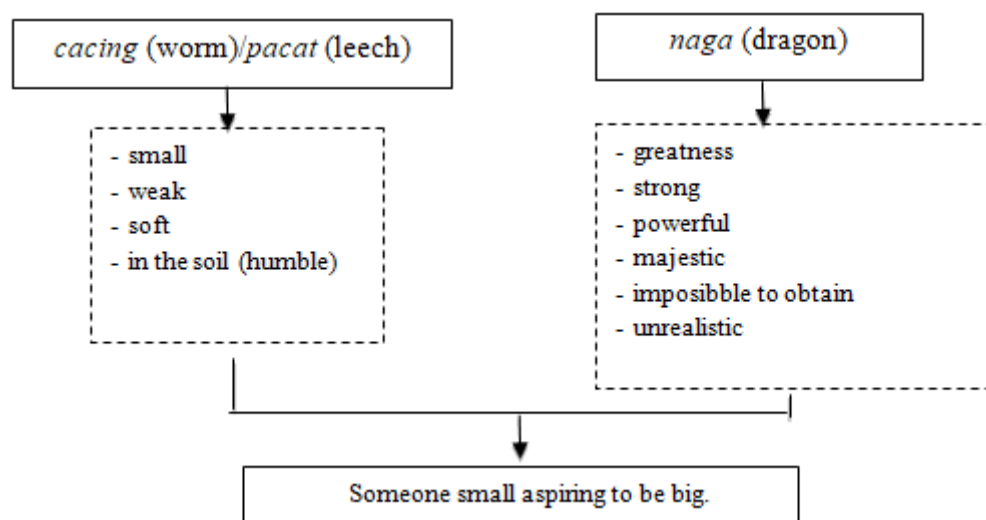


Figure 2 The Representation of cognitive process in proverbs

Based on Figure 2, several cognitive processes motivate the elements of earthworm and dragon within the proverb. This proverb is motivated by the inherent nature and characteristics of the two animals in question. The comparative elements that highlight *cacing* (earthworm) and *naga* (dragon) as symbolic objects suggest that the Malay community in the past was keenly attuned to the natural phenomena surrounding them. The earthworm, residing in the soil, is symbolized as weak and lowly, while the dragon is depicted as a noble person endowed with extraordinary strength. This contrast in nature and traits justifies the pairing of *worm* and *dragon*, such as, in the proverb ‘*bagai cacing hendak menjadi naga*’ (like a worm wanting to become a dragon). To clarify the metaphorical expression, linguistic evidence through corpus data is also required. Sentence (i) provides an example of linguistic proof, demonstrating the use of the dragon-related proverb as a piece of advice.

Sentence (i)

“Kau itu sama saja macam kami. Jangan bermimpi ke langit kalau tempat kita ini di bawah
Dasar cacing hendak menjadi naga!” beritahu Zam.

(Korpus DBP, Dewan Siswa September 2022)

Based on sentence (i), the phrase “*bermimpi ke langit*” (dreaming to the sky) expresses the idea of “*menjadi naga*” (becoming a dragon), and the sentence “*Kau itu sama saja macam kami*” (You are just like us) is cross-referenced with “*cacing hendak menjadi naga*” (like a worm wanting to become a dragon). Upon observation, this proverb does not have any antecedents that make the interpretation of its meaning immediately clear. However, understanding the context of the sentence helps develop an interpretation of the proverb, which can be further explained by examining additional premises.

Furthermore, the context of the proverb “*cacing hendak menjadi naga*” (like a worm wanting to become a dragon) serves as an advice. In this case, the statements “*kau itu sama saja macam kami*” (You are just like us) and “*jangan*” (do not) indicate the element of advice, and not a prohibition, which is commonly used in Malay discourse. Examples of the use of “*jangan*” (do not) include sayings such as “*jangan panjat tinggitinggi, nanti jatuh*” (do not climb too high, you might fall), “*jangan main hujan, nanti demam*” (do not play in the rain, you might catch a cold), and so on. Therefore, the expressions “*kau itu sama saja macam kami*” (You are just like us) – as an ordinary people, and “*bermimpi ke langit*” (dreaming to the sky) provide additional context that helps in understanding meaning of the proverb. To compare a worm (small, weak, soft,

easily rotting, and humble) with other animals that are bigger and stronger, Malays might use animals such as a crocodile, eagle, or tiger. However, the fact that Malays choose to use a dragon is notable. In the Malay community, stories about dragon are largely mythical, as the creature has never been seen in reality. The general knowledge of the listener or reader also contributes relevant information. Considering the context of the sentence, the proverb is used to advise against undertaking an impossible or unrealistic action. The idea that a dream is unreal is compared to the dragon, a mythical creature that also does not exist.

Sentence (ii)

Sekali lagi atas nasihat isterinya, Sang Tikus yang mempunyai cita-cita seperti ular lidi nak
menelan naga itu mengambil keputusan menemui Sang Angin. Hasrat bermenantukan yang
hebat-hebat masih menguasai fikirannya.

(Korpus DBP, *MASTIKA* September 1997)

In sentence (ii), the phrase “*tikus yang mempunyai cita-cita*” (a mouse with aspiration) is cross-referenced with the expression “*seperti ular lidi*” (like a twig snake), while the phrase “*menelan naga*” (swallowing a dragon) is cross-referenced with “*bermenantukan orang hebat*” (to have an exceptional son-in-law). To understand that this proverb has no antecedent, an additional premise is required, namely ‘*atas nasihat isterinya...*’ (upon the advice of his wife). Similar to sentence (i), the additional premise in sentence (ii) helps relate the context to the meaning of the proverb “*ular lidi nak menelan naga*” (a twig snake wanting to swallow a dragon), which is conveyed as advice. ‘*Ular lidi*’ (twig snake), which is physically small, symbolizing an ordinary or common person, while ‘*naga*’ (dragon), known to be large, strong, and perfect, symbolizes a noble or eminent person. Overall, the dragon element is used to depict a great, noble, respected, or feared person.

The use of the dragon element, paired with worms, twig snakes, or other small animals, indicates an intended comparison in conveying implicit meanings, often functioning as a form of advice. This comparison highlights the significant differences between dragons and smaller animals. Furthermore, the semantic resonance analysis explores the speaker’s cognitive processes in determining the reasons for including the dragon element in Malay proverbs. Given the image of the dragon as large, strong, and great, it is common for the Malay community to create proverbs such as “*bagai cacing hendak menjadi naga*” (like a worm wanting to become a dragon) or “*seperti ular lidi menelan naga*” (like a twig snake wanting to swallow a dragon). Dragons are described as large, brave, majestic, powerful, and feared creatures. These characteristics are attributed to them in order to instill a sense of admiration within the community, fostering a belief that dragons are magnificent creatures.

Through the cognitive analysis demonstrated earlier, there remain unanswered questions. Semantic not only considers authentic data but also examines context, speaker cognition, culture, and its connection to the speaker’s intellect (Jalaluddin, N. H., 2014). In the proverb “*bagai cacing hendak menjadi naga*” (like a worm wanting to become a dragon), the worm is portrayed as weak and with no chance of success. As an agrarian society, the Malay community is deeply familiar with worms and soil. The continuous interaction between the Malays and their environment has fostered a unique perspective in their thinking, making the worm a symbol for forming values, norms, and life lessons. The abstraction is largely influenced by the worm’s inherent characteristics: weakness, in the sense of being easily broken, watery, and prone to decay. Conversely, strength, the characteristic that represent the dragon, refers to thorny skin, taste, and physical form.

Despite the numerous myths related to the dragon element, there has been no event that authentically proves the existence of dragons, including in the Malay world. Based on observations in circulating stories, dragons seem to appear in critical situations when a person needs help. This condition aligns with Riska, A. A.’s (2014)

statement that the dragon is symbolized as a guardian of a building and the underwater world. This belief can be observed in examples of several structures in China and Thailand that are decorated with dragons as symbols or emblems of guardianship. According to the Malay culture, the positive meanings of the dragon lead to the use of dragon elements in Malay proverbs to symbolize a positive situation. For example, in the proverb "*bagai cacing menjadi ular naga*" (like a worm turning into a dragon snake), the dragon symbolizes 'glory' or 'nobility.' In the ancient Malay community, it was common for those with great physical strength and extraordinary abilities to be symbolized as guardians of peace as a noble trait.

The proverb "*bagai cacing menjadi naga*" indicates that the ancient Malay community was highly observant of their surroundings, particularly the elements that were part of their daily lives. The meaning that can be interpreted within proverbs is connected to the characteristics of the elements that become the objects in the proverb. Despite being associated with myths, dragons are described as having specific characteristics (large, terrifying, fanged, with the power to breathe fire, capable of flying, and always hidden), in line with 'belief' or 'conviction,' where these characteristics are believed as such even though they are never seen. Although impossible, this belief or conviction can be observed through the literal meaning of this proverb, which signifies "*orang kecil mahu menjadi orang besar*" (someone small aspiring to be big) or "*hina menjadi mulia*" (from humble to majestic). Additionally, a worm that resides in the ground with a soft or weak body morphology is associated with lowliness, while a dragon, described as a large, strong, and formidable creature with great power, symbolizes a prominent or noble person.

The compatibility between the traits or characteristics of this creature and the literal meaning found in Malay proverbs proves the meticulousness of the Malays in selecting objects. This selection is based on an assessment oriented towards their life experiences. To explore the relationship between dragons and the Malays mind, the etymology of the word '*naga*' was explored. '*Naga*' is a loanword from the Sanskrit language '*nāgá*', which means '*ular tedung*' (cobra snake) or the Indian cobra (*Naja naja*). Several words also mean '*ular*', with '*sarpá*' being one of the most commonly used words. Indicating '*ular*' in general (Shivram, A. V., 1997), the word '*nāgá*' shares the same origin as the snake in English: *A snake in general*—from Old English *draca*, from Proto-Germanic **drako*, and an early borrowing from Latin *draco*, as stated in the Online Etymology Dictionary:

"Dragon, a fabulous animal common to the conceptions of many races and peoples, from Old French dragon and directly from Latin draconem (nominative draco) "huge serpent, dragon," from Greek drakon (genitive drakontos) 'serpent, giant seafish,' apparently from drak-, strong aorist stem of derkesthai 'to see clearly,' from PIE *derk- 'to see' (source also of Sanskrit darsata- 'visible;,' Old Irish adcondarc 'I have seen;,' Gothic gatarhjan 'characterize;,' Old English torht, Old High German zoraht 'light, clear;,' Albanian dritë 'light'). Perhaps the literal sense is 'the one with the (deadly) glance, the one with (paralyzing) sight.' The young are dragonets (c. 1300). Fem. form dragoness is attested from 1630s. Obsolete drake (n.2) "dragon" is an older borrowing of the same word, and a later form in another sense is dragoon. Used in the Bible generally for creatures of great size and fierceness, it translates Hebrew tannin 'a great sea-monster,' also *tan*, a desert mammal now believed to be the jackal."

(<https://www.etymonline.com/word/dragon>)

Generally, snakes are long, scaly reptiles with hard bones that can only be bent slightly (Shihab, M. Q., 2004). Snakes are creeping animals classified under the reptile kingdom, comprising diverse species and habitats, and are distributed worldwide depending on their types (Mariyono, Kevin A., 2016). According to Das, I. (2013), more than 3,000 types or species of snakes exist around the world, with 600 of them classified as poisonous. Notably, the smallest snake is the '*blind snake*' (8 cm), while the largest is the '*Python*' (9 metres).

'*Naja*', which is also referred to as a genus of venomous snakes belonging to the Elapidae family, is known for its remarkably strong venom, which is highly dangerous to humans. This genus of venomous elapid snakes is commonly known as cobras (or true cobras) (www.wikipedia.org). According to Tan, C. H. (2022), '*ular tedung*' (king cobra) are snakes from the genus '*Naja*', which comprise various species that are widely

distributed in Africa, Southwest Asia, South Asia, East Asia, and Southeast Asia. Tan, C. H. (2022) added that cobras play an important role in many cultures due to their association with medicine and public health. In Southeast Asia, at least six to seven species of cobras (*Naja*) can cause death and paralysis through envenomation. Moreover, the '*Naja sumatrana*' species, also known as the '*Naja sputatrix*' (Malayan Spitting Cobra), is widely spread across the Malay Archipelago. This species is known for its elongated nuchal ribs, which allow it to develop the front part of its neck into a hood. This snake raises the front part of its body, spreads its hood, and only attacks by biting when it feels threatened (Chanhome, L. et al., 2011).

Based on the etymology of the word '*naga*', this word was subsequently absorbed into the Malay language, leading to further exploration of the term by referring to the earliest Malay dictionaries, such as the *Dictionary English and Malayo*, *Malayo and English* by Thomas Bowrey (1701), *Dictionary of the Malay Language* by William Marsden (1812), and *Malay-English Dictionary (Romanised)* by R. J. Wilkinson (1901). It was found that the words '*naga*' or '*naja*' did not exist in William Marsden's dictionary (1812); however, they were discovered in R. J. Wilkinson's (1901) and Thomas Bowrey's (1701) dictionaries. According to R. J. Wilkinson's dictionary, '*naga*' is recorded as "Skr. Dragon, a snake of supernatural size," while Thomas Bowrey's dictionary records '*naga*' under the entry for '*dragon*', which matches the term "*oolar naga*." Another old dictionary that records the word '*naga*' is the manuscript MSS EUR E110 (<https://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/>), a dictionary written in the 1800s or the 19th century, where '*naga*' is defined as "A sp. of snake." In general, these dictionaries define the dragon as '*ular*' (snake).

The curiosity towards the word '*naga*' (dragon) continued with a search through classical texts. This search aimed to investigate when was the word '*naga*' began to be used among the Malay (mostly Muslim) people. Apart from the word '*naga*', the term '*ular naga*' (dragon snake) is also found in the collection of ancient texts. The assimilation of this word can be seen through the writings of *Sejarah Melayu*, *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa*, and *Hikayat Amir Hamzah*. The following excerpt is an example of the search display of the Malay Concordance Project (MCP) corpus related to the use of the word '*naga*'.

"... menghukumkan segala peri, dewa dan jin, sekaliannya di bawah senjatanya; dan ialah yang membunuh burung geroda; dan ialah yang membunuh binatang barbiaban; dan ialah membunuh **ular naga** yang terlalu besar; dan ialah yang menghukumkan tujuh penjuru dunia ini; dan ialah yang membubuh anting-anting pada telinga segala pahlawan; dan ialah murid Jibril."

(*Malay Concordance Project*, Hikayat Amir Hamzah – 1380M)

and

"Maharaja Darmawangsa pun bertanya bondanya Betara Kunti. Maka sahut Dewi Draupadi, "Paduka bonda dibawa oleh Maharaja Karna ke Astinapura daripada mula tuan hamba ditelan **ular naga** Arda Leka. Itulah beta semuanya lagi disuruhnya jemput oleh Maharaja Duryudana hendak diambilnya akan dayang-dayang. Beta lagi bertangguh dua belas tahun dua belas bulan."

(*Malay Concordance Project*, Hikayat Pandawa Lima – 1350M)

Based on observations from the texts, it was found that the earliest use of the word '*naga*' is present in texts such as *Hikayat Pandawa Lima* (14th century) and *Hikayat Amir Hamzah* (14th century). The texts were written in Jawi script, creating the impression of Islamic influence in Malay-language works. This condition could be linked to the history of Islam's arrival in the Malay world. According to Hamid (1985), Marrison argued that Islam was introduced to Samudra Pasai by Islamic preachers from Coromandel at the end of the 13th century by Arab traders. It was also found that this date was not far from the dates of the *Hikayat Amir Hamzah* and *Hikayat Pandawa Lima* texts.

Spiritual and Moral Symbolism of 'Naga' in Malay Proverbs

The next step to be explained is: how do the dates of the 14th century relate to the arrival of Islam and the concept of '*naga*' (dragon) or '*ular besar*' (big snake)? In this context, Muslims are required to believe in and adhere to the Pillars of Faith, one of which is belief in the Prophets and the Holy Books. As believers in the prophethood of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), this obligation may be linked to the story of Prophet Moses

(AS) and his miracle in which a stick was transformed into a snake. This belief, which is challenging to describe or imagine, is highly relevant to the definition of dragon as a mythical or mystical creature. Furthermore, several verses in the Quran specifically mention snakes, which are generally associated with the miracles of Prophet Moses (AS): (i) Surah al-A'raf, 7:107; (ii) Surah Thaha, 20:19-20; (iii) Surah al-Syu'ara, 26:32; and (iv) Surah al-Qasas, 28:31. These surahs narrate that Prophet Moses (AS) was sent by Allah SWT to show the power of Allah SWT to Pharaoh. In the Quran, snakes are referred to as '*sukban*' (ثعبان), '*hayyah*' (حي), and '*jan*' (جان). The term '*al-hayyah*' (حي) refers to a snake regardless of its size or gender. Specifically, '*al-sukban*' (ثعبان) refers to a large snake, while '*al-jan*' (جان) denotes a small snake. However, the Quran does not provide a detailed description of the shape or size of the snakes. Nevertheless, *Tafsir al-Maraghiy* (Thalib, M. 2001: 2332) presents the following statement:

Many commentators rely on narrations (*athar*) (*tafsir bil ma'thur*) to describe the nature of the snake, which is not based on a reliable foundation. All of these are nothing, but Israiliyat stories are accepted wholeheartedly by commentators among the people of the Holy Book who deliberately deceive the Muslim community and Arab people.

While based on the translation of the book *Minhajul Hanif* compiled by Al-Imam Abu Yazid Al-Bustomy, the following statements were expressed, but the statement is not in the Quran and Hadith, hence it also considered as false but some people believed:

During the Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) night journey (Isra), he saw a large creature wrapped around the pillar of the throne (arasy) with three coils. He trembled upon seeing the creature and asked, "Oh Jibril, who is that greatly large serpent?" Jibril replied, "Its name is '*sukban*' (ثعبان), the dragon snake that swallows all the magic of Pharaoh's army." It could also swallow a rock as big as a mountain wholly. The original form of the dragon snake from the staff (stick) of Prophet Moses (AS) was very huge and long, with golden scales. The snake coiled around the throne in three coils and has a thousand heads. Each head has 1000 mouths, and each mouth has 1000 tongues. On each tongue, the creature continuously recited and praised God until the Day of Resurrection.

In the context of Malay wisdom, the depiction of concepts that must be believed despite being unimaginable to the naked eye prompts the portrayal of dragons as extraordinary and incomparable creatures, distinct from common snakes. Given the encyclopaedic limitations of this miracle, the snake is described as a creature greater than *Naja* or *Elapidae*. The characteristics of this snake include being the most poisonous yet protective, only attacking when threatened. These traits are reinforced by the belief in the Prophet's miracle, where a large snake, 'presented' by Allah SWT, saved Prophet Moses (AS) and his people from Pharaoh's oppression. This miracle serves as an inspiration and offers lessons embedded within proverbs. Therefore, *naga* (dragon) in the Malay world is not depicted as a violent, evil, or predatory creature.

As mentioned earlier, mythical creatures such as *naga* tend to be portrayed as protectors or guardians that appear when needed, often symbolizing *nobility*. Based on the story of Prophet Moses (AS), it is depicted that the large snake was a creature sent by Allah (SWT) as a miracle to save the Prophet and his people from Pharaoh's cruelty, with Pharaoh viewing the snake as a threat to be destroyed. Thus, this article has demonstrated and elaborated the use of the dragon in Malay proverbs, especially the *naga*, which differs due to the influence of Islamic faith and belief. In line with their level of Islamic religious knowledge at the time, the Malays, when proverbs were created, also embedded Islamic elements into these proverbs.

CONCLUSION

Proverbs are not merely linguistic expressions but serve as repositories of collective wisdom, passed down through generations to convey essential life lessons. The deliberate selection of words and symbols in these proverbs reflects a sophisticated intellectual process in which meanings are shaped not only by direct experiences but also by cultural, spiritual, and philosophical reflections. This article highlights the intellectual and cultural depth of the Malay community, which can be better understood through a careful examination of their language, particularly proverbs that have been integral to their tradition.

This article discusses the use of the dragon symbol in Malay proverbs—despite dragons being mythical creatures without scientific classification—that reveals its deep connection to the religious beliefs and worldview of the Malays, particularly their adherence to Islam. By integrating perspectives from multiple fields of knowledge, it affirms that proverbs are not mere expressions but are embedded with profound cultural and intellectual insights.

In conclusion, the dragon in the Malay proverbs transcends its mythical origins, symbolizing power, nobility, and wisdom, all of which are deeply rooted in the Malay worldview. Unravelling the layers of meaning within these proverbs contributes to a deeper understanding of the Malay culture and philosophy, shedding light on the intricate interplay between language, belief, and the environment.

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Data Availability Statement

The data supporting this study's findings are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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