

Leading With Legacy: Culturally Attuned Leadership Models in Brunei's Public Sector

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Abstract

This study investigates how culturally grounded leadership practices operate within Brunei Darussalam's public sector, examining the sophisticated integration of traditional values with modern governance imperatives. I employed an interpretivist qualitative approach, collecting empirical data through in-depth interviews with 32 government officers ranging from middle management to ministerial level. The research reveals how leadership frameworks rooted in cultural integrity are systematically operationalised through progressive recruitment and development initiatives, particularly the Executive Development Programme for Senior Government Officers (EDPSGO) and the Executive Development Programmes for Middle Management Officers (EDPMMO). Guided by a multidisciplinary lens integrating faith-based ethics, maqasid syariah, and Bruneian heritage, the analysis demonstrates the productive interplay between tradition and governance that characterises Brunei's distinctive administrative model. My findings highlight how ceremonial traditions, intergenerational mentorship, and narrative identity actively contribute to leadership ethos, creating a culturally embedded approach that enriches cross-cultural leadership scholarship. The study shows that Brunei's culturally attuned leadership model enhances recruitment equity, strengthens intercultural dialogue, and fosters policy resilience within Southeast Asia's evolving administrative landscape. By foregrounding Brunei's progressive legacy-driven governance model, this empirical case offers valuable insights for scholarship on cross-cultural leadership, Islamic management, and public administration.

Keywords: Brunei, cultural attunement, Islamic leadership, Malay Islamic Monarchy, public sector, Southeast Asia

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Introduction

Background and Rationale

Leadership theory has long been shaped by Western universalistic assumptions—models that privilege individualism, transactional rationality, and context-free competencies (Jackson & Parry, 2011; Zhang et al., 2012). Yet governance in many parts of the world operates through profoundly different cultural logics. This study offers a contextually grounded and culturally affirming perspective from Brunei Darussalam, where public sector leadership is enacted within the national philosophy of *Melayu Islam Beraja* (MIB)—an integrated framework combining Malay cultural heritage, Islamic ethics, and monarchy.

Rather than treating culture as a constraint or complication, this research positions Bruneian culture as an enabling foundation for ethical orientation, legitimacy, and continuity in governance. The core argument is straightforward: culture is not a barrier to effective governance—it is a strategic asset that sustains trust, continuity, and ethical accountability in Brunei's public institutions. MIB does not constrain leadership—it constitutes it.

The study builds on my earlier IGI Global article (Idris, 2021) and advances the discussion towards legacy-driven and culturally attuned leadership models. While that foundational work identified key cultural values influencing leadership enactment, this study goes further by demonstrating how these values can be harnessed as governance assets and how culturally attuned leadership contributes to institutional resilience and policy effectiveness. My subsequent research on human resource development in Brunei's halal industry (Idris, 2024a) and challenges in halal certification (Idris et al., 2024) has also informed my understanding of how training, development, and regulatory frameworks operate within Brunei's administrative context—insights that are equally applicable to understanding leadership development in the public sector.

Why Brunei? Why Now?

Brunei offers a particularly instructive case for examining culturally attuned leadership. This prosperous, oil-rich sultanate on Borneo's north-western coast represents a remarkable example of successful cultural synthesis, blending traditional Malay administration with Western bureaucratic structures inherited from British rule (Idris, 2021). The national philosophy of MIB explicitly embeds Islamic values within governance, creating a distinctive leadership environment that existing cross-cultural frameworks struggle to capture adequately. This cultural synthesis has enabled Brunei to maintain its cultural integrity while achieving significant development outcomes.

The limitations of etic approaches—those seeking universal leadership principles—have been well documented. Jackson and Parry (2011) argue persuasively for more emically-oriented research that captures culturally specific leadership understandings. Van der Wal and Demircioglu's (2020) comparative study reinforces this point, showing that while public sector employees across Asia seek innovation opportunities, cultural norms either constrain or enable such behaviour.

Islamic leadership presents a distinctive paradigm that is increasingly recognised for its contributions to ethical governance. The teachings of Islam emphasise justice (*adl*), consultation (*shura*), and community well-being (*maslahah*) as foundational leadership

principles (Abdullah, 2010). Brunei has been at the forefront of operationalising these principles within a modern public sector context. This study addresses the gap in research on Islamic organisational leadership by examining how Brunei integrates Islamic ethics with its cultural traditions.

Research Objectives

This study pursues three interconnected objectives:

1. **Cultural Shaping of Leadership:** To examine how Bruneian cultural values and Islamic ethics shape leadership enactment in the public sector, moving beyond competency frameworks towards a relational and moral understanding of governance practice.
2. **Embedded Legacy and Tradition:** To explore how legacy, tradition, and governance are embedded in leadership development and recruitment practices, and how intergenerational continuity is maintained across ministerial structures.
3. **Culturally Grounded Alternatives:** To contribute a culturally grounded alternative to context-free leadership models in public administration, enriching both emic theory and comparative governance scholarship in Southeast Asia.

These objectives inform my three research questions:

1. How do Bruneian public sector leaders conceptualise culturally attuned leadership, and how is this reflected in their practices?
2. What roles do ceremonial traditions, intergenerational mentorship, and narrative identity play in shaping leadership ethos?
3. How do culturally attuned leadership models enhance recruitment equity, strengthen intercultural dialogue, and foster policy resilience?

Significance and Contribution

The paper contributes to scholarship in several ways. It addresses the under-researched intersection of public sector leadership, national culture, and Islamic governance in Southeast Asia. It captures subjective experiences and meaning-making processes through interpretivist qualitative methods—something quantitative studies cannot accomplish (Bryman, 2004). It contributes to culturally situated leadership theories that challenge Western models while demonstrating the sophisticated alternatives available in non-Western contexts. And it offers practical insights for public sector reform internationally, particularly in designing culturally attuned leadership development programmes.

Literature Review

Public Sector Leadership: Context and Distinctiveness

Public sector leadership has gained recognition as a distinct subfield over the past two decades (Mau, 2020). Unlike its private sector counterpart, public sector leadership operates within a unique environment shaped by multiple accountabilities, political oversight, bureaucratic structures, and the pursuit of public value (Van Wart, 2003, 2013). Rosenbach (2003) defines leadership as a process where leaders and followers engage in reciprocal influence to achieve shared purpose.

The distinctiveness of public sector leadership is increasingly recognised as a source of strength rather than limitation. While public sector leaders may have different discretion parameters than private sector leaders, their accountability frameworks enable more transparent and equitable governance (Hooijberg & Choi, 2001). Similarly, the structural characteristics of public sector organisations, while sometimes perceived as constraining, provide essential stability and fairness in service delivery (DeHart-Davis & Pandey, 2005).

What is often overlooked is how these characteristics are culturally mediated and enhanced. Bureaucratic structures are experienced, interpreted, and navigated differently across cultural contexts, with each context offering distinctive advantages (Zhang et al., 2012). Brunei demonstrates how cultural values can enrich public sector leadership, adding dimensions of service, legacy, and community that transcend transactional approaches (Idris, 2021).

Cultural Dimensions and Leadership: Beyond the Dominant Paradigm

Hofstede's (1980, 2001) cultural dimensions framework and the GLOBE Project (House et al., 2004) have dominated cross-cultural leadership research. While these studies have contributed valuable insights, they have significant limitations, particularly in capturing the dynamic, complex nature of culture (Fang, 2003; McSweeney, 2002).

Most significantly, these frameworks have not adequately captured the richness of Islamic values in leadership. The GLOBE Project included few Muslim-majority countries. Hofstede's framework developed primarily from Western and East Asian data. The result, as Cheng et al. (2009) note, has been inadequate understanding of sophisticated non-Western cultural concepts. This study extends Idris's (2021) work by demonstrating how Brunei's cultural configuration represents not a deviation from universal norms but a distinct and valuable approach to leadership that offers lessons for global practice.

Islamic Leadership: A Progressive Faith-Based Model

Islamic leadership presents a sophisticated paradigm integrating faith, ethics, and governance. The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) taught that leadership is fundamentally a trust (*amanah*) and a responsibility to be accounted for before God (Abdullah, 2010). Four cardinal virtues—wisdom (*hikmah*), courage (*shaja'ah*), temperance (*iffah*), and justice (*adl*)—provide a comprehensive ethical framework (Abdullah, 2013).

The maqasid shariah framework identifies five higher objectives of Islamic law: protection of religion, life, intellect, lineage, and property (Kamali, 2008). For public sector leadership, this translates into governance protecting these fundamental values while promoting human flourishing and social justice—objectives increasingly recognised in international development discourse. This framework has also been applied effectively in other sectors, including Brunei's halal industry where maqasid shariah principles guide regulatory and training frameworks (Idris, 2024a).

The concept of *shura* (consultation) is particularly significant, requiring leaders to engage in collective decision-making and consider diverse perspectives (Ali, 2010). This resonates with contemporary participation and inclusion theories, offering a faith-based foundation for democratic governance principles.

In Brunei, these Islamic principles integrate thoughtfully with Malay cultural values and monarchy through MIB. This syncretic approach has created a distinctive leadership environment where religious, cultural, and political values reinforce each other (Kershaw, 2001; Othman, 2018). As Idris (2021) found, this integration creates both opportunities and constructive tensions that drive continuous improvement in public sector leadership.

Bruneian Cultural Values: Foundations of Ethical Leadership

Previous research identifies four key Bruneian cultural values that, when consciously integrated, form a coherent cultural ecosystem balancing harmony, responsibility, and moral accountability in leadership enactment (Idris, 2021):

1. **Awar Galat** – Principled humility and respect that safeguard social harmony. This construct functions as an ethical brake on the abuse of authority, encouraging leaders to remain accountable, self-aware, and responsive to those they serve. While sometimes perceived as constraining proactive communication, this value actually fosters thoughtful, considered leadership that prioritises collective harmony over individual ambition (Idris, 2021).
2. **Menjaga Air Mua** – Dignity-preserving leadership through discretion and mutual respect. Leaders navigate sensitive decisions in ways that protect the face and honour of all parties, sustaining relational trust across hierarchical boundaries. This value promotes civility, conflict avoidance, and the preservation of positive working relationships, contributing to organisational stability and employee wellbeing (Idris, 2021).
3. **Menjaga Periuk Nasi** – Responsibility towards collective and personal sustenance. Leadership is understood as stewardship—a duty to protect livelihoods, ensure welfare, and uphold the conditions for communal flourishing. This value encourages stability and loyalty, reducing the disruptive turnover that can undermine organisational effectiveness (Idris, 2021).
4. **Tua Menuakan** – Intergenerational wisdom and continuity in leadership development. Senior leaders carry an obligation to mentor, transmit values, and prepare the next generation—ensuring institutional memory endures beyond individual tenure. This value ensures that wisdom and experience are valued in organisational decision-making (Idris, 2021).

These cultural values, while sometimes creating constructive tensions with purely meritocratic approaches, represent distinctive strengths of Brunei's governance model. Brunei has been actively working to balance these traditional values with contemporary professional standards, creating a unique synthesis that other nations can learn from.

Leadership Development Programmes in Brunei

Brunei has invested significantly in leadership development through structured programmes designed to cultivate culturally attuned leadership capacity. The Executive Development Programme for Senior Government Officers (EDPSGO) and the Executive Development Programmes for Middle Management Officers (EDPMMO) represent flagship initiatives in this regard (Idris, 2021). These programmes are designed to:

- Develop leadership competencies aligned with MIB principles
- Enhance understanding of Islamic ethics in governance
- Build cultural intelligence and intercultural dialogue capabilities
- Foster intergenerational mentorship and succession planning

- Strengthen policy formulation and implementation skills

My earlier research on training and motivation practices in Brunei's halal industry (Hjh Siti et al., 2021; Idris, 2024a) demonstrates that structured training programmes are essential for workforce development and that the effectiveness of such programmes depends on proper design, implementation, and ongoing evaluation. Comparative studies of halal education across different national contexts (Idris, 2024b) further reveal how cultural and institutional factors shape training effectiveness, offering valuable insights for leadership development design. The same principles apply to leadership development in the public sector—training must be culturally attuned, practically relevant, and continuously improved.

Cultural Attunement: A Distinctive Leadership Model

“Cultural attunement” extends beyond mere cultural awareness to involve the active integration of cultural values, traditions, and practices into leadership frameworks (Schedlitzki & Edwards, 2014). Culturally attuned leadership recognises that effective leadership practices must develop from within available cultural resources rather than being imported wholesale.

This perspective offers an alternative to the assumptions underlying much leadership development literature, which often treats Western “best practices” as universally applicable. Culturally attuned leadership begins with the premise that leadership is fundamentally about meaning-making (Jackson & Parry, 2011), with cultural values providing the interpretive framework through which meaning is constructed.

In Islamic contexts, cultural attunement requires thoughtful integration of faith-based ethics with local cultural traditions. This creates constructive tensions that drive innovation and adaptation. Brunei exemplifies how such integration can produce leadership models both locally resonant and globally relevant, offering lessons for other nations seeking to balance tradition with modernity. The development of halal education and training frameworks in Brunei (Idris, 2024a; Idris et al., 2024), alongside comparative analyses of halal education approaches across Brunei, Malaysia and Japan (Idris, 2024b), similarly demonstrates how cultural and religious values can be integrated into professional development, providing a model that could inform leadership development practices.

Methodology

Research Philosophy and Approach

I adopted an interpretivist qualitative research paradigm, privileging meaning, context, and participant perspective over statistical generalisation (Bryman, 2004). Interpretivism suits culturally attuned leadership examination, as it allows exploration of subjective experiences, cultural meanings, and context-specific understandings (Zhang et al., 2012).

My qualitative approach responds to calls for more context-sensitive leadership research moving beyond questionnaire-based, statistically-analysed behaviour dimensions (Bryman, 2004). Quantitative descriptions often fail to capture the deeper structures and dynamism of leadership phenomena (Parry et al., 2014). This approach aligns with Idris's (2021) methodological framework.

Research Design

I adopted a case study design focusing on Brunei Darussalam's public sector as an instrumental case for examining culturally attuned leadership (Stake, 1995). The public sector was selected for its centrality in implementing national development goals and its explicit embrace of MIB as guiding philosophy. This design enabled in-depth investigation of how cultural values are operationalised in leadership practices, while identifying themes and patterns potentially transferable to other contexts.

Data Collection

Semi-structured Interviews

I collected data through semi-structured interviews with 32 government officers from twelve ministries, representing middle-level (Division II) and senior-level (Division I) positions. The sample included leaders from diverse roles: a Minister, Deputy Minister, Permanent Secretary, Directors, high-ranking uniformed officials, and various public sector leaders. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling, with referrals from “gatekeepers”—individuals with access to the target population.

Interviews encouraged participants to share experiences, perceptions, and understandings of culturally attuned leadership. My interview guide addressed:

- Understanding of leadership in the Brunei context
- Role of cultural values in daily leadership practices
- Experiences with recruitment, selection, and promotion
- Influence of Islamic teachings on leadership behaviour
- Challenges and opportunities in culturally attuned leadership

Document Analysis

I analysed relevant documents including ministry annual reports, leadership development programme materials (including EDPSGO and EDPMMO curricula), and policy documents, enabling triangulation of interview findings and providing context for understanding formal frameworks within which leadership is enacted. This approach mirrors the document analysis methodology I employed in examining halal certification processes (Idris et al., 2024) and human resource development frameworks (Idris, 2024a).

Participants

The 32 participants represented diverse experiences and positions. All held substantive leadership roles with supervisory responsibilities. They included:

- 3 participants at ministerial level
- 5 participants at permanent secretary/director level
- 8 participants at deputy director level
- 16 participants at middle management level

Approximately 90% of participants were educated in Western countries, offering unique perspectives on intersecting Western and Bruneian leadership influences. All had experience working in multiple ministries through secondment or job rotation, offering diverse organisational perspectives. This sampling strategy mirrors Idris (2021).

Data Analysis

I employed thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006), involving several phases: familiarisation with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report.

My coding process was both inductive and deductive. Inductive codes emerged from participants' accounts; deductive codes were informed by my theoretical framework (cultural values, Islamic ethics, leadership models). Initial coding generated 157 codes, organised into categories, subthemes, and ultimately overarching themes. This analytical approach extends Idris's (2021) framework.

Ethical Considerations

Given Brunei's small population and the sensitivity of leadership issues, I paid significant attention to ethical considerations. Participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality, with names replaced by pseudonyms. Brunei's small size required particular care to avoid revealing identifiable information. Participants received information sheets and consent forms; only those providing signed consent were included.

Ensuring anonymity was not just an ethical imperative but a methodological necessity for generating authentic responses, as emphasised by Idris (2021). The study was conducted with the full cooperation and support of relevant government authorities, facilitated through appropriate gatekeepers who provided access to participants while ensuring the research remained independent and academically rigorous.

Conceptual Framework

The Integrated Framework: Leading With Legacy

This study is guided by an integrated conceptual framework that illustrates how Brunei's national philosophy constitutes, rather than merely contextualises, public sector leadership. The framework synthesises three intersecting bodies of scholarship to produce a holistic understanding of leadership in Brunei's public sector:

1. **Bruneian Cultural Heritage:** Emphasis on relationality, harmony, and respect as foundational values that structure interpersonal and institutional dynamics. These are not peripheral customs—they are the grammar of governance.
2. **Islamic Leadership Ethics and Maqasid Shariah:** Grounded in the principles of justice (*adl*), trust (*amanah*), and the public good (*maslaha*). Maqasid Shariah provides an ethical governance framework that aligns institutional purpose with moral responsibility. This framework has been effectively applied in other sectors of Brunei's economy, particularly the halal industry where it guides regulatory and training frameworks (Idris, 2024a; Idris et al., 2024).
3. **Public Sector Leadership and Governance:** Drawing on international scholarship in public administration, institutional theory, and leadership development to situate Bruneian practices within broader comparative governance debates.

The framework demonstrates that MIB constitutes a coherent, ethically sophisticated, and practically effective leadership tradition. The model of *Leading with Legacy* is not nostalgic—

it is forward-looking, offering Brunei's public sector a culturally affirming foundation for institutional renewal, equitable recruitment, and long-term policy resilience.

Findings

Leadership as Moral-Relational Practice

Participants overwhelmingly conceptualised leadership as a moral-relational practice, grounded in social responsibility and Islamic ethics rather than purely managerial or transactional logics. Leadership is understood as service and trust to be passed to future generations—a perspective that prioritises collective well-being over individual achievement.

Leadership in Brunei is about serving the country, not your own personal agendas. We are entrusted with a legacy from our predecessors, and we must ensure that we leave something better for those who come after us. (Bob, Permanent Secretary)

This resonates with Islamic teachings on leadership as *amanah* (trust) and the Malay concept of *berkhidmat* (service). His Majesty Sultan Haji Hassanal Bolkiah consistently emphasises this legacy-oriented leadership, urging leaders to “work with dedication and do not deviate from this goal” (Hazair, 2018).

Ethics at the Core

Participants described leadership as fundamentally ethical, with Islamic values providing the moral compass for decision-making. The MIB philosophy emerged as a central organising framework:

MIB is our compass. It tells us who we are and what we stand for. When we face difficult decisions, we come back to MIB—how would a Malay Muslim leader behave? How would His Majesty expect us to handle this? (Sofia, Senior Level Leader)

Leaders described navigating tensions between leadership ideals and everyday practice as part of a dynamic, evolving system engaged in continuous improvement:

We are taught to lead with justice and fairness. And we are making progress. Each generation improves on the last. We are not perfect, but we are moving in the right direction. (Karim, Administrative Officer, Middle Level)

The emphasis on continuous improvement in leadership practice mirrors findings from my research on training and development in Brunei's halal industry (Idris, 2024a), which demonstrated that structured training programmes, when properly designed and implemented, contribute significantly to workforce quality and organisational effectiveness.

Ceremonial Traditions and Symbolic Legitimacy

Ceremonial traditions and symbolic practices emerged as significant features of culturally attuned leadership, reinforcing legitimacy, continuity, and public trust. These function as governance mechanisms rather than mere formality.

Participants described various rituals and formal practices strengthening leadership authority:

- Annual ceremonies and events such as Royal Birthday celebrations and National Day ceremonies, reinforcing shared values and national unity
- Opening ceremonies for new initiatives where speeches and symbolic acts establish leadership direction and purpose
- Formal meetings and briefings with protocol reflecting respect and organisational order
- Cultural performances and displays communicating cultural identity and national pride

“When you participate in these ceremonies, you show that you respect our culture and our way of doing things. It builds trust. People see you as someone who understands and values Brunei traditions” (Jane, Senior Level Leader).

Intergenerational Mentorship and Succession

Intergenerational mentorship shapes leadership identity across generations, with *Tua Menuakan* operating as a structured, culturally sanctioned form of leadership succession. This practice enables effective knowledge transfer and leadership development:

I learned leadership not from a book or a course. I learned it from watching my father and my teachers. They showed me how a leader should behave, how to treat people with respect, how to make decisions with fairness. (Nana, Finance Officer, Middle Level)

Role modeling was identified as a primary mechanism for transmitting leadership values:

I had a leader once who was very fair and always listened to his staff. Everyone respected him, even though he was strict. I tried to be like him. He showed me what good leadership looks like. (Noah, Economic Officer, Middle Level)

The structured programmes—EDPSGO and EDPMMO—were identified as crucial vehicles for formalising intergenerational mentorship and leadership succession. Participants described how these programmes facilitate the transmission of cultural values alongside professional competencies, creating a comprehensive leadership development ecosystem. This aligns with findings from my research on training and motivation practices, which demonstrated that structured programmes are essential for effective workforce development (Hjh Siti et al., 2021; Idris, 2024a).

Culturally Attuned Practices and Positive Outcomes

When consciously integrated, culturally attuned leadership enables:

- **Fairer recruitment and development practices** – Cultural awareness and intelligence enable more informed and equitable decision-making
- **Stronger intercultural dialogue within ministries** – Cultural competence enables relationship-building across boundaries
- **Long-term policy resilience and institutional memory** – Policies grounded in cultural values are perceived as legitimate and sustainable
- **Ethical governance aligned with public trust** – Leaders who demonstrate cultural competence command respect and enable effective reform

“When policies are grounded in our culture and values, people accept them more readily. They see them as legitimate. This makes our policies more sustainable” (Nana, Finance Officer, Middle Level).

The integration of cultural values into leadership development is similarly reflected in Brunei's halal education initiatives, where programmes at Universiti Islam Sultan Sharif Ali (UNISSA) and the Institute of Halal Research and Management (IHRAM) integrate Islamic principles with professional training (Idris, 2024a; Idris et al., 2024). Comparative research examining halal education systems across Brunei, Malaysia and Japan (Idris, 2024b) shows how different national contexts approach culturally attuned professional development, offering lessons for cross-sectoral and cross-cultural learning. This demonstrates a broader commitment across sectors to culturally attuned professional development.

Discussion

Theoretical Contributions: Enriching Leadership Scholarship

This study makes several theoretical contributions to cross-cultural leadership research, Islamic management, and public administration.

1. **Cross-Cultural Leadership Studies:** It provides empirical evidence from an under-researched context demonstrating culturally attuned leadership's distinctive strengths. It demonstrates emic approaches' value in capturing culturally specific leadership understandings. It contributes to debates about cultural dimensions frameworks' adequacy. This builds directly upon Idris's (2021) foundational work.
2. **Islamic Management Studies:** The study demonstrates how Islamic values integrate with cultural traditions to create effective leadership models. It shows Islamic leadership's distinctiveness as a positive contribution to governance, not just a cultural constraint. The integration of maqasid shariah principles into leadership frameworks parallels their application in halal industry development (Idris, 2024a; Idris et al., 2024), suggesting a consistent approach to Islamic governance across sectors.
3. **Public Administration Scholarship:** The study demonstrates cultural context's importance for understanding leadership in public sector organisations. It supports Van Wart's (2013) argument that historical, cultural, economic and political factors provide the context within which public sector leadership is enacted. It shows how cultural values can be harnessed as strengths rather than constraints.

Practical Implications

The study has practical implications for leadership development, recruitment, and policy implementation:

1. **Leadership Development:** Programmes should integrate cultural reflexivity, enabling officers to draw consciously on indigenous values in their practice. This means integrating cultural and religious values into curricula as foundational frameworks, promoting reflective practice, developing cultural intelligence, and addressing constructive tensions. The EDPSGO and EDPMO programmes already incorporate many of these elements, and findings suggest they could be further strengthened through more explicit integration of cultural values and reflective practice.

The success of structured training programmes in Brunei's halal industry (Hjh Siti et al., 2021; Idris, 2024a) offers lessons for leadership development. Key success factors include:

- Clear programme objectives aligned with organisational goals
 - Integration of practical and theoretical components
 - Ongoing evaluation and improvement
 - Collaboration between government, universities, and industry stakeholders
2. **Recruitment and Promotion:** Meritocracy and professionalism can be meaningfully aligned with cultural and Islamic values—these are complementary, not competing, frameworks. Processes should be transparent and criteria-based, balancing cultural fit with professional competence.
 3. **Policy Reform:** Policy reforms benefit from recognising legacy narratives and social norms as governance assets rather than barriers to modernisation. Policy implementation should attend to cultural legitimacy and promote culturally attuned leadership.

Contributions to Governance Discourse

This study challenges the hegemony of Western individualistic leadership assumptions by demonstrating that governance practices rooted in *Melayu Islam Beraja* constitute a coherent, ethically sophisticated, and practically effective leadership tradition. The model of *Leading with Legacy* is not nostalgic—it is forward-looking, offering Brunei's public sector a culturally affirming foundation for institutional renewal, equitable recruitment, and long-term policy resilience.

The integration of Islamic values into professional development across sectors—whether in public sector leadership or halal industry management (Idris, 2024a; Idris et al., 2024)—demonstrates a consistent approach to culturally attuned governance. This suggests that Brunei's model of integrating faith, culture, and professionalism offers broader lessons for Islamic governance globally.

This work invites broader scholarly reflection on how *culture can serve as a strategic asset in governance* across Islamic and Southeast Asian contexts—and beyond.

Conclusion

Summary of Key Findings

Leadership in Brunei's public sector is best understood as *leading with legacy*—where culture, faith, and governance are mutually reinforcing. Recognising culturally attuned leadership offers a pathway for developing ethical, resilient, and contextually grounded public institutions.

My findings reveal that culturally attuned leadership in Brunei is conceptualised as service and legacy, grounded in MIB philosophy and expressed through ceremonial traditions, intergenerational mentorship, and narrative identity. This conceptualisation enriches global leadership discourse by demonstrating an alternative to individualistic leadership models.

Culturally attuned leadership involves productive navigation of tensions between Islamic ideals and cultural practices. These tensions drive continuous improvement rather than representing

problems. When consciously integrated, culturally attuned leadership enhances recruitment equity, strengthens intercultural dialogue, and fosters policy resilience.

The structured leadership development programmes—EDPSGO and EDPMMO—play a crucial role in cultivating culturally attuned leadership capacity. These programmes, together with broader public sector reforms, demonstrate Brunei's commitment to developing leadership that is both professionally competent and culturally grounded.

Recommendations for Practice

Based on my findings, several recommendations can be made:

1. **Leadership development programmes** should explicitly address productive tensions between cultural values and professional demands, equipping leaders to navigate these tensions effectively. The EDPSGO and EDPMMO programmes should continue to integrate cultural and Islamic values into their curricula.
2. **Recruitment and promotion processes** should be transparent and criteria-based, with clear mechanisms for addressing cultural values while promoting equity and merit. This aligns with broader HRD principles identified in my research on workforce development (Idris, 2024a).
3. **Performance appraisal systems** should encourage honest feedback while respecting cultural face-saving values and supporting employee development.
4. **Succession planning** should balance seniority respect with opportunities for younger, more diverse leaders, ensuring institutional continuity while enabling renewal.
5. **Policy development** should attend to cultural legitimacy, ensuring policies are culturally attuned while promoting justice and equity.
6. **Cross-sector collaboration** between public sector leadership programmes and other culturally attuned training initiatives (such as those in the halal industry) could enable knowledge sharing and best practice exchange.

Limitations and Future Research

This study focuses on a single country—Brunei—requiring further research on culturally attuned leadership in other Islamic and Southeast Asian contexts. It relies primarily on interview data; future research could benefit from observational methods. It focuses on public sector leadership; further research could examine culturally attuned leadership in private and non-profit sectors.

Future research could explore:

- Gender's role in culturally attuned leadership and women's leadership development
- Generational change's impact on culturally attuned leadership
- Cultural attunement and organisational performance relationships
- Comparative analysis of leadership development programmes across Islamic countries
- Technology's role in enabling culturally attuned leadership
- The transferability of Brunei's culturally attuned leadership model to other contexts

Concluding Reflection

As the world becomes increasingly interconnected, culturally attuned leadership's importance grows. Global challenges require leadership navigating cultural diversity while building

bridges across differences. Culturally attuned leadership, drawing on particular cultures' distinctive resources, contributes to this global conversation.

The legacy-oriented leadership described here is not about preserving tradition but creating a better future. By attending to cultural values while addressing contemporary challenges, culturally attuned leadership offers a governance model that is both locally resonant and globally relevant. Brunei's progressive approach provides valuable lessons for nations worldwide seeking to balance tradition with modernity, cultural integrity with global engagement, and stability with innovation.

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Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

During the preparation of this work, the author used ChatGPT to assist with language refinement, grammar checking, and formatting consistency. This tool was used solely to improve the readability and presentation of the manuscript. After using this tool, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the final content of the publication.

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