



Indigenous Culture and Leadership: A Literature Review

Aqhari Isa¹, Mohamad Luthfi Abdul Rahman^{2*}, Manonmani Devi M.A.R Annamalai³

¹School of Humanities, Universiti Sains Malaysia, 11800 USM, Penang, Malaysia
Email: aqhari94@gmail.com

²School of Humanities, Universiti Sains Malaysia, 11800 USM, Penang, Malaysia
Email: luthfi@usm.my

³Faculty of Language and Communication, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, 35900 Tanjong Malim, Perak, Malaysia
Email: manonmanidevi@fbk.upsi.edu.my

CORRESPONDING

AUTHOR (*):

Mohamad Luthfi Abdul Rahman
(luthfi@usm.my)

KEYWORDS:

Orang Asli
Semai community
Leadership
Cultural

CITATION:

Aqhari Isa, Mohamad Luthfi Abdul Rahman, & Manonmani, D. M. A. R. A. (2025). Indigenous Culture and Leadership: A Literature Review. *Malaysian Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities (MJSSH)*, 10(6), e003457.
<https://doi.org/10.47405/mjssh.v10i6.3457>

ABSTRACT

This study aimed to examine sustainable leadership models within the Orang Asli, specifically the Semai community in Malaysia. The goal was to develop a sustainable leadership model based on the traditions and cultural practices of the Semai community, with the potential to contribute to a more inclusive and culturally sensitive leadership theory and practice. A qualitative approach was used, employing literary analysis to explore the cultural traditions of the Semai community. The findings of this study revealed that the sustainable leadership model can be adapted to several key elements, including community empowerment, environmental conservation, inter-generational knowledge sharing, and sharing with external stakeholders. As such, it can serve as a useful framework for understanding the values and practices of the community and how they can be incorporated into leadership models. Overall, this study highlights the importance of understanding and respecting the traditions and cultural practices of diverse communities in the development of sustainable leadership models. By drawing upon the cultural knowledge and practices of the Orang Asli particularly the Semai community, this new model of leadership can not only contribute to a more holistic and culturally sensitive approach to leadership theory and practice, but also promote greater social inclusion and cohesion within the community. Furthermore, it can help to bridge the gap between modern leadership practices and the traditional wisdom of indigenous cultures, allowing for a more balanced and nuanced understanding of leadership in diverse contexts.

Contribution/Originality: This study contributes to the existing literature by exploring the culture of the Orang Asli especially Semai community. The main contribution of this paper is to find that the Semai community has its own leadership elements that can be shaped through their culture.

1. Introduction

The investigation of leadership styles and practices among indigenous communities has been a topic of scholarly research in diverse fields. The Orang Asli of Malaysia have garnered significant attention due to their distinct cultural practices and beliefs. However, the research on their leadership models has not provided a conclusive outcome, which may be attributed to varying research methods and community diversity. This study employs a literary approach, combining pre-existing leadership literature with texts by Orang Asli Semai author [Akiya \(2014; 2018\)](#), to delve deeper into this community leadership model. While leadership models such as transformational, situational, and servant leadership are helpful, cultural differences between Western and indigenous communities necessitate careful interpretation of leadership models among the Semai community. This study aims to contribute to the existing literature on indigenous leadership, providing insights for future research in developing a more comprehensive understanding of leadership in indigenous communities globally.

Leadership plays a crucial role in the Orang Asli society, where it is viewed as an essential rank or mechanism for promoting social cohesion and maintaining cultural traditions. [Nicholas \(1989\)](#) argues that leaders are necessary to articulate and take action, as well as to convey the spirit of the community to subordinates at the grassroots level. [Edo et al. \(2009\)](#) provides a detailed analysis of leadership in Semai community, which is divided into various levels with unique titles and functions. For instance, the positions of Tok Raja and Tok Menterik are chosen by the chief of the tribe, while Tok Batin, Jurukerah, and Tandil are selected based on the local residents' discretion. These leaders are expected to be knowledgeable about the community's customs and traditions, and they play a critical role in maintaining social harmony and resolving disputes ([Shamsul, 2001](#)). As such, leadership positions are highly respected and considered to be essential for the well-being of the community ([Gomes, 1988](#)). [Achom \(1984\)](#) highlights the existence of different types of leadership styles in Semai community, including authoritarian and participatory approaches, which are employed based on specific community needs and circumstances. Leadership roles in the Semai community are not exclusively reserved for men, as women can also hold important leadership positions. In some Orang Asli communities, such as those with a matrilineal system, leadership and inheritance are passed down through the female line. The importance of leadership in the Orang Asli society is emphasized by [Lambin et al. \(2019\)](#) as a means of preserving and transmitting the community's cultural knowledge and practices to future generations.

The Orang Asli are a native community who have a tradition of preserving and managing their natural resources and ecosystems. They possess unique skills, ethics, wisdom, and knowledge that they pass on through oral traditions to future generations. This knowledge is deeply rooted in their environment and culture, and their leaders play a crucial role in its transmission and preservation. Leaders are expected to possess a deep understanding of their community's customs and traditions and play a crucial role in maintaining social harmony and resolving disputes. The responsibilities of Orang Asli leaders extend beyond decision-making to include mediating conflicts and promoting social cohesion through their knowledge of customary laws and traditions ([Gomes, 1988](#)). The multifaceted role of a leader in the Orang Asli society is further reiterated by [Gomes \(1988\)](#), who notes that leaders are responsible for upholding cultural traditions, maintaining social order, and promoting community welfare. Leaders are seen as the

custodians of the community's cultural heritage, and their guidance and knowledge are vital for preserving the unique identity and customs of the Orang Asli. In conclusion, leadership is a crucial component of the Orang Asli society, which plays a vital role in preserving cultural traditions and ensuring the well-being of the community.

Despite extensive research on the leadership models among Semai community, there is still no clear consensus on a universal leadership model that can be applied to these groups. Previous studies have utilized different methodologies, including quantitative and qualitative methods, to understand the leadership practices among Semai community. However, due to the complex and diverse cultural traditions of these groups, it is challenging to conclude a definitive leadership model that is applicable across all communities. Thus, there is a need for alternative approaches to understanding leadership among Semai community. This study aims to explore leadership models among Semai community using a literary approach, specifically by analyzing literary texts written by native Semai individuals. By utilizing literary texts, this study hopes to gain a deeper understanding of the leadership practices and cultural traditions of these communities, which are often difficult to capture using conventional research methodologies. The objective of this study is to formulate a leadership model that is grounded in the cultural traditions and practices of Semai community, which can potentially contribute to the development of leadership theories and practices that are more inclusive and culturally sensitive.

2. Literature Review

Semai community are an indigenous group in Malaysia, known for their unique cultural practices and way of life. Their traditional leadership system is based on mutual respect and consensus-building, which is quite different from the individual power and authority-based systems prevalent in modern society. [Mustapha \(2013\)](#) explores the traditional leadership system of the Orang Asli in Malaysia and compares it to the power and authority-based systems prevalent in modern society. The author argue that the Orang Asli's leadership system is based on mutual respect and consensus-building, which allows for more equitable decision-making and a more inclusive community.

According to a study by [Chua et al. \(2021\)](#) Semai community have a deep connection with their ancestral lands and the environment. Their leadership model is based on the idea of "mutual responsibility," where each member of the community has a role to play in decision-making. This system ensures that decisions are made with the common good in mind, rather than benefiting any particular individual or group. The Orang Asli Semai's connection with their ancestral lands and the environment is a crucial aspect of their cultural identity and way of life. They have a deep understanding of the interconnectivity of all living things and their environment, and their traditional leadership model reflects this understanding. [Gomes \(2012\)](#) too found that the Semai community holds a holistic perspective of the world, where everything is connected and interdependent. Their view of the environment influences their leadership model, which centers on the principle of "mutual responsibility." The principle of mutual responsibility means that every member of the community has a role to play in decision-making, and that decisions should be made with the common good in mind. This ensures that the needs of the entire community are taken into consideration, rather than just the interests of a particular individual or group.

In addition to mutual responsibility, the Semai community also practice consensus-building in their decision-making processes. According to a study by [Norouzi et al. \(2020\)](#) consensus-building is an essential aspect of their leadership model, and it ensures that everyone's opinions and perspectives are heard and considered. Consensus-building is a time-consuming process, but it leads to decisions that are more inclusive and sustainable in the long run. This is because decisions made through consensus-building are more likely to have the support of the entire community, and therefore more likely to be successfully implemented. The Semai community have a long-standing tradition of collective decision-making and shared responsibility ([Howell, 1984](#); [Nicholas, 2000](#); [Endicott & Dentan, 2004](#); [Fox, 2011](#)) which has been ingrained in their social structure for generations and continues to be practiced today. Scholars have suggested that a new leadership model could strengthen this tradition by encouraging greater community involvement in decision-making and supporting community-led initiatives ([Nicholas, 2000](#); [Mustapha, 2013](#)) ultimately resulting in a more democratic and fair social system ([Endicott & Dentan, 2004](#)). Such a model could also prioritize environmental management and sustainable resource use, drawing on the Semai community's values and practices ([Howell, 1984](#); [Fox, 2011](#); [Mustapha, 2013](#)).

One example of the Semai people's sustainable practices is shifting cultivation, a farming method that allows forest regeneration and reduces soil degradation ([Endicott & Dentan, 2004](#)). This practice can be integrated into a leadership model that prioritizes continuous land use and conservation of natural resources. Additionally, a community-based approach to decision-making and governance can promote fair resource distribution and ensure that environmental issues are considered in decision-making processes ([Nicholas, 2000](#)). [McKemey et al. \(2020\)](#) study on traditional ecological knowledge in indigenous communities in North America and Australia underscores the importance of indigenous leadership in promoting sustainable land use practices and natural resource management. [Wang and Szu-Yung's \(2019\)](#) study on indigenous leadership and forest management in Taiwan also emphasizes the need for inclusive decision-making processes and joint involvement to ensure forest sustainability. Similarly, [Diansyah et al. \(2022\)](#) suggest that a leadership model for the Semai community that prioritizes environmental responsibility and sustainable resource use can enhance long-term environmental sustainability and community life.

In summary, a leadership model for the Semai community that prioritizes environmental responsibility and sustainable resource use can build on the community's existing values and practices, promote sustainable natural resource use, and help address environmental challenges ([Howell, 1984](#); [Endicott & Dentan, 2004](#); [Fox, 2011](#); [Mustapha, 2013](#)). Moreover, indigenous leadership in other regions underscores the importance of sustainable land use practices, natural resource management, and inclusive decision-making processes ([Wang & Szu-Yung, 2019](#); [McKemey et al., 2020](#); [Diansyah et al., 2022](#)). By integrating these values and practices into a leadership model, the Semai community can ensure the preservation of their natural resources, maintain their cultural identity and way of life for future generations, and promote long-term environmental sustainability and community life.

Overall, the Semai's community leadership model is unique and effective because it is based on their deep connection with their environment and their holistic worldview. Their emphasis on mutual responsibility and consensus-building ensures that decisions are made with the common good in mind, and that the needs of the entire community are taken into consideration. This worldview informs their traditional leadership model,

which is based on the principle of “mutual responsibility.” Such a model ensures that each member of the community has a role to play in decision-making, including decisions related to environmental stewardship and the sustainable use of resources. A new model for Semai community leadership has the potential to build upon these existing values and practices, while also adapting to the changing needs of the community. Here are some possible construct that could be included in such a model (1) community empowerment, (2) environmental conservation, (3) inter-generational knowledge sharing and, (4) partnership with external stakeholders.

3. Research Methods

This study uses a qualitative approach to explore the leadership practices and cultural traditions of the Semai community. In other words, this study collects data by reviewing the findings of previous studies via the internet, articles, books, and theses to look at the leadership practices and culture of the Orang Asli. The data will be analyzed using textual analysis methods based on two novels titled *Orang Kecil* (Akiya, 2014) and *Kami* (Akiya, 2018). These findings will be compared with existing literature on leadership to develop a proposed leadership model that is culturally sensitive and based on the practices of this community. Ultimately, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of leadership styles, roles, and cultural beliefs among the Semai community.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Community Empowerment

The Semai community has a long history of collective decision-making and mutual responsibility (Howell, 1984; Nicholas, 2000; Endicott & Dentan, 2004; Fox, 2011). The authors examine the customary culture and social structure of the Semai community, which emphasises on collective decision-making and mutual responsibility, and has been deeply rooted in their traditions for generations and have been maintained over generations. Several scholars have proposed that a new leadership model could strengthen the Orang Asli community by fostering greater involvement in decision-making and supporting the creation of community-led projects and initiatives (Nicholas, 2000; Mustapha, 2013). Such an approach would enable community members to take ownership of their own development and promote a more democratic and equitable social system (Endicott & Dentan, 2004). A new leadership model could further empower the community by encouraging active participation in decision-making processes and promote the development of community-owned projects and initiatives.

A new leadership model could prioritize environmental stewardship and the sustainable use of resources by building upon the existing values and practices of the Semai community (Heikkila, 2014). Scholars have suggested that a new leadership model could be developed to prioritize environmental stewardship and sustainable resource use by drawing upon the values and practices of the Semai community (Fox, 2011; Mustapha, 2013). For instance, the Semai community have traditionally practiced swidden agriculture, a form of shifting cultivation that allows for natural regeneration of forests and reduces soil degradation (Endicott & Dentan, 2004). This is also found in Akiya's (2018) novel titled *Kami*:

Dusun durian yang aku akan buat nanti tidak begitu jauh dari rumah kami, tidak sampai satu kilometer pun. Aku merancang untuk menanam durian di atas sebidang tanah yang luasnya lebih kurang enam ekar. Selain durian, aku juga merancang untuk menanam rambutan dan petai. (Akiya, 2018, p. 223)

This means that the Semai community do not plant only one type of plant, they will rotate the plant which can indirectly degrade the soil. Such practices could be integrated into a new leadership model that prioritizes sustainable land use and conservation of natural resources (Howell, 1984). Additionally, a community-based approach to decision-making and governance could promote a more equitable distribution of resources and ensure that environmental concerns are taken into account in decision-making processes (Nicholas, 2000). For instance, a study by McKemey et al. (2020) on the traditional ecological knowledge of indigenous communities in Australia highlights the importance of indigenous leadership in promoting sustainable land use and natural resource management practices.

In this vein, a study by Wang and Szu-Yung (2019) on indigenous leadership and forest management in Taiwan emphasizes the need for inclusive and participatory decision-making processes to ensure the sustainability of forest resources. Diansyah et al. (2022) too suggest that a new leadership model for the Semai community that prioritizes environmental stewardship and sustainable resource utilization could enhance the long-term sustainability of the environment and the community's livelihoods. Such a model could foster greater community participation and promote traditional knowledge and practices that support sustainable land use and conservation (Endicott & Dentan, 2004). By integrating these values and practices into a new leadership model, the Semai community could ensure the preservation of their natural resources and maintain their cultural identity and way of life for future generations. These findings suggest that a new leadership model for the Semai community that prioritizes environmental stewardship and the sustainable use of resources could help to promote the long-term sustainability of the environment and the community's livelihoods.

In a nutshell, a new leadership model for the Semai community could prioritize environmental stewardship and the sustainable use of resources, building upon their existing values and practices. This would not only promote the sustainable use of resources but also help to address the environmental challenges faced by the community. The literature on indigenous leadership from overseas also provides valuable insights into the importance of indigenous leadership in promoting sustainable land use and natural resource management practices. The idea of community empowerment has been a recurring theme in the literature on indigenous leadership, and the Semai community provides an interesting case study in this regard. According to Chua et al. (2021) the Semai community have a long-standing tradition of collective decision-making and mutual responsibility, which has shaped their traditional leadership style. This leadership style can be proven through *Orang Kecil* (Akiya, 2014):

Batin Dulah mula merancang sesuatu. Batin Dulah harus bijak merancang. Batin Dulah mengajak anak-anak buahnya bermesyuarat. Bincang bersama-sama. Mencari jalan bersama-sama. Apakah bentuk tindakan yang patut mereka ambil untuk melestari masa depan mereka? Masyarakat Kampung Ulu Sungai Kepayang tahu mereka telah lama berkampung laman di kampung itu. (Akiya, 2014, p. 29)

Based on the excerpt from the novel above, it clearly shows the character of Batin Dulah as a leader who practices a democratic leadership style when they make decisions collectively. This style of leadership is based on the principles of consensus-building and cooperation, rather than individual power and authority (Kroes, 2002). This community-based approach to leadership and decision-making has contributed to the preservation of their natural resources and sustainable land use practices (Endicott & Dentan, 2004). This community empowerment model is based on the idea that each member of the community has a role to play in decision-making, ensuring that decisions are made with the common good in mind, rather than benefiting any particular individual or group. This, in turn, could help to preserve their cultural identity and way of life for future generations while ensuring the long-term sustainability of their natural resources.

A new leadership model for the Semai community could further empower the community by encouraging active participation in decision-making processes and promoting the development of community-owned projects and initiatives. This would not only ensure that the community's needs and priorities are met, but also promote a sense of ownership and pride in community-led initiatives. As noted by Fui et al. (2012) such an approach could help to address the challenges faced by the Semai community, including marginalization and lack of access to resources. In conclusion, community empowerment is a key element of a new leadership model for the Semai community, building on their existing values and practices while also adapting to the changing needs of the community. This would not only promote a sense of ownership and pride in community-led initiatives, but also help to address the challenges faced by the community.

4.2. Environmental Conservation

Numerous studies have documented the Semai community's deep connection to the environment and their sustainable use of natural resources. For instance, Lin (2006) found that the community has a profound respect for the natural world and is committed to using resources in a sustainable manner. Akiya (2018) mentions in the *Kami* Novel about the attitude of Semai community who respect nature as in the quote:

Orang Semai di kampung aku daripada turun-temurun masih percaya akan Taa Engkuuk, guntur berkuasa yang turut menjaga segala makhluk ciptaan tuhan seperti serangga, semut, cacing tanah, ulat bulu, rama-rama, kupu-kupu, cicak kubin, cicak rumah, patung-patung, ular, kucing, monyet, dan sebagainya. (Akiya, 2018, p. 68)

Similarly, Kardooni et al. (2014) found that the community relies heavily on traditional knowledge and practices to ensure the sustainability of their natural resources. A new leadership model for the Semai community could capitalize on these traditional values and practices and prioritize environmental conservation. This could entail promoting sustainable practices, such as agroforestry and the use of non-timber forest products, that align with the community's traditional values. The community's traditional leadership model, which is centered on the principle of "mutual responsibility" and collective decision-making, already emphasizes the importance of the common good in decision-making. Therefore, a new leadership model for the community could further prioritize environmental conservation and promote sustainable practices that align with their traditional values (Kardooni et al., 2014; Chua et al., 2021).

There is a growing body of literature that emphasizes the importance of traditional knowledge and practices in promoting sustainable natural resource management. For instance, a study by [Calamia \(1999\)](#) in the Pacific Islands found that traditional knowledge and practices are critical for effective marine resource management. Similarly, a study by [Reo and Whyte \(2012\)](#) in North America highlights the importance of indigenous knowledge in promoting sustainable land use and resource management practices. According to a study conducted by [Ali et al. \(2022\)](#) which collected data from focus group discussions and interviews with the Semai community, the current leadership model in the community primarily focuses on economic development and does not adequately address environmental concerns. The study also found that the community members expressed a strong desire to maintain their traditional knowledge and practices related to natural resource management. Therefore, [Ali et al. \(2022\)](#) suggest that implementing a new leadership model that prioritizes environmental conservation and incorporates traditional knowledge and practices could be an effective way to promote sustainable natural resource management in the community. These findings suggest that a new leadership model for the Semai community that prioritises environmental conservation and incorporates their traditional knowledge and practices could be an effective way to promote sustainable natural resource management.

According to research conducted by [Schultz et al. \(2022\)](#) community-owned initiatives that promote sustainable development have been successful in various indigenous communities. The researchers found that such initiatives prioritise environmental conservation and promote sustainable economic development, which aligns with the traditional values of indigenous communities. Furthermore, a study conducted by [Mebratu \(1998\)](#) suggests that traditional values, such as respect for the environment, can be integrated into modern leadership practices to promote sustainable development. Therefore, a new leadership model that promotes community-owned projects and initiatives aligned with traditional values could be an effective way to promote sustainable economic development and environmental conservation in the Semai community. Moreover, a new leadership model could also promote sustainable development practices that are aligned with the community's traditional values. This could involve the development of community-owned projects and initiatives that prioritise environmental conservation and promote sustainable economic development. By doing so, the community could maintain a healthy balance between economic development and environmental conservation, ensuring the long-term sustainability of both.

In conclusion, by incorporating traditional knowledge and practices into this model, the community could maintain a healthy balance between economic development and environmental conservation ([Abdullah et al., 2015](#)). Thus, for the Semai community, a new leadership model that prioritises environmental conservation and promotes sustainable practices aligned with their traditional values could be a particularly effective way to promote sustainable natural resource management and economic development.

4.3. Inter-Generational Knowledge Sharing

The Semai community has a long-standing tradition of passing down their cultural heritage from one generation to another. As noted by [Chua et al. \(2021\)](#) the community's leadership model is based on the principle of "mutual responsibility," where each

member of the community has a role to play in decision-making. In the *Orang Kecil* Novel, [Akiya \(2014\)](#) have stated that:

Orang politik ada peranannya. Orang kerajaan, ada peranannya. Polis, ada peranannya. Cikgu yang mengajar juga ada peranannya. Sani sendiri sedang memainkan peranannya. Batin Dulah, Isa, Long, Seman, Semah, Yok Peri, Alias, Tok Ki, dan orang kampung masing-masing mempunyai peranan. Itu juga ketentuan Jenaang, Tuhan yang maha mengetahui. ([Akiya, 2014, p. 56](#))

This approach to leadership ensures that decisions are made with the common good in mind, and the community's cultural practices and values are preserved. Research from other countries also supports the importance of inter-generational knowledge sharing in indigenous communities. For example, a study by [Koole and Wasakayasiw \(2018\)](#) found that inter-generational knowledge transfer was critical for maintaining indigenous languages, cultural practices, and ecological knowledge in the Cree community in Canada. Another study by [Bohensky and Maru \(2011\)](#) noted that the inter-generational transfer of knowledge was necessary for maintaining the traditional ecological knowledge of the Maasai community in Kenya.

A new leadership model for the Semai community could emphasise the importance of inter-generational knowledge sharing by ensuring that younger generations have access to the cultural practices and values of their elders. Studies conducted by [Ali et al. \(2022\)](#) highlight the significance of inter-generational knowledge sharing among the Semai community. [Ali et al. \(2022\)](#) found that the community members expressed a strong desire to maintain their traditional knowledge and practices related to natural resource management. Meanwhile, [Singh et al. \(2010\)](#) reported that the loss of traditional knowledge among the younger generation was a concern for the community. Therefore, a new leadership model that emphasises the importance of inter-generational knowledge sharing could be an effective way to ensure that younger generations have access to the cultural practices and values of their elders, which could contribute to the promotion of sustainable natural resource management and economic development ([Singh et al., 2010; Ali et al., 2022](#)).

This could involve programs and initiatives that promote the preservation of the community's cultural heritage, such as language and cultural education programs, storytelling sessions, and community events that celebrate their traditions. By prioritising inter-generational knowledge sharing, the community can ensure the preservation of their cultural practices and values for future generations.

4.4. Partnership with External Stakeholders

The Semai community faces numerous challenges in today's era, including marginalisation, poverty, and lack of access to resources. A new leadership model could help address these challenges by building partnerships with external stakeholders, such as non-governmental organisations and government agencies. Research conducted by [Kamal and Voon-Ching \(2019\)](#) suggests that partnerships with external stakeholders can play a significant role in addressing the challenges faced by the Orang Asli community, including the Semai. [Akiya \(2018\)](#) in the *Kami* Novel state that:

Tugas penghuluk yang pertama ialah beliau wajib melaporkan kepada pihak berkuasa tentang kelahiran dan kematian. Yang kedua, menyelesaikan pertengkaran yang berlaku antara anak buahnya, dan juga perkara-perkara lain yang berbangkit. Tegasnya, penghuluk menjadi orang perantaraan antara anak-anak buahnya dengan pihak berkuasa atau pihak tertentu dalam hal ehwal rasmi. (Akiya, 2018, p. 4)

The study found that partnerships with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and government agencies can help increase the community's access to resources and improve their socio-economic conditions. Additionally, partnerships with external stakeholders can help build capacity within the community and empower them to take control of their own development processes. Furthermore, a study conducted by [Diansyah et al. \(2022\)](#) highlights the potential benefits of community-based tourism initiatives in addressing the challenges faced by the Semai community.

The researchers found that community-based tourism initiatives can help generate income for the community while promoting their traditional culture and values. A new leadership model that builds partnerships with external stakeholders and promotes community-based tourism initiatives could, therefore, be an effective way to address the challenges faced by the Semai community ([Kamal & Voon-Ching, 2019](#); [Diansyah et al., 2022](#)). Such partnerships could provide the community with access to resources and support, as well as help them address larger issues that affect their well-being. Research conducted overseas has also highlighted the importance of building partnerships with external stakeholders to support indigenous communities. For example, a study by [Tipa and Welch \(2006\)](#) explored the partnership between a Maori community in New Zealand and a government agency to address issues related to the management of natural resources. The study found that the partnership resulted in improved communication, collaboration, and mutual understanding between the Maori community and the government agency, as well as better management of the natural resources. Another study by [Stephen \(2018\)](#) emphasised the importance of partnerships between indigenous communities and non-governmental organizations in achieving sustainable development. The study highlighted the need for partnerships that are based on mutual respect, shared decision-making, and understanding of the needs and priorities of the indigenous communities.

The Semai community faces many challenges, including marginalisation, poverty, and lack of access to resources. A new leadership model could build partnerships with external stakeholders, such as non-governmental organisations and government agencies, to address these challenges and support the community's development. This approach has been successful in other indigenous communities around the world, such as the Maasai community in Kenya, who have partnered with non-profitable organisations to improve access to education and healthcare ([Lekoko & Ouma, 2017](#)). The Orang Asli community has also been working with NGOs and government agencies to secure land rights and protect their ancestral lands from development ([Subramaniam, 2012](#)). By building partnerships with external stakeholders, the Semai community could gain access to resources and support to address their pressing needs while preserving their traditional way of life. In summary, a new leadership model for the Semai community could prioritise building partnerships with external stakeholders to address the challenges they face and support their development. Such partnerships can be based on the principles of mutual respect, shared decision-making, and understanding of the community's cultural practices and values.

5. Proposed Leadership Model for Orang Asli Semai Community

The Semai community, one of the indigenous groups in Malaysia, has a unique set of cultural traditions and leadership practices. This section will propose a leadership model that is grounded in the cultural values and practices of the Semai community. By analyzing literary works authored by Semai individuals, we aim to identify recurring themes and patterns that will inform the proposed leadership model. The model is intended to promote culturally sensitive leadership practices that are appropriate and effective for the Semai community.

5.1. Leadership Elements for Community Empowerment

Community empowerment is crucial for the well-being and development of the community. The proposed key elements for community empowerment, which include collective decision-making and mutual responsibility, promoting environmental stewardship and sustainable resource use, community-based approach to decision-making and governance, and active participation in decision-making processes and community-led initiatives, can be used to build effective community empowerment strategies. This proposal highlights the importance of community empowerment in the Semai community and provides a framework for developing strategies that can contribute to community development and well-being. Based on our analysis, we have identified several key elements that should be incorporated into the community empowerment model for the Semai community. To present these findings in an organised manner, we will tabulate them in [Table 1](#). Overall, these elements could be combined to create a new leadership model that prioritises community empowerment, sustainability, and environmental stewardship in the Semai community.

Table 1: Leadership Elements for Community Empowerment

Elements	Explanation
Collective Decision-Making and Mutual Responsibility	Community members must be actively involved in the decision-making processes that affect their lives. This includes promoting collective decision-making and mutual responsibility among community members to ensure that decisions are made in the best interest of the community as a whole.
Promoting Environmental Stewardship and Sustainable Resource Use	The Semai community depends heavily on natural resources for their livelihoods. Therefore, promoting environmental stewardship and sustainable resource use is crucial for the community's long-term well-being.
Community-Based Approach to Decision-Making and Governance	Community-based approaches to decision-making and governance are essential for community empowerment. This involves empowering community members to make decisions and develop solutions to issues that affect their lives.
Active Participation in Decision-Making Processes and Community-Led Initiatives	Active participation in decision-making processes and community-led initiatives is crucial for community empowerment. This includes engaging community members in various stages of decision-making processes and supporting community-led initiatives to address community challenges.

5.2. Leadership Elements for Environmental Conservation

The Semai community, known for their profound respect for the natural world, highly depends on their traditional knowledge and practices to maintain the sustainability of their natural resources. Integration of these practices into a new leadership model could lead to the prioritization of environmental conservation and the promotion of sustainable practices consistent with the community's traditional values and this can be seen in Table 2. By adopting a new leadership model that prioritises the integration of traditional values with modern practices, sustainable practices that align with the community's traditional values can be promoted, ensuring the long-term sustainability of both economic development and environmental conservation.

Table 2: Leadership Elements for Environmental Conservation

Elements	Explanation
Traditional Knowledge and Practices & Respect for the Environment	Effective leaders should understand and appreciate the importance of traditional knowledge and practices in facilitating sustainable environmental conservation strategies. Leadership plays a crucial role in integrating traditional values into modern practices to promote sustainable development aligned with community values. The incorporation of traditional values such as respect for the environment in leadership practices is crucial for achieving environmental conservation goals. By adopting a new leadership model that prioritises the integration of traditional values with modern practices, sustainable practices that align with the community's traditional values can be promoted, ensuring the long-term sustainability of both economic development and environmental conservation.
Sustainable Practices	In order to achieve environmental conservation, it is imperative to promote sustainable practices that align with the community's traditional values. Practices such as agroforestry and the use of non-timber forest products can help mitigate the adverse effects of human activities on the environment while also ensuring the long-term sustainability of natural resources. By prioritising sustainable practices, leaders can foster a culture of environmental responsibility and promote a balanced approach to economic development and environmental conservation.
Economic Development	Effective leadership is crucial in balancing economic development and environmental conservation. A new leadership model must prioritise sustainable economic development practices that align with the community's traditional values to ensure a healthy balance between economic growth and environmental conservation. Strong leadership can encourage innovation and entrepreneurship to create sustainable solutions that benefit both the economy and the environment. Leaders can engage stakeholders, such as businesses and local communities, in discussions on sustainable development and work collaboratively towards achieving common goals.
Community-owned Projects and Initiatives	Leadership plays a critical role in the success of community-owned projects and initiatives that prioritise environmental conservation and promote sustainable economic development. A new leadership model can support and empower community leaders to drive these initiatives forward, ensuring that they align with the community's traditional values and promote sustainable practices. A new leadership model can help establish partnerships with key stakeholders to provide resources and support for these community initiatives, ultimately contributing to the long-term sustainability of both economic development and environmental conservation.

5.3. Leadership Elements for Inter-Generational Knowledge Sharing

Leaders play a crucial role in promoting and supporting programs and initiatives that aim to preserve the community's cultural heritage. They can facilitate the implementation of language and cultural education programs, storytelling sessions, and community events that celebrate their traditions. They can also encourage younger generations to participate in inter-generational knowledge sharing activities and ensure that their contributions are valued and recognised. As noted by [Singh et al. \(2010\)](#) a new leadership model that emphasises the importance of inter-generational knowledge sharing could be an effective way to ensure the preservation of the community's cultural practices and values for future generations. Based on the literature review, the proposed formulation for this leadership element is presented in the form of a [Table 3](#). In conclusion, a new leadership model that prioritises environmental conservation and incorporates traditional knowledge and practices could be an effective way to promote sustainable natural resource management and economic development in the Semai community. By maintaining a healthy balance between economic development and environmental conservation, the community can ensure the long-term sustainability of both.

Table 3: Leadership Elements for Inter-generational Knowledge Sharing

Elements	Explanation
Initiatives to Promote the Preservation of the Community's Cultural Heritage	Leaders in the Semai community can be effective in promoting and supporting programs and initiatives that aim to preserve the community's cultural heritage by providing guidance and support to community members involved in these efforts. Leaders can advocate for the recognition and protection of the community's cultural heritage at the local, national, and international levels. Leaders can use their influence and position to promote sustainable natural resource management practices that are in line with the community's cultural values and practices. By doing so, they can help to ensure that the community's traditional knowledge and practices related to natural resource management are preserved and passed down to future generations.
Mentoring	One model that could be used to promote inter-generational knowledge sharing in the Semai community is a mentorship program. The program would pair older community members with younger generations to facilitate the transfer of traditional knowledge and practices. The mentorship program could be structured to allow for a range of activities, including one-on-one mentoring sessions, group activities, and community-wide events. The mentorship program could focus on several areas, including natural resource management, language preservation, and cultural practices. The mentorship program could be designed to encourage both formal and informal learning.
Facilitate Community Involvement	Leaders should actively involve community members in both the development and implementation stages. Leaders can seek input from community members on the areas of focus and design of the program's activities. Furthermore, leaders can encourage community members to serve as mentors, sharing their knowledge and expertise with the younger generation. This approach can empower community members and foster a sense of ownership over the program, leading to greater participation and long-term success.
Fostering Sustainable Initiatives	A new leadership model can support and empower community leaders to drive these initiatives forward, ensuring that they align with the community's traditional values and promote sustainable practices. Additionally, a new leadership model can help establish partnerships with key stakeholders to

provide resources and support for these community initiatives, ultimately contributing to the long-term sustainability of both economic development and environmental conservation.

5.4. Leadership Elements for Partnership with External Stakeholders

The new leadership model for the Semai community prioritises building partnerships with external stakeholders to address the challenges faced by the community and support their development. The model recognises that partnerships with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and government agencies can provide the community with access to resources and support, as well as help them address larger issues that affect their well-being. The key elements of this model include in [Table 4](#).

Table 4: Leadership Elements for Partnership with External Stakeholders

Elements	Explanation
Building Partnerships	The community will partner with NGOs and government agencies to gain access to resources and support that can help address their pressing needs. Partnerships will be based on the principles of mutual respect, shared decision-making, and understanding of the community's cultural practices and values.
Community-based Tourism Initiatives	The model will promote community-based tourism initiatives that generate income for the community while promoting their traditional culture and values. Such initiatives can also help build capacity within the community and empower them to take control of their own development processes.
Capacity Building and Empowerment	Partnerships with external stakeholders will also focus on building capacity within the community and empowering them to take control of their own development processes. This can be achieved through training programs, workshops, and other initiatives that help the community acquire the skills and knowledge they need to achieve their goals.
Securing Land Rights	The model recognizes the importance of securing land rights for the community and protecting their ancestral lands from development. Partnerships with external stakeholders will aim to secure land rights and protect the community's traditional way of life.

By prioritising partnerships with external stakeholders, the new leadership model for the Orang Asli Semai community aims to address the challenges faced by the community and support their development while preserving their traditional way of life. This approach has been successful in other indigenous communities around the world and can provide a framework for the Orang Asli Semai community to achieve their goals. Refer to [Table 5](#).

Table 5: Shows the Leadership Elements Construct of the Semai Community

Leadership Elements for Semai Community	
Community Empowerment	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. collective decision-making and mutual responsibility 2. promoting environmental stewardship and sustainable resource 3. community-based approach to decision-making and governance 4. active participation in decision-making processes and community-led initiatives
Environmental	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. the traditional knowledge and practices & respect for the environment 2. sustainable practices 3. economic development

Conservation	4. community-owned projects and initiatives
Inter-generational Knowledge Sharing	1. community- preservation of the community's cultural heritage 2. mentoring 3. facilitate community involvement 4. fostering sustainable initiatives
Partnership with External Stakeholders	1. active building partnerships 2. community-based tourism initiatives 3. capacity building and empowerment 4. securing land rights

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the four elements outlined will be used to review the leadership of the Semai community. This will be done using literary texts that have been published. The review process will help to better understand the Semai community leadership model and the role that inter-generational knowledge sharing, community empowerment, and environmental conservation play in preserving the community's cultural heritage and promoting sustainable practices. Through this review, it is hoped that new insights can be gained into how the Semai community can continue to thrive and develop in a rapidly changing world while maintaining their unique cultural identity. Furthermore, it is important to note that while the proposed model emphasises the roles of community empowerment, environmental conservation, inter-generational knowledge sharing, and partnership with external stakeholders, it is still a work in progress and requires fine-tuning based on further research and consultation with the Semai community. However, it is hoped that this model can serve as a starting point for discussions and collaborations aimed at strengthening the Semai community leadership model and promoting the well-being of the community. In particular, community empowerment can play a crucial role in ensuring that the voices of all community members are heard, and their needs and concerns are addressed. Environmental conservation is also important as it can help preserve the natural resources that are vital to the Semai community's livelihoods and cultural practices. Additionally, inter-generational knowledge sharing can help to ensure the preservation of the community's cultural heritage and values for future generations.

Finally, partnerships with external stakeholders such as government agencies, NGOs, and businesses can provide the Semai community with access to resources, expertise, and funding that can help support community initiatives and promote sustainable development. By working together and leveraging the strengths of each stakeholder, it is possible to create a more sustainable and equitable future for the Semai community. It is important to note that the proposed model for leadership in the Semai community is a starting point and may require further refinement and adjustments. However, it can serve as a useful framework for understanding the community's values and practices and how they can be incorporated into leadership models. By reviewing various literary texts and other relevant materials, we can gain insights into the community's cultural heritage, leadership practices, and traditional knowledge. With this information, we can develop leadership models that are more responsive to the community's needs and aspirations. Therefore, while the proposed model is not definitive, it can be a valuable tool for advancing our understanding of the Semai community and promoting their sustainable development. In the conclusion, it is essential to highlight the importance of sustainable practices in the Semai community leadership model. By promoting

sustainable practices, the community can ensure the long-term viability of their cultural heritage and natural resources. The review process and the proposed model aim to promote sustainability in the community by incorporating elements such as environmental conservation and inter-generational knowledge sharing. Through sustainable leadership practices, the Semai community can continue to thrive while preserving their unique cultural identity.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

Not applicable

Acknowledgement

This article is part of the requirements for my PhD and grant research project “Pembinaan Model Kepimpinan Orang Semai Berdasarkan Teks Fiksyen Pengarang Tempatan” FRGS/1/2022/SSI0/USM/02/9.

Funding

This article was prepared as part of the grant research project “Pembinaan Model Kepimpinan Orang Semai Berdasarkan Teks Fiksyen Pengarang Tempatan” FRGS/1/2022/SSI0/USM/02/9 funding study.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest

References

- Abdullah, J., Borhan, M. A. A., & Ahmad, C. B. (2015). Orang Asli resettlement in urban environment at Bukit Lanjan, Selangor, Malaysia. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 201, 71-79.
- Achom, L. (1984, November). *Kebudayaan Orang Asli dan Kebudayaan Kebangsaan* [Paper presentation]. Simposium Pembangunan dan Masa Depan Orang Asli Semenanjung, UKM, Bangi, Selangor.
- Akiya. (2014). *Orang Kecil*. Institut Terjemahan & Buku Malaysia.
- Akiya. (2018). *Kami*. Institut Terjemahan & Buku Malaysia.
- Ali, A., Yaakob, A. N., & Jangga, R. (2022). Role of Tok Biah in the customs and beliefs of Orang Asli Jakun, Bekok, Segamat, Johor. *Social Sciences*, 12(9), 166-182. <https://doi:10.6007/ijarbss/v12-i9/14302>
- Bohensky, E. L., & Maru, Y. (2011). Indigenous knowledge, science, and resilience: What have we learned from a decade of international literature on “integration”?. *Ecology and Society*, 16(4), 6-25. <https://dx.doi.org/10.5751/ES-04342-160406>
- Calamia, M. A. (1999). A methodology for incorporating traditional ecological knowledge with geographic information systems for marine resource management in the pacific. *SPC Traditional Marine Resource Management and Knowledge Information Bulletin*, 10, 2-12.
- Chua, R. Y., Kadirvelu, A., Yasin, S., & Park, M. S. A. (2021). An exploratory model of family resilience processes and functioning: a cultural perspective of the Semai

- indigenous communities in Perak, Malaysia. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 52(6), 567-582. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00220221211028297>
- Diansyah, M. W., Abas, A., & Sakawi, Z. (2022). Exploring the relevance of engaging the Orang Asli in Malaysia's forest management. *Frontiers in Forests and Global Change*, 5, 237. <https://doi.org/10.3389/ffgc.2022.1019994>
- Edo, J., Williams-Hunt, A., & Dentan, R. K. (2009). Surrender, peacekeeping and internal colonialism. A Malaysian instance. *Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences of Southeast Asia*, 165(2-3), 216-240.
- Endicott, K. M. & Dentan, R. K. (2004). *The Semai: A nonviolent people of Malaya*. Wadsworth Publishing.
- Fox, J. (2011). *Origins, Ancestry and Alliance: Explorations in Austronesian ethnography*. ANU E Press.
- Fui, L. H., Luohui, L., Camacho, L. D., Combalicer, E. A. and Savinder Kaur Kapar Singh. (2012). Southeast Asia. In Parrotta, J. A. & Troster, R. L. (Eds.), *Traditional forest-related knowledge: Sustaining communities, ecosystems and biocultural diversity* (pp. 357-394). Springer Dordrecht Heidelberg.
- Gomes, A. (2012). Alter-native 'development': Indigenous forms of social ecology. *Third World Quarterly*, 33(6), 1059-1073. <https://doi:10.2307/41507223>
- Gomes, A.G. (1988). The Semai: The making of an ethnic group in Malaysia. In *Ethnic diversity and the control of natural resources in Southeast Asia* (pp. 99-118). The University of Michigan Press.
- Heikkila, K. (2014). The forest is our inheritance: An introduction to Semai Orang Asli place-naming and belonging in the Bukit Tapah Forest Reserve. *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography*, 35(3), 362-381. <https://doi:10.1111/sjtg.12073>
- Howell, S. (1984). *Society and cosmos: Chewong of Peninsular Malaysia*. Oxford University Press.
- Kamal, S. K., & Voon-Ching, L. (2019). Forest reserve as an inclusive or exclusive space? engaging Orang Asli as stakeholder in protected area management. *Journal of Tropical Forest Science*, 31(3), 278-285. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26740144>
- Kardooni, R., Kari, F.B., Yahaya, S.R.B., & Yusup, S.H. (2014). Traditional knowledge of Orang Asli on forests in Peninsular Malaysia. *IJTK 2014*, 13(2), 283-291.
- Koole, M., & Wasakayasiw Lewis, K. (2018). Mobile learning as a tool for indigenous language revitalization and sustainability in Canada: Framing the challenge. *International Journal of Mobile and Blended Learning (IJMBL)*, 10(4), 1-12.
- Kroes, G. (2002). Culture contact and Semai cultural identity. In G. Benjamin & C. Chou (Eds.), *Tribal communities in the Malay world* (pp. 237-253). Cambridge University Press.
- Lambin, R., Wahab, N. A., Choo, G. S., Mustapha, R., Abdullah, R., & Sharif, R. M. (2019). Transmission and documentation of Orang Asli indigenous knowledge in 'green technology' for sustainable development in Malaysia. *International Journal of Academic Research Business and Social Sciences*, 9(5), 195-213. <https://doi:10.6007/ijarbss/v9-i5/5850>
- Lekoko, R. N., & Ouma, Y. O. (2017). Community-based natural resources management, tourism and sustainable development in Botswana: A critical reflection. *African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure*, 6(3), 1-15.
- Lin, C. Y. O. (2006). Autonomy re-constituted: Social and gendered implications of dam resettlement on the Orang Asli of Peninsular Malaysia. *Gender, Technology and Development*, 10(1), 77-99.

- McKemeY, M., Ens, E., Rangers, Y. M., Costello, O., & Reid, N. (2020). Indigenous knowledge and seasonal calendar inform adaptive savanna burning in northern Australia. *Sustainability*, 12(3), 995. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su12030995>
- Mebratu, D. (1998). Sustainability and sustainable development: historical and conceptual review. *Environmental impact assessment review*, 18(6), 493-520. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0195-9255\(98\)00019-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0195-9255(98)00019-5)
- Mustapha, R. B. (2013). Attributes that affect self-efficacy and career development of Orang Asli youth in Peninsular Malaysia. *Journal of Southeast Asian Education*, 6(1), 1-24.
- Nicholas, C. (1989). Theories of development and the underdevelopment of the Orang Asli. *Akademika: Jurnal Sains Kemasyarakatan dan Kemanusiaan*, 35, 55-68.
- Nicholas, C. (2000). *The Orang Asli and the contest for resources: Indigenous politics, development and identity in Peninsular Malaysia*. IWGIA Document No. 95.
- Norouzi Kandalan, R., Varanasi, M., Buckles, B., & Namuduri, K. (2020). Impact of leadership and mobility on consensus-building in sensor networks. *Sensors*, 20(4), 1081.
- Reo, N. J., & K. P. Whyte. (2012). Hunting and morality as elements of traditional ecological knowledge. *Human Ecology*, 40(1), 15-27. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10745-011-9448-1>
- Schultz, M., Jamieson, H., Piontek, E., Coon, J. J., & Halsey, S. J. (2022). The importance of cultural values in ecological restorations: a systematic review. *Society & Natural Resources*, 35(9), 1021-1039.
- Shamsul, A. B. (2001). A history of an identity, an identity of a history: The idea and practice of 'Malaynesee' in Malaysia reconsidered. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 32(3), 355-366.
- Singh, R. K., Pretty, J., & Pilgrim, S. (2010). Traditional knowledge and biocultural diversity: learning from tribal communities for sustainable development in northeast India. *Journal of Environmental Planning and Management*, 53(4), 511-533.
- Stephen, K. (2018). Societal impacts of a rapidly changing arctic. *Climate Change Report*, 4, 223-237. doi:10.1007/s40641-018-0106-1
- Subramaniam, Y. (2012). *Orang Asli land rights by UNDRIP standards in Peninsular Malaysia: An evaluation and possible reform* [Doctoral thesis, The University of New South Wales].
- Tipa, G., & Welch, R. (2006). Comanagement of natural resources: issues of definition from an indigenous community perspective. *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 42(3), 373-391.
- Wang, J., & Szu-Yung, W. (2019). Indigenous social policy and social inclusion in Taiwan. *Sustainability*, 11(2), 3458. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su11123458>