Cultural Values and Its Influence on the Enactment of Leadership in Public Sector Organisations:
A Case Research in Brunei

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ABSTRACT

This research contributes to our understanding of leadership in public sector organisations by examining the influence of national culture on the enactment of public sector leadership in the context of Brunei. It followed a qualitative interpretivist research approach employing semi-structured interviews involving public sector leaders in Brunei. This research contributes to existing debates that claim that public sector leadership is context specific and contingent upon cultural backgrounds and the national cultures of specific countries and emerging nations. The findings suggest national culture appear to have a constraining influence on public sector leadership, where tension exists between abiding to Islamic work ethics and cultural tribal activities, particularly relating to the issues of fairness and justice regarding recruitment, selection, and promotion.

KEYWORDS

Brunei, Islam, Leadership, Malay, Monarchy, National Culture, Public Sector, Southeast Asia, Values

INTRODUCTION

The focus of this research is to explore the influence of national culture; it attempts to understand Brunei Malay Muslim cultural influence on public sector leadership in the public sector of Brunei Darussalam (henceforth referred to as 'Brunei'), a tiny, oil-rich South East Asian country located on the north-western coast of the island of Borneo. This goal is supported with data collected from among Brunei's public sector employees, with particular emphasis on how leadership is viewed and understood in Brunei's public sector. The government system in Brunei is influenced by its historical, religious, political and cultural background. It is a combination monarchy based on the Bruneian tradition and Western bureaucracy transplanted during the British rule. Bruneian traditional administration is hierarchical and bound by rules and protocols. However, not all bureaucratic features are in line with the Bruneian culture. Bureaucracy focuses on impersonality but such characteristics as collectivism and interdependency in Brunei society suggest personal and social relationships and group norms play an important role in influencing the behaviour of Bruneian employees at work.

Bruneians share many cultural characteristics with other Asian countries. The aim of this research is to explore the influence of national culture on the enactment of leadership in public sector organisations, in the context of Brunei.

The term 'enactment' employed in this research focuses on the experiences of leaders engaging in leadership including their interaction with others. By focusing on the enactment process, the focus is shifted from not only looking at leaders but at the holistic process of public sector leadership, which involves the complexities and dynamics of the interaction between different levels of employees within the public sector (superior and subordinate) and the public sector environment. The role of public leaders is to proactively provide line managers with the most appropriate tools, resources and competencies to achieve organisational performance (Coupland et al., 2008; Podger, 2004). The majority of leadership studies, including public sector leadership studies, are North American in origin and much research, perhaps unwittingly, articulates positivist US values (Den Hartog & Dickson, 2004). This often acknowledged US-centrism is based on the assumption that North American values can be transposed to leadership theory, development and practice in quite different contexts from those found in the USA (Jackson & Parry, 2008). Yet, it is increasingly evident that leadership and followership dynamics take very different forms in different societies.

While this research is by no means the first to argue for validating the relevance of leadership in public administration (Behn, 1998; Fairholm, 2014; Morse & Buss, 2007; Terry, 1995; Wart, 2003) or articulating a research agenda for examining leadership in public administration (Mau, 2009; Ingraham, 2006; Van Slyke & Alexander, 2006), the research does argue for expanding research scope to include a broader reflection of leadership in the public sector. Specifically, this research argues that acts of leadership occur within all levels and sectors of government; therefore, we need to broaden the research questions to consider a broader application of leadership in the public sector. Furthermore, this study proposes a research agenda that explores beyond comparative analyses of leadership (public versus private leadership skills, contexts, and limits) and competency-based frameworks, to argue for a research agenda that supports a heuristic inquiry of how public administrators perceive the meaning of leadership in the public sector.

THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN LEADERSHIP, PUBLIC SECTOR AND NATIONAL CULTURE

The Malay Muslim Leader

About the size of Delaware in the U.S, Brunei is home to one of the world's longest continuously ruling dynasties. The concept of *Melayu Islam Beraja* (MIB) or Malay Islamic Monarchy forms the basis of social and political life in the Sultanate of Brunei and the country has been deeply influenced by a dominant Malay culture, one shared by its neighbouring countries of Malaysia and Indonesia. In studies of eastern cultures, research mainly focuses on China and Japan. However, there are other eastern cultures which are less known to the intercultural schools; one being Malay culture. Some authors (Low, 2011; Mastor et al., 2000; Mohd. Salleh, 2005) portrayed Malay culture as 'being polite, self-effacing and avoiding open conflict wherever possible'.

This ideals was vividly illuminated by His Majesty the Sultan and Yang Di-Pertuan of Brunei Darussalam in his decree in 2018 where he warned newly sworn-in cabinet members against falling into the trap of cronyism and nepotism, saying it is their duty to serve the country and not their own personal agendas (Hazair, 2018). Delivering his decree during the first meeting of the new cabinet at Istana Nurul Iman, the monarch aired his grievances ranging from the lack of long-term results from sending SMEs to expos abroad, undermining the values and beliefs of the country, to the adoption of foreign practices which are "ill-suited to Brunei". His Majesty further added:

Ministers, deputy ministers and permanent secretaries are the government's front-liners and are entrusted to fulfill [the goal of] being an independent nation… Work with dedication and do not deviate from this goal. Serve the country, not your own personal agendas.

He prompted cabinet members to have the fortitude to meet government targets, urging them to become wise, selfless leaders who implement beneficial policies. Leaders who hold on tight to the national value of MIB (Malay Islamic Monarchy) will not be susceptible to selfishness and the hunger for power, he said:

Do not become intoxicated with power that you will do anything for your own self-interests above the needs and interests of the country," he warned, adding that leaders who have become intoxicated with power have a tendency to practice nepotism and cronyism…This must not be allowed to happen.

As a Muslim leader in Brunei, His Majesty Sultan Haji Hassanal Bolkiah urged Muslims to emulate the Prophet Muhammad's "exemplary leadership" (Hj Abu Bakar, 2019). In a *titah* broadcast on Radio Televisyen Brunei to mark the Islamic holiday, he cited a hadith where Prophet Muhammad reminded Muslims that "the perfect Muslim is not a perfect Muslim, who eats till he is full and leaves his neighbours hungry":

'The strong should help the weak and the rich should help those who are less fortunate,' the sultan added. 'These are the pillars of life in Islam and its leadership.'

For that reason, it is interesting to discover how this notion of Malay culture, which is embedded in the very fabric of Brunei's collectivism and high power-distance society, may impact on public sector leadership. Popular cultural studies such the GLOBE Project (2004) and of course Hofstede (2001) have not included Brunei in their study of leadership and culture. All these elements: namely leadership, public sector and the national context could offer additional challenges to public sector leadership. Understanding the dynamics and complexity of these elements is the motivation behind conducting this study of Brunei.

Public Sector Leadership

In a recent article by Tim Mau (2020) he highlighted that with a burgeoning of research studies over the past two decades public sector leadership has gained traction for recognition as a distinct subfield of public management and administration. He argued a number of important research lacunae remain. Rosenbach (2003) defines leadership as a process of the leader and followers engaging in reciprocal influence to achieve a shared purpose. Particularly, "leadership is about getting people to work together to make things happen that might not otherwise occur, or to prevent things from happening that would ordinarily take place" (Zhihong, Wei, & Xiaoying, 2013,p.74).While other authors have tried to offer their own definitions of public sector leadership (see e.g. Dodge et al., 2005; Getha-Taylor et al., 2011), the growing leadership literature aimed at public services' settings, typically focuses on the nature of leadership offered, and the context in which it can be seen as individualised or collective (e.g. Currie & Lockett, 2007). In particular, some of this work suggests that there are already groups and communities enacting the more collaborative, non-heroic style of leadership that is currently receiving so much attention (e.g. Day, 2005; Gunter & Rayner, 2007; Hargreaves & Fink, 2008; Hartley & Allison, 2000; Torrance, 2009). Public administration scholars and practitioners have also tried to demarcate the public leadership domain more clearly (Wallis & McLoughlin, 2007).

A persistent assumption in public administration is that acts of leadership are reserved for the political elite, the legislative representatives, the agency leaders, the city and county managers, the individuals who have the perceived political authority to make decisions. Several gaps that were

addressed in recent studies, including the need for public sector leadership studies to focus more on the contextual factors impacting leadership, in order to complement the research that exists at the individual and group levels of analysis (Johns, 2006; Porter and McLaughlin, 2006). The inadequate attention given to contextual and situational factors, as well as the poorly understood or missing links between individual and group attitudes and behaviours, together with their impact on organisational outcomes (Goodman, 2000) emerge as key themes developed in this research. Another gap addressed in this research is the need for research to explicitly address the organisational characteristics in the conceptualisation of leadership. In other words, there is a need to explicitly address the enactment of public sector leadership by asking leaders about their experiences on how they enact or perform activities in relation to their leadership capacity. For instance, exploring claims by authors that suggest that public sector leaders have far less discretion in exercising leadership than their private sector counterparts, given their differing contexts and differing stakeholders (Hooijberg & Choi, 2001).

Other issues that emerged include assessing whether this study supports Van Wart's (2013) study that found historical, cultural, economic and political factors provide the context within which public sector leadership is enacted and which differentiates it from other organisational contexts. Finally, to address the issue of whether structural characteristics of bureaucratic organisations are commonly expected to impede leadership, it was noted that very few studies have empirically explored this assumption. A few studies (Vogel & Masal, 2015; Van der Voet et al., 2016) found that structural characteristics hinder both the need for leadership and potential for leadership. Similar studies (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Vogel & Masal, 2015; Van der Voet et al., 2016) found that structural characteristics reduce the potential to exercise leadership by restricting the leader's ability to act in novel ways or to provide an appealing vision by reinterpreting organisational objectives in ways that are more congruent with employees' values. In the same way DeHart-Davis and Pandey (2005) found that structural characteristics of public sector organisations alienate employees from their work by inhibiting the expression of individual differences, motives and attitudes.

The Cultural Link

The majority of the literature demonstrates widespread support for the link between leadership and culture. However, little has been written on addressing the important and complex issue: the relationship between culture and public sector leadership; particularly in the case of Brunei. A review of popular cultural dimensions highlighted valuable insights to this link at various levels of culture. Insights still do not appear to have been generated so as to address certain key cultural features found in a society deeply embedded with a philosophy such as Confucianism or Shintoism. Furthermore, there seems to be an absence of research that looks into the impact of Islamic culture on the organisation, with the exception of Faris and Parry's (2011) research that looked into Islamic organisational leadership within Western societies. Although some Western scholars have pointed out that cultural differences matter, they are often unfamiliar with, or even misunderstand, non-Western cultural concepts (Cheng et al., 2009). Moreover, scholars from non-Western nations primarily use theories that were developed and validated in the West as the basis for their research on indigenous leaders (Zhang et al., 2012). Such studies contribute very limited knowledge and may sometimes misrepresent or, as critiqued by Fang (2003), misinterpret the unique cultural characteristics found in a non-Western context. If applied to guiding leaders, such studies would either be totally irrelevant, or help to solve the wrong problem (Von Glinow & Teagarden, 2009). This study is a response to the challenge to move forward to more emically-oriented leadership research, of the kind that Jackson and Parry (2011) described, to complement the preponderance of etically-oriented research within the field of cross-cultural leadership. van der Wal and Demircioglu (2020) study shows that public sector employees in the studied Asian countries all seek opportunities to innovate, whereas cultural norms and values either constrain or enable innovative behaviour and affect the extent to which employees experience leadership support for displaying such behaviour.

Previous studies have primarily measured the influence of national culture on leadership using cultural dimensions identified by Hofstede (2001)and the GLOBE PROJECT (2004). Previously, the focus of these studies has been on the impact of national culture on leadership and not public sector leadership. Culture is a very complex term and it is not as simple as it appears in the Hofstede (2001) research. This current research runs counter to Hofstede's definition of culture as a programming of mind, rather than actions which shape and evaluate the cultures. This research of public sector leadership in Brunei intends to capture the subjective experiences of leaders, as well as the complex nature and the national context in which public sector leadership takes place. Nakata (2003) laments that many, if not most, of these studies have treated culture theory as static, trait theory, where every society is described by its intensity along a particular societal and/or personality trait, such as individualism/collectivism. In fact, many studies show that culture is a dynamic, complex phenomenon. This research serves to strengthen the case for a move towards local, connected, dialogical and relational approaches.

METHODOLOGY

Burns (2005) call for a multi-disciplinary perspective and broadening of social issues in leadership studies; recognition of the importance of and need for more encompassing approaches. Researching leadership, and in this case public sector leadership, requires employing novel research methods and developing new context-specific leadership theories (Zhang et al., 2012). Previous studies, using quantitative descriptions of leadership, failed to help us understand the deeper structures and dynamism of the leadership phenomenon and were deemed insufficient for explaining the leadership phenomenon the researchers wished to research (Parry et al., 2014). The limited availability of research results relating to public sector leadership, and the absence of such research specifically in Brunei, encourages the selection of a qualitative approach for this research.

Research Questions

Table 1 Shows the linkages between the research question and the rationale of the research.

Method

This research approach will be implemented by using exploratory semi-structured interviews. The interviews in this study were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and analysed using content and thematic analysis. In order to understand the public sector leadership phenomenon, middle-level and senior-level managers were interviewed to talk about how they interpret the public sector, leadership, their culture, their actions and others' actions. Van Wart (2003) asserts more research involving public policy makers and administrative leaders, linking explicit well-articulated models

Table 1. Linkages between research questions and rationale of the research

Research Question	Rationale
RQ1: What do we understand about public sector leadership in Brunei?	An unexplored context that could offer insight and inform the public sector leadership literature by drawing from experiences in Brunei.
RQ2: What is the role of national culture in enabling individuals to enact leadership in public sector organisations?	This research question is asked to assess the role of national culture in facilitating the enactment of leadership in the public sector.
RQ3: What is the role of national culture in hindering individuals' enactment of leadership in public sector organisations?	This research question is asked to assess whether the role of national culture in constraining the enactment of public sector leadership includes national culture.

with concrete data in public sector settings, is needed. He further contends that there is not enough data available concerning the micro and macro levels of leadership in the public sector to truly define the phenomenon (p.225). As such, the assessment of enactment in this research is in terms of how the leader and followers engage in reciprocal influence to achieve a shared purpose. Semi-structured interviews, as a research method, was used to explore the perceptions and understanding held by thirty-two senior and middle level leaders from twelve government ministries.

Participants

Researchers argue that it is crucial to understand the practitioners' or administrative leaders' perspectives, as they provide valuable insights into how public sector leaders view their leadership experiences, which in turn affects the way they enact that leadership. There is, however, a significant lack of research investigating the views, perceptions and understandings of leaders in public sector organisations such as government ministries and departments. Seeking to address this gap, the current study employed a qualitative interpretive approach to describe the role of culture on the enactment of public sector leadership, as understood and perceived by thirty-two government public service employees. The invitations for interview were sent to those previously nominated or referred by my 'gatekeepers'. Gatekeepers are people who have access to your population/sample and can help you also to access them. This yielded a total of 33 interviews. However, 1 interviewee did not manage to complete the interview. I have interviewed two levels of leaders from the Brunei public service. The first level consists of senior-level leaders who held Division I positions (namely Deputy Director level and above) in the civil service. The second level consists of middle-level leaders who held Division II positions (This group of officers consists of Professionals and Administrative Officers) in the civil service. The middle level or Division II leaders were chosen based on their nomination and successful completion of the civil service leadership programmes such as Development Programme for Middle Management Government Officers (DPMMGO) and other similar leadership programmes. The senior level leaders of this study, who are formally designated high-ranking public sector leaders, and who were interviewed via referrals include a Minister, Deputy Minister, Permanent Secretary, senior level leader, Directors, high-ranking uniformed officials and public sector leaders of various roles and positions.

The participants chosen in the study comprised Division I and Division II employees in the Brunei civil service. The number of Division I leaders, who were deemed experienced and well-reviewed by their peers, were narrowed down, and the selected leaders were then invited to participate in the study. They were given the information sheets and consent forms, and only participants that signed the consent form were selected for inclusion in the final participant pool of the study. To address variation and to reveal as many viewpoints as possible, the author access to interview the cohort of two different leadership development programmes for middle-level leaders, currently running at the time of this research. 21 respondents were contacted via a course coordinator of an executive development programme and the rest were contacted through friends. To ensure anonymity, the author has removed each respondent's role or job description and given pseudonyms to each leader. There are a number of reasons for choosing senior and middle level leaders as a sample in this study. First, the complex nature of the interview, particularly the experience or exposure to activities that contribute to public sector leadership may not be easily understood and comprehended by staff at the lower levels. Secondly, Division I leaders, as senior executives, are the backbone of the organisation. Their leadership capacity is critical to the success and credibility of the government ministries and departments. Thirdly, most of these officers have subordinates. They are expected to be able to lead and develop the subordinates. However, this is not possible unless they, themselves are leaders and are seen to be interested in their jobs, their subordinates, their superiors and the organisation as a whole. Finally, the majority of the employees in this job category (about 90%) were educated in the West. They were

exposed to western cultures more than those in the lower job groups who were educated locally. Based on their educational backgrounds it is possible leadership and administration theories which originated from the West, are in line with their ideas and thoughts.

The sampling method used in this study is purposive sampling. Purposive sampling, also referred to as judgment, selective or subjective sampling is a non-probability sampling method that is characterised by a deliberate effort to gain representative samples by including groups or typical areas in a sample. With this method, the researcher relies on his/her own judgement to select sample group members. In this study, the participants were recruited from all ministries in the Brunei government. The majority of the participants have experience working in various ministries in the Brunei government, either through secondment or job rotation. This was particularly important, as these participants were able to offer a range of perspectives based on their experiences with each ministry, in positions that were serving different roles within the public sector.

Analysis

The analytic process of this study revealed a set of logically-related themes, subthemes, and categories of description that capture leaders' perceptions of public sector leadership. Descriptions of these themes and subthemes are presented in the "Findings" section. Thematic analysis is historically a conventional practice in qualitative research which involves searching through data to identify recurrent issues and patterns of living and/or behaviour (Creswell, 2003). It is commonly used by researchers and in particular is suitable for analysing and reporting personal qualitative interview data (Mutch, 2005). The complete analysis generated codes, categories, subthemes and themes aimed at offering insights and answers to the research questions. The analysis of the data revealed that codes reflected words or phrases that appear to have been frequently associated with the phenomenon. For example, "face preservation". In terms of categories, it refers to the grouping imposed on the coded segments, in order to reduce the number of different pieces of data in my analysis. For example: "activities related to the public sector leadership", covering those coded as support for followers (positive activities), empowering followers (positive activities), lack of support for promotion (negative activities), risk-adverse approach to assuming leadership responsibilities (negative activities). The positive activities denote activities discussed by leaders, as what they experienced to be necessary or important for public sector leadership. Alternatively, the negative activities categorise activities that frustrate the middle and senior level leaders. Overall, the final themes of this study, as based on the views of the participants, revealed that there are three significant influences on public sector leadership.

Confidentiality

The participants were assured of their right to remain anonymous, to ensure participants' identities cannot be identified or linked to the actual data they offer. Participants' names were replaced with pseudonyms to protect their identities. Providing anonymity and confidentiality is a researcher's way of protecting the participants' privacy. Prominent leaders of the public sector were unlikely to reveal much of their personal experience if, in doing so, they also exposed others, or rendered themselves vulnerable to criticism or attack. Brunei is a very small country; the risk of revealing too much in this study would leave the interviewees exposed and in an unfavourable situation. When information about participants is used in ways that participants are not aware of, privacy is breached and violated. Therefore, ensuring anonymity and confidentiality is an extremely important and sensitive ethical measure that safeguards the participants' privacy and therefore also his or her psychological security. Therefore, the quotes presented from the in-depth interviews, will be given pseudonym name to still reveal the gender of the speaker. As a disclaimer, this is a non-binding document where the quotes and views expressed in this article are those of the participants. The views do not necessarily represent the official stance of the author.

FINDINGS

The findings of this study have revealed that there are four key Bruneian cultural values that have an impact on the actions and behaviours of leaders. The four cultural values of: *awar galat*, *menjaga air mua*, *menjaga periuk nasi* and *tua menuakan*.

Awar Galat

This Bruneian cultural value signifies shame (awar) associated with the fear of exposing one's defective self to others and the act of humility (galat) or keeping to oneself in the background, which is associated with the respect or reverence one has for others. The expressed frustration by senior level and middle level leaders infers varying influence of *awar galat* on public sector leadership. The definition of reverence includes the combination of two emotions: respect and shame. Respect is for other people and shame is over one's own shortcomings. According to all the senior level leaders in this study, they inferred that the culture of respect and politeness is a mechanism that influences the Bruneians' way of thinking and acting. Therefore, *galat-menggalati* refers to the act of both the self and others being self-effacing. One of the accounts on how the cultural feature of *awar galat* could influence the behaviour and actions of leaders is recounted by Jane, a senior level leader. She has understood that her subordinates are *awar galat* when they are reluctant to share valuable information with her for fear of "appearing rude" or "bold" or "boasting" to her. In this sense, it appears that she believes her subordinates prefer to keep themselves in the background. The subordinate's self-effacing behaviour appears to frustrate other senior level leaders such as Adam. It seems the overdependence of subordinates on their superior makes it difficult to empower them or for them to be empowered.

Similarly, other leaders felt that certain behaviour that was interpreted to be important for public sector leadership, like being proactive, does not come naturally to Bruneians who are *awar galat*.

…You know being vocal and being too proactive is not a natural thing for us. It is just hard to encourage that behaviour. Yes, it is a great thing. To be able to make that the norm but you see we're supposed to have togetherness and if you act individually, it just looks odd… (Sarah, Head of Division, Senior level)

The overdependence of subordinates on superiors, combined with the preoccupation for maintaining harmonious relationships, reinforces an autocratic style of leadership and decision making, with decisions being made with little consultation or explanation and with little input from lower-level employees. The above anecdotes seem to suggest that leaders often have a preoccupation to "self-regulate" their behaviour to the audience or the context in which they act. From the perspective of the middle level leaders, they established that they are having difficulties in expressing their ideas. They observed that if they are seen "to outdo their seniors" their input or ideas were eventually "ignored" or "dismissed". There is a feeling of resignation that things will never change. There is also a lack of openness in confronting and dealing jointly with an issue:

…I remember when I was under X, he would ask my opinion often, but after a while I sort of stopped doing it. You could tell X was feeling undermined. I think it is more of an ego thing you know; sometimes he questions why he didn't think of it first. I wanted to flatter him sometimes and let him think of the solutions first… (Noah, Economic Officer, Middle level)

The above quotation could be interpreted as Noah strategically negotiating his work environment; as were the other two officers. In other words, Noah's story could be interpreted as a personal conscious choice and not something that perhaps another middle level leader would do. The dominant view of the middle level leaders in this study, it is "less stressful" to just let the superiors have "their way" and to not "rock the boat". Arguably some respondents believe that this self-effacing behaviour is

not necessarily just due to the fear of offending or "upstaging" others, but it is also a sign of respect they have for their leaders. In other words, *awar galat* stems from *hormat* (respect) subordinates feel for their leaders and the acknowledgment that there is a difference in power. *Hormat* means the recognition of superior rank by means of the appropriate forms of etiquette. These values are not limited to power, authority, or even class strata. As the values of *hormat* are developed from the patronage relationship, it is common that respected people are not always obligated with power, authority, or high-class status. Therefore, the overdependence of subordinates on superiors, as reported in the present study, is indicative of high-power distance. For a senior level leader, Sofia felt that power distance has led her to lose insight into valuable information. Other behaviours indicative of high-power distance can be seen where centralisation was carried to quite extraordinary lengths and appeared to be regarded, in itself, as conferring special value on anything that was subjected to it. For example, several participants believed that the lack of speed or the delays in implementing or completing projects are due to the cultural protocols of lettering and applications. With regards to the successful implementation of a project, several respondents stated that projects are often delayed and some eventually get abandoned. When these leaders were invited to discuss the cause of the delay or abandonment, they had varying responses as to why it happens. These reasons include "leaders spearheading such projects were moved to different ministries or departments" while the majority of leaders mentioned that "to surpass cultural protocol and red-tape takes a very long time". From the middle level leaders' perspective, they interpreted *awar galat* as the act of "shying away from responsibilities" as a negative behaviour but also felt in remaining passive they do not "rock the boat" and maintain harmonious relationships with others. Middle level leaders also suggested that, on top of maintaining harmonious relationships, they understood that assuming the leadership role was "a heavy responsibility that needed to be done right". Alternatively, some middle level leaders believe that being *awar galat* is how Bruneians were raised to behave since childhood. Moreover, they believe Bruneians are encouraged to observe the environment and audience where they are, in order to behave accordingly. Middle level leaders tend to be overcautious and inflexible. Thus, collaborative problem solving and decision making rarely occur, and middle level leaders' concerns focus on coping with and preserving the status quo, rather than attempting to change it. Over-caution and lack of decisiveness and creativity in problem solving are indicative of low levels of individualism, as reported in the present study.

Menjaga Air Mua

This Bruneian cultural value means face saving emphasises the importance of not disgracing others. This might include respecting others' opinions and not publicly embarrassing or offending them, either in their absence or in public. *Menjaga air mua* emphasises the importance of respecting others' opinions and not publicly embarrassing or offending others. This cultural value is different from *awar galat* where the focus is not simply just respecting others but the primary focus to avoid disgracing someone in public, either in their presence or in their absence. Senior level officers interpreted this behaviour of "protecting the leader's face" as resulting in subordinates being unable or unwilling to contribute to the discussion, as well as not being brave enough to assume leadership roles. Additionally, the cultural value of *menjaga air mua* has also led subordinates to avoid revealing the truth and, as a result, made it difficult to resolve issues and improve transparency. There appeared to be less risk taking by subordinates to participate in decision making and a strong feeling that conflict or disgracing others in organisations is undesirable and to be avoided wherever and whenever possible. Formal criticism of individuals is regarded as unprofessional and destructive. Therefore, meetings rarely confront people problems. Avoidance behaviour of this type is widely practiced and accepted, and there is a conspiracy of silence when it comes to attributing problems to particular individuals. Instead, technical or impersonal explanations are sought. There is also an avoidance of data gathering on the causes of problems. Expertise is under utilised, decisions are unilateral and chronic interpersonal conflicts are unlikely to be resolved. Hank (Relations Officer, Middle level) posits that the cultural

aspect of *menjaga air mua* explains why "Bruneians are very much reserved in their approach and in their opinion". They tend to "put things in a nice way". As a result, they appear to be or actually are "lenient". Nana (Finance Officer, Middle level) concurred, "Don't offend others. That's a sin". Nana further added, "Bruneians tend to be lenient" and are more empathetic to one another where mistakes are downplayed. As she observed when one makes a mistake, the response will be "Oh it is okay. Don't worry. Try Again". Sofia (Senior level) said that the way she corrects her subordinate's mistake is by *tagur-tagur* (gentle scolding) and in a group setting not individually. Interestingly, compliments and criticisms are ordinarily directed at the group, instead of individual(s). The reason is that it may be seen as an attack against someone, causing him or her to lose face (*hilang muarah*), and this could lead to withdrawal or much resentment. This brings to mind that indeed there may be low or underperformers who, in a team situation, then become free-riders. Normally, the leader would have to talk to such subordinate(s) individually and privately in a polite 'dancing' (indirect and tactful) way so as to save his or her face and get everyone to contribute and perform well.

Menjaga Periuk Nasi

This Bruneian cultural value is the self-preserving behaviour that emphasises isolationism for fear of rocking the boat or ruffling feathers and fear of being removed from the in-group which could in turn jeopardise one's position in the organisation. Literally translated as menjaga (protecting) periuk nasi (rice bowl), this is an analogy that reflects on how the Malays consider rice as a source of sustenance and survival. This is a cultural value of the Malays that is frequently referenced by leaders in this study. It is in a way similar to "minding one's own business" in the pursuit of preserving one's livelihood or to that effect. Subordinates refrain from challenging those in position of power or their superiors for "fear of negatively affecting their income or livelihood" or "being outcast from the in-group". The in-group — whether extended family, clan, or organisation — protects the interests of its members and, in turn, expects the members' permanent loyalty. As such, several senior level leaders did not agree that the reason they were withholding information earlier was because they were "protecting their leader's face". Instead the leaders concluded that such self-preserving behaviour were more to ensure that they do not "rock the boat" with their superiors and to "remain in their good graces". Whilst maintaining harmony is generally considered positive behaviour, the self-preserving act of withholding information for personal reasons is not. These senior level leaders believed it was "selfish" behaviour and "unjust". For that reason, if problems are brought into the open, they are dealt with at arm's length. Wherever possible, face-to-face confrontation is avoided. Collaborative problem solving and decision making rarely occur and, as pointed out above, people's concerns focus on coping with the status quo rather than attempting to change it. Hence, disowning of problems and an abdication of responsibility for the search for solutions, were probably due to the middle level leaders' fear of being outcast from the in-group. Conversely, senior level leaders assumed their subordinates are just blissfully unaware of the existence of problems, especially since problem solving is engaged in only half-heartedly. There is a feeling of resignation that things will never change and it is not necessary for people to rock the boat, so why bother? In order to maintain a harmonious community, the senior level concluded that the subordinates will not jeopardise their livelihood or their sustenance by pointing out the mistakes of others, even if as a result it means that "justice will not prevail". This appears to be at odds to the teachings of Islam, where Islam encourages justice; the desire for 'self-preservation at all costs' appears to dominate and persist in the public sector setting:

…I'm not ready to fail. Once you fail, it will be hard to build up the credibility. That's the harsh truth. You are just a failure to them. I want to progress but I also don't want to step on any toes. I still have a long way to go… (Jack, Health Officer, Middle level)

The above quote is a perfect example of *double binding*, an emotionally distressing dilemma in communication in which an individual (or group) receives two or more conflicting messages, and

one message negates the other (Bateson et al., 1956). Highly individualistic approaches to problem solving predominate; there is little teamwork. Other people are regarded as potential threats or sources of problems rather than sources of help.

Tua Menuakan

This Bruneian cultural value is essentially similar to the concept of filial piety, which requires one to defer to parents for advice based on their knowledge, experience and wisdom. In the workplace, the cultural value of tua menuakan focuses on the pro-seniority culture or a culture that places great importance on the wisdom of elder employees over the knowledge of younger employees. One of the frustrations felt by senior level leaders was the difficulty of promoting younger, more qualified subordinates to leadership positions due to the "pro-seniority" culture or the culture of *tua-menuakan*. The findings suggest that the nature of Bruneian relationships within an organisational context is strongly influenced by the nature of Bruneian relationships in a family context. One of the guiding principles for interpersonal relationships within a family context is that of *tua-menuakan*, which translates as respect for elders. This principle is manifested as a strong respect for the father, and permeates family boundaries out into broader society, which promotes the culture of kinship. In larger social and organisational contexts it can be seen in expressions of respect for the contextually appropriate 'father figure', which could be a superior or leader, as epitomised by His Majesty the Sultan. Essentially this principle is a form of Bruneian paternalism and patronage, which demands obedience and respect within Bruneian society. The values of *tua menuakan,* which reflect the patronage relationship beyond family relationships, are embodied within the values of what the participants refer to as "*hormat*". Being older and generally known as a generous or charitable man in society, can also earn an individual *hormat* from others. Several middle level leaders have agreed that there seems to be a mismatch of expertise in the leadership roles within their organisation. They cited that a few of these leaders were mostly appointed based on what they believe to be their "good reputation" and "social standings" in society. In other words, they were appointed because they were respected or *"dihormati"* i.e. revered by society. According to Kershaw (2001) Brunei society is extremely hierarchical, with the Sultan and immediate members of the royal family at the apex.

The participants of this study inferred that the outcome of the "lack of job-fit" could result in leaders not performing in their new roles. Karim (Administrative Officer, Middle level) affirmed that assuming leadership roles would be increasingly meritocratic over time, but acknowledges that due to the culture of respect for 'seniors' or respect for seniority, "at present, seniority, in terms of duration of service, still prevails over youth and intelligence". However, Bob (Permanent Secretary, Senior level leader) believes that "the way we Bruneians are supportive of *MIB*, we also have to be aware of meritocracy'. Shane (Administrative Officer, Middle level) is resigned to the prevailing assumption that a senior may still be preferred to a younger star, by virtue of known track record and predictability. From the data, with regards to promotion and selection processes, due to the culture of kinship, middle level leaders are of the view that "favouritism", "nepotism" and "cronyism" "handicap the opportunities of younger more academically qualified employees". Again, this reported frustration by middle level leaders appears to be contrary to the societal influence of leadership that indicated the prominence of leading according to the Islamic teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). In his teachings, leaders were cited to have the desire to emulate the four cardinal virtues which are wisdom, courage, temperance and justice. Even though leaders cited Islam as a guide to how they understand leadership, as they enter the work place, they have observed that the culture of kinship can be interpreted to cause "cronyism" and "favouritism".

The middle level leaders expressed displeasure with certain senior level leaders who have "abused" the good culture of kinship. They observed that "cronyism has allowed the wrong people for the role to assume a leadership position, as opposed to more qualified leaders". Again, this is contrary to the Islamic teaching of fairness and equity. Though leaders appear to want to emulate the admirable behaviour of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH); in reality, it has been reported that there

are challenges to exercising these behaviours, particularly when social values have priority. As the leadership process involves developing and supporting followers, cronyism and favouritism appear to have an impact on leadership in the public sector. These observations reveal there is a perception or feeling of unfairness among the middle level, which in itself is a significant organisational issue. When discussing the culture of kinship, several middle level leaders further observed its impact on the "effectiveness" of the appraisal system. From the findings, there were varying interpretations as to why they felt the appraisal system in the public sector was deemed "ineffective". By contrast, there are leaders who interpreted the "ineffectiveness" of the appraisal system to be caused by the culture of "looking out for the less fortunate" and these leaders are of the view that "there is no loss in giving a helping hand". The findings reveal that there are various reasons why leaders have reported to give "inaccurate" or "dishonest" evaluation of their subordinates in the performance appraisal. To some, the societal influence of being a "concerned" and "generous" or "charitable" leader could be the reason for this dishonesty. On the other hand, other leaders do not share the same ideals of being generous, as it left these middle level leaders to feel "unhappy" with the cronyism, nepotism and favouritism they perceived to be associated with their superiors.

Based on the findings, the evident frustrations of senior and middle level public sector leaders appear to suggest there are several organisational areas ready for, and needing of, improvement in terms of their efficiency and effectiveness. The participants did not all explicitly use the criteria of efficiency and inefficiency, but they indicated they understood the challenges they faced were due to the possible system's inefficiency. They have however used other criteria such as unfairness and injustice with regards to promotion, resolution of conflict and performance appraisal (such as favouritism, nepotism, patronage). There is no question that the participants in this study believed the traditional Malay cultural mores so evident in Brunei society had helped to create an unfair and dissatisfying work environment. Certainly, the observational and interview data gathered in the present study suggest that *menjaga air mua*, *awar galat*, *tua-menuakan* and *menjaga periuk nasi* are deeply rooted in the Malay collective subconscious. Similarly, culture appear to have negatively impacted on the culture of professionalism in the public sector. Such negative impact seems paradoxical to the teachings of Islam, which encourage leaders to practice fairness, equality and professionalism. On the contrary, in this study, participants infer with the existence of favouritism, cronyism and nepotism such Islamic ideals are not practiced widely nor are they endorsed by superiors in the public sector. According to the findings of this study the Bruneian values, which act to minimise conflict, have further implications relating to organisational change and performance appraisal processes. The management of change requires people to express dissatisfaction with the status quo, whereas Bruneian values appear to encourage people to be cautious, to fear failure and to accept the status quo. According to the participants in this study, Bruneians hold the value of *menjaga air mua* in most situations, whenever organisations need their employees to be proactive and exercise leadership; individuals will often place themselves as a blockade or barrier to change. They appear to accept what they have, as it has been relatively satisfactory up until now.

DISCUSSION

The findings suggest a 'battle' over professionalism or new public management rationalities versus traditionalism. The findings of this study corroborates with findings of other studies on Brunei such as Blunt (1988) and Low, Zain, & Ang (2012) that suggest national culture has a significant impact on the understanding of leadership. This study challenges Barry's (2009) study that found conceptual analysis and re-analysis of empirical evidence does not support the strong role of national culture, on average, as a constraint on organisational culture. However, Barry (2009) did state that further research is needed to identify when national culture constrains organisational culture and when it is less likely to do so.

This study, illuminates the possible constraining influence of culture on public sector leadership in terms of unequal distribution of power leading to (1) difficulty of leaders to promote subordinates, (2) difficulty of leaders and subordinates to express dissatisfaction and collaborate in decision-making, (3) risk-adverse behaviour and finger pointing, (4) disowning of problems and an abdication of responsibility for the search of solutions. Correspondingly, the findings of this study reveal that there is an intricate balance between maintaining harmony and avoiding conflict. An imbalance arises when the act of maintaining harmony comes at the expense of transparency in processes and decisions made by leaders. This supports various other studies which theory and research describes East Asian cultures as valuing harmony and interdependence (see Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003; Ting-Toomey, Oetzel, & Yee-Jung, 2001; Lim et al., 2012; Musa & Idris, 2020a, 2020b; Pehin Dato Musa et al., 2020). This study suggests that culture and religion can limit the ways we can be transparent.

In terms of cultural factors, the apparent tension experienced by leaders to minimise conflict as well as maintain harmonious relationship and abiding to their Islamic religious belief illustrates the struggles or hindrances leaders experienced in enacting leadership in the public sector. These tensions were evident in certain leadership processes such as supporting followers for promotion and providing a truthful appraisal of their followers' performance. Issues such as favouritism, nepotism and cronyism were highlighted to contribute to the potential systemic weaknesses of implementing strategies, policies and work processes. Furthermore, this study builds on that debate that it is unrealistic to account for all behaviours into neat dichotomies. For instance, one of the implications of the findings in this study is in Brunei's individualistic cultural value of "*menjaga periuk nasi*" (or preserving one's livelihood or income) even when sacrificing one's position meant that issues will be resolved quicker and it would be benefiting more people. The self-preserving acts of many Bruneians are not synonymous to a collectivistic culture. From a methodological perspective, this research presents insights into the potential contributions of an interpretivist approach to the study of the impact of culture on leaders and leadership in organisational contexts. Culture is a very complex term and it is not as simple as Hofstede (see Fang, 2003; Jones, 2007; McSweeney, 2002) takes in his study. This study illustrates the limitations of leadership studies that ignore how and why cultures interact dynamically. Furthermore, Bryman (2004), in noting the dominance of quantitative approaches in the study of leadership, has advocated moving beyond questionnaire-based research, which is statistically analysed, to elicit dimensions of leadership behaviour. He argues that qualitative approaches enhance our understanding of leaders and leadership behaviour, particularly in relation to organisational change processes. In the light of this, this study was a qualitative, interview-based investigation of public sector leadership. This study addresses the gap identified by Bryman (2004) in relation to research on leadership, by adopting a qualitative approach which does not simply attempt to replicate quantitative research in identifying the cultural dimensions that impacts on public sector leadership, but rather focuses on the complex and dynamic nature of culture and other influences in a given context (such as public sector in Brunei) that give rise to certain outcomes.

This study contributes to the understanding of leadership in public sector organisations in two ways: first, as encouraged by Van Wart (2013) by exploring how leadership is understood and enacted in an under-explored public sector setting specifically an Islamic state like Brunei. Moreover, focusing on the influence of national culture specifically where there exist different levels of influence – both the national culture through kinship but also the teachings of Islam – which seems to have led to tensions in understanding of leadership and how leaders and followers behave and ultimately impact on the enactment of leadership. In this study, culture appears as an important tool in the enactment of leadership in dictating and correcting the behaviour and speech of leaders in accordance to the accepted expectations of their environment. This study supports the findings of a study by van der Wal and Demircioglu (2020) on public sector innovation in the Asia-Pacific region that examines a range of drivers and outcomes of innovation, including studies comparing Asia-Pacific countries and countries in the East and the West. Their study shows that public sector employees in the studied Asian countries all seek opportunities to innovate, whereas cultural norms and values either constrain or

enable innovative behaviour and affect the extent to which employees experience leadership support for displaying such behaviour. Particularly this study on Brunei illustrates how national culture can impact on the appointment, promotion process and decision-making process and accountability structures of the public sector. A narrow focus on individual without references to followers and context more broadly, may identify important qualities, however it reduces the ability to develop more generalisable findings or lessons for public leaders (Moynihan & Wallace Ingraham, 2004). An alternative analytical approach emphasises the external environment of the leader, offering insights in how to mould this environment to fit the leaders' agenda. The findings of this study also encourages researchers to take into consideration that public sector leadership is a multi-level phenomenon that particularly looks at the varying psychological and sociological dynamics of leadership experienced by leaders at different levels of the origination, where the multiple and often conflicting accountabilities that prevail upon public sector leaders necessitates greater training, support and skill. Zaccaro and Klimoski (2002) claims a situated approach that examines the contextualized influences on organisational leadership is more likely to produce accurate, defensible, and ultimately more successful models and midrange theories of this phenomenon.

This study supports this view and recognizes that dimensions of organisational structure, specifically hierarchical level, degree of differentiation in function, and place in organisational space, moderate the nature of public sector leadership as well as its antecedents and consequences. Even though hierarchies or structural characteristics of bureaucratic organisations are a common feature everywhere, in the case of Brunei the cultural influences may operate to inhibit or enhance their effectiveness. The research of House et al. (1997), as well as Project GLOBE (the Global Leadership and Organisational Behaviour Effectiveness Research Project) (House, Javidan, & Dorfman, 2001), reveals that the expectations of leaders, what they can do, and the status bestowed upon them by constituents vary considerably as a result of the cultural forces associated with the countries or region where they lead. This study supports various other studies which theory and research describes East Asian cultures as valuing harmony and interdependence (see Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003; Ting-Toomey, Oetzel, & Yee-Jung, 2001;). The findings of this study suggest that the concept of cultural influence is bi-directional. The findings of this study illustrated that, from a practical perspective, public sector leaders should recognise that numerous aspects of organisational culture, as well at the national culture, can have a strong impact on the leadership style and behaviour that are most appropriate to the situation. There is a growing awareness of need for a better understanding of the way in which leadership is enacted in various cultures and a need for an empirically grounded theory to explain differential leader behaviour and effectiveness across cultures' (Raffel et al., 2009).

CONCLUSION

The aim of this research was to explore the influence of national culture on the enactment of public sector leadership by specifically looking into the unique and unexplored context of the Brunei public sector. This study employs an interpretive approach, using qualitative research to understand the complex and subjective nature of the public sector leadership. This approach was selected because it is consistent with the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of the research. This is certainly in contrast to other previous studies, which predominantly used quantitative methods to explore the influence of culture using Hofstede's and the GLOBE project cultural dimensions. The findings provide insight into how public sector leadership is enacted and the plausible constraining influence that culture, religion and economy have on its enactment which was the overall aim of this research. This study has shown that not only does national culture have an impact on the enactment of public sector leadership; such an influence appears to be replicated and reproduced in various levels of Bruneian society. The national philosophy of the country, MIB (Malay Islamic Monarchy) also drives the way the public sector presents itself, and interacts with the public, because it is mirroring or reflecting the unique beautiful ideals and views that are enshrined in the national philosophy.

CONTRIBUTIONS OF THIS STUDY

The first contribution of this study is that research about leadership on the public sector in an Islamic rentier state is limited. While the literature on public sector leadership is growing and addressing interesting issues, there is limited literature that focuses on the influence of national culture on public sector leadership. Furthermore, this study also extends its focus into not only leaders at the apex of the organisation but also middle level leaders. This study extends Van Wart's (2003) definition of public sector leadership by highlighting three potential constraining influences on public sector leadership namely (1) ideological and political influence, (2) cultural influences and (3) economic influences.

FUTURE RESEARCH AGENDA

While theorising about the enactment of public sector leadership, it is important to consider cultural norms. The findings of this study also have important implications for private sector leaders migrating to public sector organisations specifically surrounding the issue of transparency and performance appraisal system. In various studies by Mau (2009, 2017, 2020) this study also illuminates the policy or managerial implications for future research agenda. Key breakthrough solutions for the public sector like those highlighted by Mau (2002), for example, mentioning for the human resource management (HRM) practices that could help in selecting, training and developing the right person for the leadership position who even with rigid structure of the public sector, the rules and regulations persistence, but with the charisma and ethics could have led to changes in work behaviour and bring about customer-orientation to the public sector employees to be more focused on their effective services to the clientele. Similar to the Canadian leadership competency framework there is a need for creating a customer-oriented culture that could be initiated by the charismatic leaders who would transform the workplace culture that fits with the impersonal and effective services for the public sector clientele as required and designed by the bureaucracy concept. Recently, Brunei has introduced a new Performance Management System which involves government officers and staff at all levels in Divisions One until Five, this is among the continuous measures of the Prime Minister's Office to further improve the performance based culture in the civil service. Globally, the introduction of an Eastern rentier state perspective in the West will allow broader theorisation and ultimately a better understanding of management and organisation theories in other parts of the world. This will have implications at the practical level. Bruneian leaders will be able to better articulate their views of leadership by using Bruneian concepts. In turn, Western leaders will be more aware of Bruneian ways of doing business and ultimately may need to modify or customise their business practices to consider Bruneian cultural values. Furthermore, the implications for practitioners are this study can offer insight into the influences of religion on work ethics and leadership practices.

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