

## Malay Leadership Model from an Institutional Economic Perspective in the Riau Islands

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### **Abstract**

#### **Keywords:**

Malay Leadership, Local  
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*This study examines the Malay leadership model in the Riau Islands, which is rooted in local cultural values, particularly trust, etiquette, deliberation, and moral responsibility in leadership practices. The objectives of this study are to understand the meaning of Malay leadership, identify its distinctive characteristics compared to other leadership models, and analyze its relevance in the context of contemporary leadership challenges. This study employs a qualitative approach by collecting primary data through interviews and observations, supported by documentary studies as secondary data sources. The findings reveal that Malay leadership emphasizes harmony between spiritual, moral, and social values. The core characteristics of this leadership model include integrity, honesty, wisdom, politeness, and the balance between inner and outer character. In addition, the principles of deliberation (*musyawarah*), consensus-building, and maintaining social harmony serve as the foundation for decision-making processes within society and organizations. The study also finds that the preservation of Malay leadership values is conducted through succession processes managed by customary institutions, which play an important role in shaping future leaders with strong moral character and cultural awareness. The novelty of this study lies in its focus on the Malay leadership model in the Riau Islands as a local culture-based leadership framework, which has received limited attention in previous leadership studies. Unlike prior research that predominantly discusses universal leadership theories such as transformational or transactional leadership, this study specifically explores the integration of Malay cultural values into leadership practices and examines their relevance in contemporary organizational and social contexts. Therefore, this study contributes to strengthening leadership studies based on local wisdom and offers an adaptive, culturally grounded, and sustainable alternative leadership model.*

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Leadership has long been a widely discussed topic, yet it remains relevant to analyze because it significantly influences the sustainability and success of an organization. The essence of leadership lies in responsibility, influence, and the ability to guide individuals toward achieving common goals. Leadership continues to attract scholarly attention because organizations increasingly require leaders who are capable of adapting to social and cultural changes while maintaining organizational effectiveness. In today's era of declining moral and spiritual values, finding effective and ethical leaders has become more challenging. Therefore, leadership plays a strategic role in shaping employee behavior, motivation, and performance within organizations.

According to Nawawi (as cited in Candra, 2024), leadership style refers to the actions or methods chosen and used by a leader to influence the thoughts, emotions, attitudes, and behavior of individuals within an organization. Similarly, Wukir (as cited in Kamal et al., 2019) explains that leadership is the ability to inspire and influence a group of individuals to act toward achieving mutually agreed-upon goals. Leadership is not merely associated with authority or position, but

also with the ability to build relationships, provide motivation, and create a conducive environment for achieving organizational objectives.

In the context of local culture, leadership style cannot be separated from the cultural values that develop within society. Each region possesses distinct cultural characteristics that influence the leadership patterns practiced within the community. In the Riau Islands, Malay cultural values serve as the foundation of social life. Values such as deliberation (*musyawarah*), politeness, respect for customs, and maintaining harmonious social relationships are important characteristics that shape leadership practices in the region.

Several previous studies have examined leadership from different perspectives. Research conducted by Kamal et al. (2019) focused on leadership as an organizational capability that influences employee performance and organizational effectiveness. The study emphasized the importance of leadership in motivating employees and achieving organizational goals. However, the discussion mainly concentrated on general leadership concepts and modern organizational management without specifically examining how local cultural values shape leadership patterns within a particular society. As a result, the cultural dimension of leadership, especially Malay cultural values, was not explored in depth.

Another study by Candra (2024) discussed leadership styles in the context of organizational behavior and explained how leaders influence the attitudes and actions of subordinates through certain approaches and strategies. The study highlighted the importance of selecting appropriate leadership styles to improve organizational performance. Nevertheless, the research predominantly analyzed leadership from a managerial perspective and paid limited attention to culture-based leadership models rooted in local wisdom. Consequently, the relevance of traditional cultural values in contemporary leadership practices remains insufficiently addressed.

In addition, several contemporary leadership studies generally focus on transformational, transactional, and democratic leadership models as universal approaches that can be applied across different organizational settings. These studies tend to prioritize effectiveness, productivity, and organizational competitiveness in modern institutions. However, such approaches often overlook the sociocultural characteristics of local communities. In the context of Malay society in the Riau Islands, leadership is closely related to customary values, ethics, politeness, collective deliberation, and harmonious social relations. The limited discussion regarding Malay leadership values indicates that research on local culture-based leadership models is still underexplored.

Based on these previous studies, the research gap of this study lies in the limited number of studies that specifically examine Malay leadership models in the Riau Islands from a local cultural perspective. Previous research has predominantly emphasized general leadership theories and organizational management approaches, while studies focusing on the implementation, relevance, and sustainability of Malay cultural values in leadership practices remain scarce. Therefore, this study aims to fill the gap by analyzing the leadership styles, principles, and values embedded in Malay culture and examining their relevance in addressing contemporary leadership challenges.

Based on this gap, the present research seeks to analyze the Malay leadership model in the Riau Islands, particularly regarding its leadership styles, values, and principles rooted in local culture. This study also aims to explain how Malay leadership shapes attitudes, behavior, and social relationships within groups or organizations. Furthermore, this research examines the relevance and applicability of the Malay leadership model in contemporary organizational contexts so that local cultural values can continue to be preserved and implemented effectively. Therefore, the research questions of this study are: (1) how are Malay leadership values and principles implemented in the Riau Islands, and (2) how relevant is the Malay leadership model in addressing contemporary leadership challenges within organizations and society.

## METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research method because it enables an in-depth understanding of social and cultural phenomena, particularly those related to the Malay leadership

model in the Riau Islands. Qualitative research was considered appropriate since this study focuses on exploring meanings, values, leadership principles, and the social realities embedded in Malay culture. According to Sugiyono (as cited in Nurrisa et al., 2025), qualitative research is a method used to examine phenomena in natural settings, where the researcher acts as the primary instrument in the research process.

The research was conducted in several Malay community environments and customary institutions in the Riau Islands. The informants in this study consisted of Malay customary leaders, community leaders, members of the Malay Customary Institution (LAM), and individuals who understand and practice Malay cultural values in leadership. Informants were selected using purposive sampling because this technique allows researchers to choose participants who possess relevant knowledge, experience, and understanding regarding the Malay leadership model. The criteria for informants included: (1) individuals actively involved in Malay customary or community institutions, (2) individuals who have experience or knowledge related to Malay leadership values, and (3) individuals recognized by the community as understanding Malay cultural traditions. In total, this study involved several key informants who were considered capable of providing in-depth and relevant information related to the research focus.

This study used two types of data sources, namely primary and secondary data. Primary data were obtained directly through interviews and field observations, while secondary data were collected from journals, books, official documents, and other literature relevant to leadership, Malay culture, and local wisdom-based leadership studies.

The data collection techniques used in this study were in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation. Interviews were conducted both face-to-face and through communication media such as chat messages to obtain detailed information regarding the meaning, characteristics, relevance, and implementation of Malay leadership values. The interview process used semi-structured interview guidelines containing several main themes, including: (1) the meaning of leadership in Malay culture, (2) the characteristics of Malay leadership compared to other leadership models, (3) the relevance of Malay leadership in contemporary society and organizations, and (4) the role of Malay customary institutions in leadership regeneration. This interview model allowed informants to provide broader explanations according to their experiences and perspectives.

Observations were conducted directly in the field to understand the social interactions, customary activities, leadership practices, and cultural values applied within the Malay community. During the observation process, the researcher systematically recorded important findings related to leadership behavior, communication patterns, deliberation practices, and the role of customary institutions in maintaining Malay leadership values. Documentation techniques were also used to support the research data through archives, photographs, institutional records, and written documents related to Malay culture and leadership.

The data analysis technique in this study used the interactive analysis model of Miles and Huberman, which consists of three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification. Data reduction was carried out by selecting, categorizing, and simplifying data relevant to the research objectives. The data were then presented descriptively in the form of narratives to facilitate interpretation and understanding of the findings. The final stage involved drawing conclusions and verifying the consistency of the findings based on the collected data. In addition, this study also applied thematic analysis to identify key themes related to Malay leadership values, leadership characteristics, social legitimacy, deliberation, ethics, and cultural preservation.

To ensure the validity and credibility of the data, this study employed several validation strategies, namely source triangulation, technique triangulation, and member checking. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing information obtained from different informants, such as customary leaders, community leaders, and members of Malay institutions. Technique triangulation was carried out by comparing data obtained through interviews, observations, and documentation. Meanwhile, member checking was conducted by reconfirming the interview results and interpretations with several informants to ensure that the findings accurately reflected

their perspectives and experiences. Through these strategies, the researcher sought to enhance the credibility, dependability, and trustworthiness of the research findings.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### The Meaning of Leadership in Malay Culture

Based on interviews conducted with several informants, leadership in Malay culture is understood not merely as authority or position, but as a form of trust, moral responsibility, and social obligation toward society. Informant ML-01 explained that a Malay leader is not only someone who possesses power, but also someone who is able to protect society, preserve customs, and act fairly according to religious teachings. According to the informant, leadership in Malay culture is closely connected to responsibility because a leader is expected to become an example for the community in both behavior and decision-making. Similarly, Informant ML-03 stated that Malay leadership is strongly rooted in Islamic values, where leaders are expected to be honest, polite, wise, and responsible because leadership is regarded as a mandate from both God and society. The informant further emphasized that moral values are considered more important than merely possessing authority or political influence.

In addition, several informants emphasized that leadership in Malay culture prioritizes social harmony and collective interests rather than individual ambition. Informant ML-02 explained that Malay leaders are expected to maintain good relationships with the community and avoid actions that could create conflict or division within society. The informant stated that leaders must prioritize deliberation (*musyawarah*) and listen to the opinions of community members before making decisions. This demonstrates that Malay leadership values participation and social balance in leadership practices.

Field observations conducted during customary meetings also showed that leadership practices within Malay communities prioritize deliberation, respectful communication, and collective agreement before decisions are made. During observations, customary leaders were seen encouraging open discussions among participants and allowing community members to express their opinions before final decisions were reached. Leaders also tended to use polite and careful language during discussions, reflecting the importance of maintaining respect and social harmony within Malay culture.

These findings indicate that Malay leadership is fundamentally value-oriented and emphasizes ethical responsibility over individual authority. Leadership is viewed as a moral obligation that integrates religious teachings, cultural values, and social harmony. The findings also demonstrate that Malay leadership is not solely concerned with achieving organizational goals but also with maintaining balance and harmony within society. This finding supports Koentjaraningrat's (1984) perspective that cultural values function as social guidelines shaping patterns of behavior, including leadership practices within society. In the Malay context, religious teachings, customs, and ethics become the foundation that shapes leadership behavior and social legitimacy.

### Characteristics of Malay Leaders Compared to Other Leadership Styles

The interviews revealed that one of the most distinctive characteristics of Malay leadership is the emphasis on spiritual and moral integrity. Informant ML-02 explained that a leader must be "perfect in faith, attitude, and behavior," meaning that leadership is assessed not only through intelligence or managerial competence, but also through morality, character, wisdom, and spiritual maturity. According to the informant, a leader who possesses high educational or organizational ability but lacks ethics and morality cannot be considered an ideal Malay leader. This demonstrates that Malay leadership integrates moral, spiritual, and social dimensions in leadership practices.

Informant ML-04 further explained that honesty and consistency between words and actions are fundamental values in Malay leadership. The informant stated that society places strong expectations on leaders to speak truthfully and behave consistently because trust is considered the

foundation of leadership legitimacy. According to the informant, when leaders fail to maintain honesty or behave inconsistently, society tends to lose respect and trust toward them. Therefore, integrity is viewed as one of the most important elements in maintaining leadership effectiveness and social stability.

The findings were also reinforced through field observations, where customary leaders demonstrated respectful communication patterns and placed significant emphasis on ethical behavior during social interactions. Observations showed that leaders were expected to maintain politeness, avoid harsh language, and prioritize collective interests over personal interests. In several customary activities, leaders were observed carefully considering community opinions before making decisions, reflecting a leadership style that values wisdom, patience, and collective harmony.

These findings suggest that Malay leadership differs from many modern leadership models that often focus primarily on managerial competence, productivity, and organizational achievement. In Malay culture, leadership legitimacy is strongly connected to moral character, spirituality, and social ethics. Leadership is not viewed solely as the ability to regulate or control others, but as a responsibility that must be carried out with honesty, fairness, and moral awareness.

This finding aligns with Northouse's (2013) theory of ethical leadership, which explains that effective leadership depends not only on technical competence but also on integrity, morality, and social responsibility. Ethical leaders are considered capable of creating healthy organizational environments and strengthening trust among organizational members. Furthermore, the emphasis on honesty and trustworthiness in Malay leadership also supports Fukuyama's (1995) argument that social trust is an important factor in maintaining organizational stability and productive social cooperation. Leaders who possess integrity are more likely to gain public trust, strengthen social cohesion, and encourage collective participation within society.

### **The Relevance of Malay Leadership Today**

Based on interview findings, Malay leadership values remain relevant in addressing contemporary leadership challenges, particularly in social, organizational, and governmental contexts. Informant ML-05 explained that society still needs leaders who are willing to listen to the people, prioritize fairness, and make decisions through deliberation. According to the informant, leadership practices that emphasize openness, justice, and collective participation are increasingly important in today's social conditions, where communities are more critical and actively involved in public affairs.

Meanwhile, Informant ML-06 stated that leadership practices that ignore moral and cultural values often lead to authoritarian tendencies, social conflict, and declining public trust. The informant emphasized that leaders who prioritize personal interests or power without considering ethics and community values usually create tension within society. According to the informant, Malay leadership principles continue to be important because they encourage leaders to remain responsible, transparent, and attentive to the interests of the wider community.

Field observations also demonstrated that deliberation remains an important mechanism in Malay community decision-making processes. During customary discussions and community meetings, leaders encouraged participation from various community members before final decisions were made. This practice reflects a participatory leadership approach that prioritizes inclusiveness, collective agreement, and social harmony. Observations further showed that community members were given opportunities to express their opinions openly, indicating that participation and communication remain central values within Malay leadership culture.

The findings indicate that Malay leadership values are still highly relevant because they emphasize social harmony, participation, ethical governance, and public responsibility. These values contribute to building public legitimacy and maintaining social stability in modern society. In addition, Malay leadership principles also encourage leaders to maintain balanced relationships between authority, morality, and community interests.

This finding supports Parsons' (1951) theory that social values and norms play a significant role in maintaining social order and balance within society. In the Malay context, cultural values function as social guidelines that shape leadership behavior and strengthen social legitimacy. In addition, the findings also align with Likert's (1961) participatory leadership theory, which states that leadership based on participation, open communication, and harmonious relationships can increase organizational effectiveness and community trust. Therefore, Malay leadership can be understood as a culturally grounded leadership model that remains adaptive to contemporary social and organizational dynamics.

### **Malay Customary Institution Programs in Developing Young Leaders**

The interviews showed that the Malay Customary Institution (LAM) has an important role in preserving Malay leadership values and preparing future leaders. Informant ML-07 explained that LAM frequently invites prospective leaders to communicate with customary leaders so that they understand Malay cultural values before becoming public leaders. According to the informant, this process is important because leadership should not only focus on political or administrative ability, but also on cultural understanding, ethics, and responsibility toward society.

Informant ML-08 further explained that leadership regeneration is necessary to ensure that younger generations continue to preserve Malay cultural identity and maintain social responsibility toward society. The informant stated that younger Malays should not become disconnected from their traditions and cultural values despite modernization and globalization. Therefore, customary institutions attempt to involve young people in cultural activities, leadership discussions, and customary events to strengthen their understanding of Malay values and leadership principles.

Observational findings also showed that customary institutions actively involve younger generations in cultural activities, deliberation forums, and traditional ceremonies as part of leadership education and value transmission. During several customary events, younger participants were observed interacting directly with traditional leaders and participating in discussions regarding community issues and cultural preservation. This demonstrates that leadership development within Malay society is not conducted formally alone, but also through social and cultural participation.

These findings indicate that Malay customary institutions function not only as cultural organizations but also as social institutions that contribute to leadership development and social stability. Leadership regeneration is viewed as a form of social investment intended to prepare future leaders who possess cultural awareness, ethical responsibility, and social legitimacy. In addition, the involvement of younger generations in customary activities reflects efforts to maintain cultural continuity amidst changing social conditions.

This finding supports Putnam's (1993) social capital theory, which emphasizes the importance of community institutions and social participation in building trust and strengthening collective cooperation. In addition, the findings also align with Bourdieu's (1986) concept of cultural capital, which explains that local cultural values can strengthen community identity and social legitimacy within development processes. Therefore, the role of customary institutions in leadership development is important not only for preserving culture but also for supporting sustainable social and community development.

### **Hopes for Future Malay Leadership**

Based on interviews, informants expressed hope that future Malay leaders would continue to prioritize deliberation, justice, integrity, and community welfare amidst the challenges of modernization and globalization. Informant ML-09 explained that Malay communities should become "masters in their own region" by improving education, leadership quality, and social responsibility. According to the informant, Malay communities should actively participate in leadership and development processes rather than becoming passive observers within their own social environment.

Meanwhile, Informant ML-10 emphasized that leadership opportunities are now increasingly open to younger generations, provided that they continue to uphold Malay values and maintain responsibility toward society. The informant explained that leadership today is no longer limited to traditional elites because education and organizational experiences provide broader opportunities for individuals to become leaders. However, the informant also emphasized that future leaders must continue to preserve cultural identity and moral responsibility despite social and technological changes.

Field observations also showed that younger generations are increasingly involved in organizational and social activities, indicating growing awareness regarding leadership participation and community development. Several youth groups were observed participating in social discussions, community activities, and cultural preservation programs organized by customary institutions and local organizations. This indicates that younger generations are beginning to recognize the importance of leadership roles within society.

These findings demonstrate that Malay leadership is viewed as a leadership model that combines democratic participation, moral values, and cultural identity. Deliberation and open communication remain important principles in maintaining social harmony and organizational effectiveness. In addition, leadership is expected to create social balance by prioritizing justice, responsibility, and community participation.

This finding supports Habermas' (1984) theory, which emphasizes that communication and deliberation are essential foundations for creating legitimate and democratic decision-making processes. Open communication between leaders and society allows leadership to gain stronger public legitimacy and maintain social trust. Overall, the findings indicate that Malay leadership values remain relevant in contemporary society because they emphasize ethical responsibility, collective participation, and harmonious social relations. These values not only contribute to cultural preservation but also offer an alternative leadership model that is adaptive, participatory, and sustainable in modern organizational and societal contexts.

## CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the Malay leadership model in the Riau Islands remains relevant in contemporary social and organizational contexts because it emphasizes ethical responsibility, deliberation, social harmony, and leadership integrity. The findings show that Malay leadership is not merely oriented toward authority and organizational control, but also toward moral legitimacy and collective responsibility grounded in religious and cultural values. The study further demonstrates that trust, honesty, politeness, and participatory decision-making are fundamental elements that strengthen the relationship between leaders and society.

In addition, this study confirms that the role of Malay Customary Institutions (LAM) is important in preserving and transmitting leadership values to younger generations through leadership regeneration programs, customary activities, and community participation. The preservation of local leadership values contributes not only to cultural sustainability but also to the development of socially responsible and culturally aware future leaders.

This study contributes to the development of local wisdom-based leadership studies by positioning Malay leadership as an adaptive and sustainable alternative leadership model amidst the challenges of modernization and globalization. Unlike leadership models that primarily emphasize managerial achievement, Malay leadership integrates moral, cultural, and social dimensions into leadership practices.

Based on these findings, several recommendations can be proposed. First, Malay cultural values such as deliberation, ethical responsibility, and social harmony should be integrated into leadership training programs conducted by government institutions, educational institutions, and community organizations in the Riau Islands. Second, Malay Customary Institutions are encouraged to develop structured and continuous leadership regeneration programs for younger generations through mentoring activities, cultural education, and community-based leadership

forums. Third, regional policymakers should strengthen collaboration with customary institutions in formulating community development policies to ensure that local cultural values remain integrated into governance and social development processes. Finally, future researchers are encouraged to examine the implementation of Malay leadership values in broader institutional contexts, such as governmental organizations, educational institutions, and private sectors, in order to enrich the study of culture-based leadership in Indonesia.

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