

The meaning of Panggadakkang in HRM practice: ethnographic study on creative SMEs in Toraja

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Abstract

This study explores the role of panggadakkang—a Torajan cultural value centered on upliftment, respect, and mutual nurturance—in shaping human resource management (HRM) practices within creative micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) in Toraja, Indonesia. Using an ethnographic qualitative approach, data were collected over eight months through participant observation, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis involving four creative MSMEs. The findings reveal panggadakkang as an operative cultural grammar that redefines HRM across five themes: ethical leadership as moral custodianship, kinship-based recruitment and apprenticeship, ritualized workplace civility, moral economies of compensation, and youth-mediated technological modernization. These practices highlight a hybrid model of HRM that integrates modern business demands with deeply embedded cultural norms, fostering organizational resilience and worker dignity. However, tensions arise between cultural obligations and economic pressures, particularly in scaling enterprises and accessing formal finance. The study concludes that culturally informed HRM interventions, co-designed with communities and leveraging intergenerational knowledge exchanges, are essential to sustain Toraja's creative industries. This research contributes to decolonizing HRM theory by foregrounding indigenous values as foundational to ethical and effective people management.

Keywords: Indigenous HRM; Panggadakkang Ethics; Cultural Hybridization; Moral Economy; Toraja Creative MSMEs.

1. Introduction

The creative MSMEs of Toraja articulate an economy that is inseparable from a living cultural grammar; central among its moral vocabularies is panggadakkang, a value that orients leaders and workers toward upliftment, respect, and mutual nurturance. This philosophical foundation shapes organizational behavior in profound ways, creating management practices that prioritize communal well-being alongside economic productivity. The preservation of this value system becomes particularly crucial as Toraja's creative industries navigate the complexities of modern market integration while maintaining their distinctive cultural identity.

The urgency to examine panggadakkang in HRM stems from rapid market integration, tourism recovery, and digital influences that confront local enterprises with managerial logics often incongruent with indigenous ethics. Global business practices emphasizing individual performance metrics and standardized procedures increasingly challenge traditional Torajan approaches to workforce management. Furthermore, the post-pandemic resurgence of cultural



tourism has accelerated these pressures, creating an imperative to understand how local enterprises can adapt while preserving their ethical foundations. The digital transformation of marketing and sales channels adds another layer of complexity, as online platforms introduce new work rhythms and customer expectations that may conflict with culturally embedded practices.

Presently, Toraja creative firms negotiate pressures for documentation, measurable performance, and scalability even as ancestral obligations and ritualized reciprocity continue to structure daily work relations. This negotiation manifests in hybrid management systems where traditional values coexist with modern business requirements. Many enterprises maintain intricate social compacts that honor ceremonial calendars and kinship responsibilities while implementing basic operational systems to meet market demands. This delicate balancing act reflects the adaptive resilience of Toraja's business community while highlighting the need for management models that honor local wisdom.

Studying panggadakkang thus matters empirically and theoretically: it reveals how moral-cultural frameworks sustain organizational resilience and shape more humane HRM interventions that are socially legitimate in Toraja contexts. The research addresses significant gaps in both development practice and management theory by demonstrating how culturally-grounded values can inform sustainable business operations. By examining the practical implementation of panggadakkang in contemporary business settings, this study offers valuable insights for policymakers, development practitioners, and scholars interested in alternative management paradigms that prioritize human dignity and community wellbeing.

Since the post-pandemic reopening, demand for Toraja crafts and cultural tourism has recovered unevenly, producing both opportunity and new dependencies on external markets that valorize efficiency and standardized labor practices. This market reconnection has created both economic benefits and cultural challenges, as international buyers and tourists often bring expectations that conflict with traditional work patterns and social arrangements. The fluctuating nature of tourist arrivals and craft orders has further complicated workforce planning, requiring flexible approaches that respect both business realities and cultural commitments.

Internally, firms are navigating generational shifts: youth bring digital competencies and market access, while elders insist on ritual timing, ceremonial obligations, and social hierarchies that govern work allocation. This interdynamic creates both creative tension and innovation potential within family enterprises. Younger generations, often educated in urban centers and digitally literate, introduce new business methods and technologies, while older generations provide crucial cultural grounding and maintain relationships with traditional suppliers and artisans. The integration of these perspectives represents both a challenge and an opportunity for sustainable business evolution.

Resource constraints—seasonal cash flow, limited access to formal credit, and small scale—shape managerial choices, forcing trade-offs between investments in formal HR systems and support for kin-based obligations. These financial limitations often mean that businesses must make difficult decisions about how to allocate scarce resources between immediate family and community needs and longer-term business development. The social embeddedness of these enterprises means that purely economic calculations are often insufficient, as maintaining relational harmony and fulfilling cultural responsibilities remain

paramount considerations in resource allocation decisions. Without ethnographically grounded insight into pangngadakkang, policy and development programs risk imposing templates that erode relational trust or fail to leverage local strengths in sustaining worker dignity. External interventions that disregard the central importance of this value system may achieve short-term efficiency gains while undermining the social fabric that sustains both businesses and communities. Understanding how pangngadakkang operates in practice enables the design of support programs that enhance business capabilities while strengthening, rather than weakening, the cultural foundations that give Toraja's creative industries their distinctive character and resilience.

2. Literature Review

Global HRM debates emphasize flexible, humane responses during crises, noting that context-sensitive practices are crucial for employee safety and organizational continuity (Caligiuri et al., 2020). Empirical work on employee safety during health crises highlights that HR practices can moderate fear and mortality salience, shaping safety behaviors across age cohorts and media exposure contexts (Li et al., 2022).

Studies of SME digitalization show that human relationships remain central for soft information and trust in finance and partnerships, even as digital tools reshape interactions—suggesting complementarity rather than substitution between technology and relational capital (Fasano & Rocca, 2023). Scholarship on Indigenous psychology underscores the intergenerational transmission of values, distinct social identities formed under colonial histories, and the importance of integrating Indigenous knowledge into well-being and organizational interventions (González et al., 2021).

Research on Indigenous entrepreneurs demonstrates that cultural identity and entrepreneurship coexist without inevitable cultural erosion, and that social networks and culture can enable mobility rather than undermine it (Côté & Evans, 2023). Methodological guidance stresses participatory, reflexive, and safety-centered methods when researching Indigenous and community contexts, recommending locally responsive ethical frameworks and transformative engagement (Thomas et al., 2020).

The emerging green HRM literature suggests that spiritual leadership and value-alignment amplify employee pro-environmental behavior, indicating that ethical and spiritual orientations can mediate HR outcomes in culturally embedded firms (Li et al., 2023). Evidence from studies on green HRM and innovative work behavior indicates that context-specific HR practices can spur creative, eco-oriented behaviors when mediated by perceived support and leadership alignments (Khan et al., 2025).

Recent reviews on AI in HR highlight both opportunities for task optimization and risks of altering the social fabric of work, emphasizing the need to consider relational and social dimensions when implementing technological solutions in HR (Dima et al., 2024). Leadership literatures emphasize that inclusive and transformational leadership styles promote organizational citizenship behaviors and engagement, suggesting that ethical, participatory leadership can mobilize extra-role behaviors in small organizations (Chen et al., 2020; Cho & Kao, 2022).

Finally, CSR and ethical leadership scholarship shows that moral reflectiveness and perceived ethical orientation of leaders can encourage pro-social behaviors among employees, a dynamic likely resonant where cultural ethics infuse managerial sense-making (Mansour et al., 2022). Across these strands, three analytic gaps emerge: (a) how pangngadakkang specifically configures HR practices in Toraja MSMEs; (b) how technological and financial pressures interact with local moral orders; and (c) how culturally anchored leadership fosters wellbeing, safety, and creativity in micro-organizations.

3. Method

To address these gaps, an ethnographic qualitative design was employed to prioritize emic meanings and embodied practices of “pangngadakkang” in workplace life.

Fieldwork extended eight months in North Toraja and Tana Toraja, engaging four creative MSMEs: woodcarving co-op, traditional weaving collective, coffee-art microbrand, and a cultural-homestay cooperative.

Data collection combined participant observation, in-depth semi-structured interviews (n = 15: owners, artisans, junior staff), focus group dialogues with community elders, and document analysis of local regulations, cooperative minutes, and ritual calendars.

Interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia and Toraja language with community interpreters to ensure linguistic fidelity; reflective fieldnotes recorded non-verbal rituals, hearth conversations, and ceremonial labor sequences.

Analysis followed thematic-phenomenological procedures: identification of meaning units, iterative coding, clustering into experiential themes, and synthesis into an interpretive model of “pangngadakkang”-infused HRM.

Trustworthiness derived from triangulation across data sources, member-checking sessions where themes were validated by participants, and reflexive memos detailing the researcher's positionality and ethical negotiations with cultural protocols.

Ethical safeguards included informed consent, confidentiality, culturally appropriate reciprocity for time (small community contributions), and sensitivity to hierarchical norms, ensuring participants could speak without community-sanctioned repercussions.

4. Results and Discussion

Analysis yielded five core themes: (a) “pangngadakkang” as ethical leadership grammar; (b) kinship-based recruitment and shared apprenticeship; (c) ritualized workplace civility as everyday HR practice; (d) moral economies shaping compensation and reciprocity; and (e) mediated modernization via youth-tech brokers.

Theme (a): Leaders articulate authority as custodianship—management decisions are framed as acts of upliftment, with legitimacy rooted in generosity, ceremony sponsorship, and stewardship of ancestral crafts.

Theme (b): Hiring and skill transmission privilege family ties, church networks, and apprenticeship embedded in communal rites; formal job postings are rare and, if present, translated into morally framed invitations.

Theme (c): Daily HR routines include salutations, mutual blessing before work, and ceremonial pauses—micro-practices that regulate affect, prevent conflict, and sustain moral equilibrium in labor relations.

Theme (d): Compensation practices reflect moral economies: profit shares, in-kind support for ceremonies, and flexible wage timing that accommodate ritual calendars—monetary exchange is relational rather than strictly transactional.

Theme (e): Younger members function as mediators introducing digital bookkeeping and online markets, but adoption is negotiated: technological tools gain acceptance only when articulated as enhancing communal dignity and market visibility.

Across firms, modern HR artifacts (attendance forms, payslips, basic contracts) appeared selectively; their meanings were reinterpreted as tokens of mutual trust or as ritualized acknowledgements rather than instruments of surveillance.

Incidents of workplace conflict were resolved through customary councils or moral dialogue rather than formal grievance procedures, with emphasis on restorative reconciliation that preserved social ties.

Safety, health, and well-being practices increased responsively after the pandemic; firms reported establishing small communal emergency funds and basic hygiene protocols framed as communal care rather than compliance measures.

The interplay between economic exigencies and cultural obligations produced visible tensions: when cash shortages rose, leaders prioritized ritual obligations, sometimes delaying wage payments but compensating via collective commitments to future support.

The following table summarizes themes, operational expressions in HR practices, and participant paraphrases.

Table 1 summarizes these themes

Theme	Operational HR Expressions	Participant Paraphrase
Ethical Leadership (Pangngadakkang)	Sponsoring rituals, mentoring, shared decision-making	"If my people grow, my lineage grows."
Kinship Recruitment & Apprenticeship	Preferential hiring, communal training, and church referrals	"We welcome those of the house and teach together."
Ritualized Civility	Morning blessings, respect gestures, conflict rituals	"A bow calms the heart; we work in peace."
Moral Economy Compensation	Profit-share, in-kind support, flexible pay	"Pay comes with responsibility to family events."
Youth-mediated Modernization	Digital catalogs, bookkeeping apps, and market outreach	"My nephew posts our crafts; the old ones decide the price."

Source: data processed, 2025

4.1. Discussion

The data reveal “pangngadakkang” as a multi-dimensional cultural grammar that redefines managerial roles: leadership becomes moral custodianship rather than purely directive control. This redefinition resonates with safety and crisis literature, showing HR practices can substitute for external anxiety when they are perceived as caring and trustworthy (Li et al., 2022).

The kinship-mediated recruitment and apprenticeship model aligns with findings that social networks and culture can enable entrepreneurial mobility while preserving identity (Côté & Evans, 2023). Ritualized civility functions as an embodied affect-regulation system, suggesting that emotional labor and non-verbal HR practices are central to workplace wellbeing and conflict prevention—an insight that complements leadership research on inclusive and transformational styles fostering extra-role behaviors (Chen et al., 2020; Cho & Kao, 2022).

Moral economy compensation practices complicate standard HR metrics: what appears as wage irregularity is intelligible within a broader temporal and ceremonial logic that privileges collective honor and reciprocity over immediate cash equivalence. Youth-mediated modernization underscores the hybridization of technology and human ties: digital tools are adopted through social brokers and re-signified to fit moral orders, echoing arguments that digitalization must integrate soft information and human relations rather than replace them (Fasano & Rocca, 2023; Dima et al., 2024).

The emergence of communal emergency funds and health protocols post-pandemic illustrates how culturally framed HR responses bolster safety behaviors and organizational resilience, in line with pandemic-related HRM insights about the centrality of context-sensitive safety practices (Caligiuri et al., 2020; Li et al., 2022). Integrating spiritual and environmental sensibilities into HR (for example, honoring craft as ancestor care) suggests opportunities to harness green HRM and spiritual leadership logics to motivate pro-social and sustainable behaviors within Toraja enterprises (Li et al., 2023; Khan et al., 2025).

However, the embeddedness of “pangngadakkang” can also pose barriers: preferential hiring limits external talent flows, moral obligations complicate investor expectations for standardized governance, and scaling may strain ritual fiscal commitments.

Practically, interventions should avoid technocratic impositions; instead, co-designed HR tools that translate formal practices into culturally resonant forms—e.g., payslips framed as sacramental receipts—can bridge modern governance and moral legitimacy.

Development programs should leverage youth brokers in participatory training that pairs technical skills with intergenerational mediation, honoring elders' roles while enabling market competitiveness. Similarly, microfinance and credit programs could recognize soft information embedded in communal relationships and adapt criteria to account for moral economies rather than penalize flexible payment norms (Fasano & Rocca, 2023).

Ethically, research and policy must heed participatory guidelines to protect community autonomy and redress power asymmetries, embedding locally responsive safeguards and co-interpretation throughout intervention design (Thomas et al., 2020; González et al., 2021).

Theoretically, the study foregrounds a relational-ethical HRM model where “pangngadakkang” constitutes both normative content and praxis, challenging universalist HR frameworks and enriching cross-cultural HR theory.

5. Conclusion

In Toraja creative MSMEs, “pangngadakkang” is not peripheral symbolism but an operative logic shaping leadership, recruitment, daily civility, compensation, and mediated modernization. HRM reform that seeks to enhance productivity without recognizing “pangngadakkang” risks undermining social cohesion and the very wellsprings of creative meaning that sustain these enterprises.

Policy and practitioner responses should therefore prioritize culturally informed designs: co-created HR templates, youth-elder knowledge exchanges, and financial instruments that accommodate ritualized temporalities. Investments in digital tools should be paired with capacity-building that preserves soft relational information, ensuring technology amplifies rather than displaces community trust in economic transactions (Fasano & Rocca, 2023; Dima et al., 2024).

Leadership development initiatives that cultivate inclusive, ethical, and spiritual dimensions can activate organizational citizenship and creative dignity central to Toraja workplace motivation (Chen et al., 2020; Cho & Kao, 2022; Mansour et al., 2022). Future research should pursue comparative ethnographies across Indonesian cultural zones to test how analogous moral grammars operate and to examine longitudinal effects of hybrid HR practices on firm sustainability.

Mixed-methods studies could quantify the resilience benefits of “pangngadakkang”-informed HRM, while participatory action research would enable communities to co-design and evaluate culturally congruent HR innovations (Thomas et al., 2020; González et al., 2021). Ultimately, recognizing “pangngadakkang” as a foundational HR principle reframes organizational success: from narrow productivity metrics toward collective flourishing, dignity, and the intergenerational stewardship of culture and craft.

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