



Going Glocal

Cultural Dimensions In Malaysian Management



“Kalau sepohon kayu banyak akarnya apa ditakutkan ribut.”

*“If a tree has many firm roots
there is no need to fear the storm.”*

By Asma Abdullah

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PROLOGUE

This book is about understanding our *akar* or roots - that part of our culture which is very much hidden and therefore not easily seen. Like the iceberg, it is that part that is below the surface of the water and has to do with our values and underlying assumptions which strongly influence the way we perceive, think, feel and evaluate the world around us.

As Malaysians become more exposed to foreign cultures through work, study and travel, I believe that the first step to looking outwards is to know who we are, particularly our revered values which have influenced our way of thinking. It is the part of us that we take for granted as it is often predefined or predetermined - we simply do not question it.

But to reach out and march ahead towards Vision 2020, we have to first of all examine our own cultural baggage which can strengthen or hinder our efforts towards modernity. It means having to come to terms with how we respond to the various forces of change - ranging from industrialization, development, westernization, Islamization and globalization, and go about internalizing their accompanying values.

It is written for the following audiences:

- Students of management and social sciences at our local universities who want to know how our cultural values are manifested at the workplace
- Managers in both private and public sector organizations, especially those who have a "quasi Western" mind-set and now want to know how to combine Eastern and Western perspectives in managing the Malaysian workforce
- Human resource development professionals and consultants both local and foreign who are interested in the subject of culture and its influence on the human side of the organization

The approach I have taken in writing this book is to examine the key elements of what constitutes culture and the values of my own ethnic group and how they are being interpreted at home and at the workplace. While I see the conflict of values of my own ethnic group in having to adjust to a rapidly changing world of industrialization and increasing globalization, I also see the need to harness our own core values or *akar*.

Whether at work or at home, I am more exposed to Western values but I remain truly and proudly a Malay in terms of my value orientation. My interpretation of the world and work is very much based on my Malay culture lens which I am most confident to talk about. My decision to exclude the views of other ethnic groups in greater detail will, I hope, stimulate some of my friends from other ethnic groups who represent the Chinese, Indian and Others to write from their own perspectives as Malaysians.

I grew up in a conservative Malay family - where some of my early days were spent in a little kampung near Baling, Kedah. I still remember the times I played rounders on the dried padi fields at the end of every rice harvesting season. Although I now live in a busy residential suburb of Petaling Jaya, my Malay "kampung" values are still intact. My parents live about five minutes' drive away from my house and I am fortunate to enjoy the benefits of an extended network of relatives for support and comfort.

I attended an all girls' residential school - away from home, and hence this was where I gained my self-confidence and independence of having to do things on my own. As my undergraduate and graduate education was at foreign universities, I learnt to cope with unfamiliar settings and not to rely on my extended network of kin for support and comfort during those times when I most needed them.

On reflection, those early experiences have given me the courage to do things on my own and the confidence to depend on my inner strengths and feminine instincts!

My first employer, MARA, and colleagues at the Mara Junior Science College introduced me to a predominantly intracultural or monocultural Malay work setting. As an overseas graduate, I still remember being told that while I was efficient, I was not always effective. Little did I realize that the remark was made because of my insensitivity to the context and nuances found in the Malay socio cultural milieu, and specifically the influence of ethnic values on managerial practices. I later learned that the behaviours which I had acquired at the cross-cultural university setting were not always appropriate at the intracultural Malay work setting.

The Business Setting

The materials in this book are based on my training and consulting experiences in both local and foreign-based organizations on the subject of culture and management. I believe it is only through our own reflections on our everyday work that we can derive lessons from our own personal journey, and in the process engage ourselves in some form of transformative learning.

My work setting has given me the context for conducting research and studying organizational work practices from the perspective of an insider. In the last two years, my research in this field has taken me to many places, organizational settings - both in business and academia, voluntary groups, schools, several government ministries, and clubs and associations both locally and abroad. It is based on my dialogues and discussion summaries with both Malaysians and foreign managers and professionals that I have now gathered sufficient material for seminars and publications on the subject.

The American multinational organization is an example of a workplace which is both intercultural (with other Malaysians of different ethnic groups) and cross-cultural (with expatriates, especially Americans). It is also a place where I have to constantly re-examine my so-called "Malayness" which I have grown accustomed to while working in a previous mono-ethnic or intracultural organization that is Malay and Muslim based.

In the course of my work as an internal consultant and Human