# UNIVERSITI MALAYSIA SABAH

## BORANG PENGESAHAN STATUS TESIS

**JUDUL** : **A STUDY ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CULTURE AND LEADERSHIP STYLE PREFERENCE AMONG MALAY-BRUNEI, BAJAU AND KADAZAN-DUSUN COMMUNITY IN SABAH**

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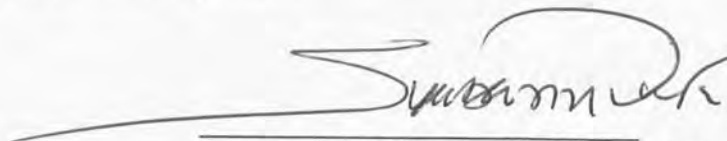Disahkan oleh;

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# A STUDY ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CULTURE AND LEADERSHIP STYLE PREFERENCE AMONG MALAY-BRUNEI, BAJAU AND KADAZAN-DUSUN COMMUNITY IN SABAH

## DG KAMISAH BINTI AG BUDIN

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## SCHOOL OF BUSINESS AND ECONOMICS
## UNIVERSITI MALAYSIA SABAH
## 2012

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# DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the material in this thesis is my own except for quotations, excerpts, equations, summaries and references, which have been duly acknowledged.

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# ABSTRACT

## A STUDY ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CULTURE AND LEADERSHIP STYLE PREFERENCE AMONG MALAY-BRUNEI, BAJAU AND KADAZAN-DUSUN COMMUNITY IN SABAH

This study is conducted to identify the relationship between culture and leadership style preference among Sabahans namely Malay-Brunei, Bajau and Kadazan-Dusun. The dependent variable in this study is preferred leadership style introduced by House (1971) which consists of directive, supportive, participative and achievement-oriented. There are two independent variables in this study which are demographics (gender, age, level of education and working experience) and Hofstede's cultural dimension (power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism/collectivism and masculinity/ femininity). The demography was also tested as moderator in this study. This study involves three major ethnic groups in Sabah namely Malay-Brunei, Bajau and Kadazan-Dusun. The sample of this research was selected based on purposive convenient sampling. Questionnaire was administered for data collection whereas a sample of two hundred nineteen employees from both public and private sector participated in this study. The results showed that three major ethnic groups in Sabah appear to be not significantly different in the Hofstede's cultural dimensions. Furthermore, there is no significant difference between demographic variable and leadership preference among employees. However, it is found that gender and level of education moderate the relationship between culture and leadership style preferences. The evidence was also found on the relationship between culture and leadership style preference. Therefore, it provide implication that leader should understand the culture in order for them to be accepted by the followers.

# ABSTRAK

Kajian ini dijalankan untuk mengenalpasti hubungan antara budaya dan jenis kepimpinan pilihan di kalangan penduduk sabah. Pembolehubah bersandar dalam kajian ini adalah jenis kepimpinan pilihan dikalangan penduduk sabah. Terdapat dua pembolehubah tidak bersandar dalam kajian ini iaitu ciri-ciri demografi (jantina, umur, tahap pendidikan dan pengalaman bekerja) dan dimensi budaya Hofstede; mengelakkan kepastian, jarak kuasa, kolektivisme, dan kejantanan. Ciri-ciri demografi juga dikaji sebagai moderator di dalam kajian ini. Responden telah dipilih berdasarkan kaedah persampelan bertujuan dan mudah. Kaedah pengumpulan data adalah melalui borang soal selidik dan seramai dua ratus sembilan belas orang pekerja dari sektor kerajaan dan swasta terlibat dalam kajian ini. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahawa tiada perbezaan diantara Melayu-Brunei, Bajau dan Kadazan-Dusun di dalam dimensi budaya Hofstede. Selain itu, didapati tiada perbezaan di antara ciri-ciri demografi terhadap corak kepimpinan pilihan dikalangan pekerja. Namun, jantina dan tahap pendidikan didapati mempunyai kesan moderator terhadap perhubungan diantara budaya dan corak kepimpinan pilihan. Kajian ini juga membuktikan bahawa terdapat perhubungan diantara budaya dan corak kepimpinan pilihan. Oleh itu, ia memberi implikasi kepada ketua untuk memahami sesuatu budaya agar mereka boleh diterima sebagai ketua oleh para pengikut.

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.0    Overview

Employees are considered assets of organizations. Obviously, without people, organizations cannot exist because they are considered as lifeblood of an organization. Obviously, excellent organizations are those that can bring collectively different kinds of people to achieve organizational goals and objectives. In a globalized era, organizations are facing greater challenges as well as having to deal with a lot of changes both internally and externally. Organizations have to move forward and identify the best way to compete in the market in order to be successful. Thus, the organizations need those employees with better knowledge, skill and abilities to run the organizations efficiently and effectively.

Highly competent employees will contribute to better performance as well as give the organization competitive advantage. However, the success of the organization is not solely dependent on employees' capabilities, but also depends on their motivation in performing their job. Though the employees are highly competent, sometime they refuse to perform because of certain factors. One of the factors might be poor supervision or guidance in the organization. To overcome this issue, the concept of leadership needs to be investigated. Good leaders are needed to guide and motivate the employees.

Leadership style is not a novel concept and has been discussed widely all over the world. With the acceleration of globalization, organizations have to adapt new paradigms or approaches of leadership. Leadership is often defined as a process of directing and influencing a group member in the organization (Ivancevich *et al*, 2011). A good leader is one who is able to lead and motivate the employees to achieve organization's goals. Leadership had been exercised in many

settings in businesses, governments, education and even sports. Therefore, it is extremely important that managers have a thorough understanding of what leadership entails. For instance, effective leadership is important to implement any changes successfully in organizations especially throughout the critical period and unexpected changes in the external environment (Littrell and Valentin, 2005).

Malaysia is divided into two which is west Malaysia consists of 11 states and east Malaysia which consist of Sabah and Sarawak (Swee-Hock and Kesavapany, 2006). Malaysia is well known all over the world with its diverse racial and ethnic composition. Besides the local Malays and the native groups, immigrants from China, India, Indonesia and other parts of the world contribute to multiracial composition of Malaysia's population. Consequently, Malaysia is often described as a minefield of cultural sensitivities (Asma and Lim, 2001). Culture play an important role in many aspect such as the way employees perform their job, relationship among employees in workplace as well as their acceptance towards their leaders. According to Hofstede and Hofstede (2005), the variations of culture result in disparity in how organizations and business networks function in different countries. Therefore, diversity of workforce becomes challenging for leaders to lead their followers successfully. In order to be effective, leaders have to understand the culture of their followers and able to suit themselves in that particular culture. Obviously, different cultures have their own preferences on leadership style. Thus, leader has to be careful in selecting the best way to lead his/her follower.

Sabah is located in east Malaysia and known as the second largest state in the country. According to Swee-Hock and Kesavapany (2006), consistently higher rate of population growth was recorded in Sabah. Sabah's population has a rich cultural diversity with various ethnic communities. Each ethnic community has their unique heritage which makes them different from one ethnic group to another. The uniqueness in Sabah is whereby some ethnic groups still maintain their customs and traditions. Nowadays, people in Sabah are mixed up into different races, religions as well as cultures. This study is conducted in Sabah whereby it focused on three major ethnic groups namely Malay-Brunei, Bajau and Kadazan-Dusun. This study provides a systematic framework within which the managers could assess

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differences in responses to various leadership styles in different Sabahans cultures namely Malay-Brunei, Bajau and Kadazan-Dusun.

This study is a replicate of a study initiated by Yusoff (1999), exploring the impact of culture on leadership preference among Malaysian managers. However, there are some differences and uniqueness in this study whereby certain variables have been changed. Previous study was conducted in west Malaysia whereby the selection of samples was mainly confined to three major categories of races: Malays, Chinese and Indians. On the contrary, this study is conducted in Sabah whereby the samples selected are from three major ethnics in Sabah: Malay-Brunei, Bajau and Kadazan-Dusun. Furthermore, the leadership style measured in these two studies is different. The previous study measured based on the Hersey and Blanchard leadership theory, while the present study measures leadership style using Path Goal leadership theory.

## 1.1 Problem Statement

Managing employees is as important as managing other resources in any organization such as finance, equipment or other materials. Neglecting human aspect might lead to reduce of productivity and wastage of resources. Thus, organizations need leaders who can guide and lead employees to achieve favorable results. Leaders play an important role to motivate, direct and influence the organization members in the workplace. At the same time, leaders face challenges in dealing with employees who come from different background in their organization. Without strong leadership, the organization might be in chaos and surely organizational goals cannot be achieved. Hence, effective leaders are really of utmost importance to lead as well as support their followers to success.

Some people might misinterpret leadership as a dimension which is to lead any particular group. Leadership is not only about leading people, in fact it is about guiding the organization to achieve the desired goals. Specifically, it is about understanding where to go, how to get there and what to do to get there. Leadership is also about building good affiliation with the organizational members. Therefore, the question is whether or not a leader can bring the organizational

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members on board with their ideas. Basically, leaders will strive towards reaching the organizational goals together with their followers. Simply speaking, the success or failure of an organization depends on effective leadership. Employees will perceive their leader as effective from different perspective. Obviously, employees have their own preferences on the type of leader to lead them. These preferences may be due to several factors but this study will focus specifically on the culture factor. Therefore, in this study organizational leaders should know and understand the preferred leadership style by their follower based on culture factor.

Malaysia is a country where Malays, Chinese, Indians and other ethnic groups live in a multicultural environment (Fontaine, 2007). Diversity of workforce in organization becomes greater challenges for leaders to manage their subordinates effectively. This is obvious, because each employee comes from different background, various personal characteristic, different attitude and unique individually mindset. Leader should be able to deal with this kind of situation especially when it comes to cultural matters. In reality, not all leaders will be able to become effective in culturally diverse situation. Changes in organizational culture require managerial leaders to meet expectation of the members of the organization (Littrell and Valentin, 2005). Thus, in depth understanding on the most suitable leadership style is crucial for those leaders.

Therefore, in order to be effective and lead followers successfully, leaders must realize the leadership style preferences among their followers. To be exact, leaders should understand the cultural aspects of employees' background and able to modify their leadership style based on their followers preferences. It is important to ensure employees satisfaction as well as increase their level of motivation. Leaders should be able to convince their followers to see things as the leaders do. Additionally, leaders must have capabilities to create trust among their followers. As a result, employees will be more committed and put their fullest effort to achieve organizational goals. Simply speaking, ideal match between what is preferred by employees and what is practiced by the leaders will lead to better and improved performance among the employees. Employees tend to be committed in their job if they believe that their leader is someone that they can trust to protect their interest

and rely on. Therefore, the main problem to be highlighted in this study is related to the context which shapes peoples awareness of leadership as well as culture. The paper discussed on what kind of leadership style is preferred by the Malay-Brunei, Bajau and Kadazan-Dusun community in Sabah.

## 1.2 Research questions

This study is about the preferred leadership style among the three major ethnic groups in Sabah namely Malay-Brunei, Bajau and Kadazan-Dusun. In other words, this study intends to explore the relationship between culture and employees' preferences of leadership style. Specifically, this study is designed to answer the following questions:

1. How do the Malay-Brunei, Bajau, and Kadazan-Dusun in Sabah is differ on Hofstede's cultural dimensions?
2. Is there a difference in the relationship between demography and the leadership style preferences among the Malay-Brunei, Bajau and Kadazan-Dusun?
3. Is there a relationship between culture and employees' preferences among Malay-Brunei, Bajau and Kadazan-Dusun?
4. Does demography moderate the relationship between culture and employees' preferences for leadership style?

## 1.3 Research objectives

### 1.3.1 General objective

The main objective of this study is to identify the relationship between culture and preferred leadership style among the Melayu-Brunei, Bajau and Kadazan-Dusun employees in Sabah.

### 1.3.2 Specific objectives

Specifically the objectives of this study are to:

1) Identify the difference between Malay-Brunei, Bajau, and Kadazan-Dusun employees on Hofstede's cultural dimensions.

2) Investigate the difference in the relationship between demography and the leadership style preferences among Malay-Brunei, Bajau and Kadazan-Dusun.

3) Investigate the relationship between culture and leadership style preferences among Malay-Brunei, Bajau and Kadazan-Dusun.

4) Determine if demography moderates the relationship between culture and employees' preferences for leadership style.

## 1.4    Scope of the study

The scope of this study is to try to find a relationship between the culture of Sabahans and their leadership style preference. As mentioned, the main objective of this research is to identify the relationship between culture and preferred leadership style among the Malay-Brunei, Bajau and Kadazan-Dusun employees in Kota Kinabalu Sabah. This research also determines the relationship between demographic variables and leadership style preference. Finally, the demographic variables are measured as a moderator on the relationship between culture and leadership style preference. This study is conducted in Sabah by choosing three major ethnic groups in Sabah namely Malay-Brunei, Bajau and Kadazan-Dusun as samples. Combination of purposive quota sampling and convenient sampling is used in this study to ensure all groups have an equal number in this study and to ensure accuracy of the finding.

## 1.5    Significance of the study

The reason for undertaking this study is to identify the possible impact of culture towards the preferences of leadership style among Malay-Brunei, Bajau and Kadazan-Dusun community in Sabah. This research can be used by the leader to understand their follower preferences. This research will reveal follower preferences and what type of leader they wish to have in the organization. Information gathered from this study will provide insight for all leaders on the most preferred leadership style in a particular culture in Sabah. Consequently, leaders will be able to modify their style accordingly to best suit their follower. Additionally, this study can also help the leader to evaluate their own leadership style and fit themselves to

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the culture of their follower. Thus, it will be easier for them to match their leadership style with the employees' preferences.

Better understanding on the influence of culture will help a leader to be more effective and successful in their role. At the same time, it will help organization to reduce dissatisfaction among employees as well as increase organizational productivity. This study can also help organization to find out the causes of failure in leadership process because some culture might not be able to cope with any particular leadership style. Simply speaking, by studying the relationship between culture and preference of leadership style, this study will contribute to the knowledge of relationship between these two variables. The nature of the relationship between these variables cannot be underestimated, because a mismatch between leadership style and culture might lead to negative impact towards the organization.

Furthermore, when an organization has suitable and effective leaders, it will help the organization to run smoothly. The most important thing is to ensure that the organization is able to achieve its goals. However, it will still depend on the follower because they might perceive a leader as effective differently based on their culture. Moreover, leaders have to realize that different culture usually have their own preferences on leadership style. Thus, it is a challenge for leaders to manage and lead their followers carefully based on the most preferred style of the follower. The effort that leaders put to change their style accordingly will be very useful. Consequently, profit of organizations will increase because employees are committed to their job by the help and guidance of competent leaders.

## 1.6   Definition of terms

This study intends to identify the relationship between culture and leadership style. Thus, there are two main variables to be focused in this study consist of culture and leadership. The definitions of the variables are as follows;

### 1.6.1 Employee

For the purpose of this study, the term employee and follower are used interchangeably because both represent the person who has his/ her own preferences towards the leadership style.

### 1.6.2 Culture

Hofstede (1980) defined culture as the "programming of the mind that differentiates one group from another group." To be exact, this definition is not to differentiate between races but focuses on the difference between groups. There are four dimensions of culture found by Hofstede's (1980) classic model namely power distance, individualism-collectivism, masculinity-femininity and uncertainty avoidance. Each dimension will be defined according to definition forwarded by Hofstede (1980) cited in Kessapidau and Varsakelis (2002) as follows:

a.  Power Distance

    The extent to which the members of a society accept that power in institutions and organizations is distributed unequally.

b.  Uncertainly Avoidance

    The degree to which members of a society are feels uncomfortable with uncertainty and ambiguity, which leads them to support beliefs promising certainty.

c.  Individualism-Collectivism

    Individualism is the preferences for loosely knit social framework in society. In the contrary, collectivism stands for preference for a tightly knit social framework.

d.  Masculinity-Femininity

    Masculinity refers to the preference for achievement, heroism, and assertiveness and material success. In contrast, femininity refers to the preference for relationship, caring for the weak and the quality of life.

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### 1.6.3 Leadership

Leadership is defined as a process in which an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal (Northouse, 2004, cited in Trinidad and Normore, 2005). There are several approaches in leadership such as trait approach, behavioral approach and contingency approach. However, this study will focus solely on the path-goal theory developed by House (1996) which states that the main goal of leaders is to help subordinates attain their goal effectively by providing necessary support to achieve their own goals (Silverthorne, 2001).

Path-goal theory proposes four main components of leadership styles consist of directive, supportive, participative and achievement-oriented styles. Each component will be defined as follows:

a.  Directive

    Leader tells subordinates about his/her expectation by giving specific guidance as well as enforces rules and procedures (House, 1996).

b.  Supportive

    Leader creates friendly environment and show concern for subordinates' needs and wellbeing (House, 1996).

c.  Participative

    Leader consults with subordinates and uses their suggestions before making a decision (House, 1996).

d.  Achievement-oriented

    Leader set challenging goals and expects subordinates to perform at the highest level (House, 1996).

### 1.7    Summary and organization of remaining chapter

This chapter discussed on the introduction, research problem, research question, research objective, scope of study, significant of study and the definition of key variables. Chapter two describes the literature review which consists of related

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studies in culture, leadership approach and relationship between culture and leadership style preferences. Chapter three reveals the methodology of the research consist of theoretical framework, measuring instrument, research sampling, data collection and method of data analysis. Furthermore, chapter four reveals the result of the research. Finally, chapter five will be the recapitulation of study, discussion, implications of the study, limitation of research and suggestions for future research as well as conclusion will be covered.

# CHAPTER 2

# REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

## 2.0 Introduction

This chapter will discuss three different parts. First part is about the concept of culture. Second part will be the related theories of leadership which covers the historical approach to leadership. There are three main approaches in leadership beginning with trait approach, behavioral approach and finally contingency approach. Third part of this chapter will discuss the related studies that have been conducted relating to culture and leadership style. Finally, there is a summary at the end of this chapter.

## 2.1 Concept of culture

According to Kluckhohn (1951), culture is defined as a pattern of ways of thinking, feeling and reacting acquired and transmitted through symbols. Basically, Kluckhohn (1951) claims that the fundamental nature of culture was consists of conventional thoughts and standards. Additionally, culture provides values, norms and roles that are enforced by positive and negative sanctions (Van Maanen, 1976). Agents of socialization such as family, peers, media and experiences will support the learning of these standards, custom and roles. Moreover, Littrell and Valentin (2005) claim that the fundamental nature of culture is not what is observable on the surface but defined as way set by the community to realize and infer the world. Additionally, Harris and Moran (1996) claims that culture gives groups of individuals a sense of who they are, how they should act and what they should be doing. Therefore, cultures will give community a sense of characteristics, particularly in terms of the individual actions and values to be encouraged (Harris and Moran, 1996). Simply speaking, culture impacts on morale, behavior and productivity at work that influence organizational thoughts and actions (Harris and Moran, 1996).

Kennedy (2002) reported that Malaysia is well known as an Islamic country with a various population of Malays, Chinese and Indians. Therefore the most interesting thing about Malaysia is the combination of Asian principles and cultural characteristic. Moreover, Abdullah (2001) states that each ethnic group in Malaysia has distinct culture based on age-old beliefs, traditions, practices rooted in their Asian heritage. In addition, Malaysian societal formation is overlaid by Islamic beliefs and values which dictate appropriate behavioral practices (Kennedy, 2002). Understanding of respect and harmony between diverse mixed ethnics or population in Malaysia has shaped a distinctive society of cultural values. Additionally, Hofstede and Hofstede (2005) have categorized Malaysia as a collectivist society because of several criteria namely generous, friendly, tolerant of errors and show concern for others.

In Malaysia, employees in organizations basically come from different ethnic groups which have different values and norms. Moreover, this diversity of ethnic groups has maintained their separate ethnic identities, and continuously practices their diverse culture. According to Jogulu and Wood (2008), hierarchies are usually recognized as element of the societal formation in collectivist societies. Hence, there is an acceptance of authority figures across many levels of society and culture has inherently placed males in a position of power and authority across the nations at each layer of the multiethnic society (Jogulu and Wood, 2008).

Hofstede (1980) has developed four fundamental issues or called as four cultural dimensions in human societies which represent the basic elements of common structure in the cultural system of the countries. Hofstede's original study included 53 countries and region and more than 116,000 observations (Stedham and Yamamura, 2004). Four of Hofstede's cultural dimensions provide important framework in analyzing national culture and also considering the effects of cultural differences on management and organization (Peng and Yuquan, 2002). According to Hoecklin (1996, cited in Peng and Yuquan, 2002), this framework is useful to understand people's conceptions of organization and the roles and relations of its members.

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