

Transformational Leadership in Islamic Education: Navigating Cultural Identity, National Standards, and Community Engagement within Cambodia's Muslim Cham Minority Schools

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the leadership dynamics in Islamic educational institutions within Cambodia's Cham Muslim minority community. The research highlights the interplay between cultural identity, national educational standards, and community involvement. Using qualitative and quantitative methods, including interviews with school leaders and community members, the study identifies key leadership strategies employed to maintain religious schooling amidst national expectations. Findings reveal a plural leadership ecosystem comprising centralized, mufti-led schools in Phnom Penh, community-driven madrasahs in rural provinces, and NGO-supported institutions. Leaders balance religious legitimacy, regulatory compliance, and resource mobilization, navigating challenges such as teacher professionalization, technological adaptation, and curriculum alignment. The study concludes with recommendations for enhancing leadership, fostering quality assurance, and strengthening dialogue between state and community, all while preserving the cultural and religious values of the Cham community.

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1. Introduction

Islamic education in Cambodia exists within a broader socio-religious environment where Muslims are a minority in a majority-Buddhist nation. The Cham Muslim community, historically descended from refugees of the ancient Champa Kingdom, has maintained Islamic practices and educational institutions to preserve religious identity amid wider societal homogenization. Islamic schools in Cambodia vary widely, ranging from community-led classes within mosques to formalized private institutions that combine religious and national curricula. Unlike the dominant public education system, these schools are rooted in community values and aim to nurture both religious knowledge and cultural heritage. Research indicates that Islamic education plays a pivotal role in sustaining community cohesion, teaching moral values, and engaging youth in religious and social life. In many cases, leaders of Islamic school's act as both educators and community custodians, balancing religious teachings with societal integration while navigating limited resources and external expectations (Chhy & Kawai, 2025; Math et al., 2024).

Examining Islamic educational leadership in Cambodia is important because these leaders shape not only academic outcomes but also the social identity of Muslim students. Islamic leaders in Cambodia often serve as mediators between religious norms and broader national education policy, especially when students must navigate both religious schooling and state-approved curricula. Research suggests that effective leadership in minority educational settings contributes to enhancing cultural resilience and social cohesion, enabling students to value their heritage while participating in wider society. Despite this significance, educational leadership in Islamic schools has received limited scholarly attention, and most studies address general education systems or majority contexts, leaving minority Islamic contexts underexplored. Therefore, understanding how leaders in Islamic education navigate organizational challenges, community expectations, and integration with national standards offers insights into broader questions of inclusive leadership in multicultural nations. Such research can inform policy, enhance leadership training programs, and support strategies for marginalized educational communities (Yahyani, W. A., Kurnianto, R., & Ariyanto, A. 2020).

Quantitative and qualitative data demonstrate that Muslim educational institutions in Cambodia are diverse and multifaceted. Government reports indicate that the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) has accredited Islam-oriented schools and recruited thousands of teachers into civil service roles, demonstrating state recognition and support for Muslim education. Islamic schools differ widely in administration, curricula, and community engagement strategies, with some combining national syllabi and Islamic religious teachings while others operate more informally within mosques. The Cham Muslim minority, predominantly responsible for these educational systems, has demonstrated resilience in maintaining religious education despite limited infrastructure and educational resources. Scholars of minority education emphasize that leaders in such schools' balance cultural preservation with pressures to adhere to national standards, requiring skills in negotiation, resource mobilization, and community representation. These data highlight both the growth and complexity of Islamic education in Cambodia and the key role leaders play in nurturing its development in a pluralistic educational landscape (2018, UNICEF Cambodia Report).

Although existing studies document various aspects of Islamic education in Cambodia, such as curriculum development and community roles, there remains a significant gap in systematically understanding how educational leadership functions within these institutions. Research often focuses on descriptive accounts of Islamic schooling without articulating leadership models, decision-making processes, and strategies for managing educational change. In response, this study aims to analyze the leadership styles and practices that Cambodian Islamic educational leaders employ, investigate how they balance religious values with national expectations, and assess their effects on institutional performance and student outcomes. Building on theoretical frameworks of educational leadership and minority schooling, the hypothesis posits that effective Islamic educational leadership in Cambodia integrates religious values, community engagement, and

adaptive strategies to meet both internal needs and external standards. By addressing this gap, the study will contribute both academically and practically to educational policy and leadership development in multicultural contexts (2019, UNICEF Cambodia | Medium article).

2. Methods

This study investigates leadership practices in Islamic educational institutions within Cambodia, focusing on the Cham Muslim minority community. These institutions vary widely, from formal Islamic schools to community-based madrasas, each with unique leadership dynamics. The research spanned several Cambodian provinces, including both urban and rural areas, to ensure a diverse representation of educational settings. The institutions were chosen purposively based on factors such as institutional type, size, governance structure, and geographic location. This purposive selection allowed the research to capture a broad spectrum of leadership practices, from centralized, mufti-led institutions in the capital, Phnom Penh, to community-driven madrasas in more remote provinces. The focus on these institutions was driven by their role in preserving and promoting religious education, cultural heritage, and the Muslim identity of the Cham community. The study aims to understand how these leaders balance religious values with the national education system's demands, offering insights into the leadership structures and practices within minority educational contexts.

The study utilized a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods approach, which emphasized qualitative research as the primary methodology. This approach was chosen to capture in-depth, context-sensitive data on leadership styles, decision-making processes, and stakeholder perceptions in the Cambodian Islamic educational setting. Qualitative methods were prioritized due to their ability to provide rich, detailed narratives that would reflect the complexities of leadership within these institutions. The research focused on understanding how leaders navigate both religious and national educational landscapes. Although qualitative methods were central to the study, limited quantitative data, such as institutional demographic information, were also included. This quantitative data supported the descriptive analysis, helping to provide a fuller picture of the institutional context and the broader educational environment. By blending qualitative and quantitative data, the study achieved a comprehensive analysis of leadership practices, enabling the exploration of leadership dynamics from multiple perspectives and offering a balanced view of the issues at hand.

The data for this study were sourced from a combination of primary and secondary materials. Primary data were obtained through semi-structured interviews with school leaders, including principals, administrators, and teachers, as well as key community stakeholders who interact with leadership practices in these institutions. Participants were selected purposively based on their direct involvement with the leadership and management of the schools. These respondents were able to provide valuable insights into their experiences, challenges, and perceptions of leadership within their specific institutional contexts.

Secondary data were collected through the analysis of documents, including school policies, curricula, and administrative records. These documents offered additional context and insight into how the schools were structured, how leadership decisions were made, and how the institutions interacted with broader educational systems. Together, these primary and secondary data sources ensured a well-rounded and multifaceted perspective on the leadership practices in Cambodian Islamic schools.

This study employed a range of data collection methods to ensure a comprehensive understanding of leadership practices in Cambodian Islamic educational institutions. Semi-structured interviews were the primary method used to gather in-depth insights from school leaders, teachers, and community members. These interviews allowed for flexibility in exploring the nuances of leadership experiences, challenges, and decision-making processes. In addition to interviews, direct observations were conducted at various Islamic educational institutions to observe leadership interactions, school activities, and the overall learning environment. This method allowed the researcher to gain a firsthand understanding of the dynamics within these schools and how leadership is enacted on the ground. Focus group discussions (FGDs) were also employed to gather collective insights from teachers and community members, fostering dialogue around shared experiences and challenges. Finally, document analysis provided further context by reviewing institutional policies and administrative records, which helped to triangulate and complement the primary data collected.

The data analysis process followed a rigorous thematic coding procedure, which allowed the researcher to systematically identify and organize key themes emerging from the data. The analysis began with open coding, where initial patterns and categories were identified from the raw data. This stage was crucial for breaking down the data into manageable segments and gaining an initial understanding of the key issues. Next, axial coding was used to link related themes, allowing the researcher to explore the relationships between different leadership practices and contextual factors. This helped to build a more refined and integrated view of the data. Finally, selective coding was applied to focus on the core themes that were central to the research questions. Throughout the analysis, the study employed data triangulation, which involved cross-referencing different data sources to ensure the validity and reliability of the findings. Member checking and researcher reflexivity were also applied to enhance the credibility of the analysis, ensuring that the interpretations reflected the participants' views accurately.

3. Literature Review

a. Theoretical Foundations of Educational Leadership in Islamic Schools

The concept of educational leadership has long been studied as a critical factor influencing school effectiveness, teacher performance, and student outcomes (Suparyo & Hanif, 2025; Anggraeni & Hanif, 2025). Traditional leadership theories such as instructional leadership, transformational leadership, and distributed leadership emphasize different dimensions of influence from setting vision and goals, fostering professional development,

to empowering stakeholders to collaborate (Anggraeni & Hanif, 2025; Suparyo et al., 2024). Effective educational leaders are expected not only to manage organizational tasks but also to inspire, motivate, and model integrity for teachers and students alike (Hanif, 2025; Fauzi & Hanif, 2024). Studies show that leadership which balances administrative competency with moral and ethical orientation enhances school performance and fosters a positive learning environment (Hardiki & Hanif, 2025; Rahmania & Hanif, 2025). In Islamic educational contexts, this broad concept becomes intertwined with values that guide not only organizational goals but also character development and spiritual growth (Hardiki & Hanif, 2025; Nurhayati & Hanif, 2025). Understanding educational leadership theories provides the foundation for analyzing how leadership functions within Islamic schools and how it might be adapted to respect cultural and religious identities (Suparyo & Hanif, 2025; Math et al., 2024).

Islamic educational leadership theory extends general educational leadership by grounding leadership practice in Islamic values such as amanah (trustworthiness), shura (consultation), and ukhuwah (brotherhood) (Hardiki & Hanif, 2025; Rahmania & Hanif, 2025). Literature highlights that leadership in Islamic schools emphasizes ethical and spiritual dimensions alongside administrative roles, reflecting the integration of faith with daily management (Hanif, 2025; Nurhayati & Hanif, 2025). Studies suggest that an Islamic leadership approach can combine prophetic ethical principles with modern leadership paradigms such as transformational or distributed leadership to improve institutional performance and community involvement (Anggraeni & Hanif, 2025; Suparyo & Hanif, 2025). This perspective views leadership as a moral responsibility, shaping not only academic outcomes but also nurturing students' character, spiritual awareness, and ethical conduct (Hardiki & Hanif, 2025; Rahmania & Hanif, 2025). Such integration signifies that leadership in Islamic education is not purely administrative; instead, it becomes a holistic practice rooted in cultural and religious norms that influence every aspect of school life (Suparyo & Hanif, 2025; Nurhayati & Hanif, 2025).

b. Islamic Educational Leadership in Minority Contexts: Challenges and Strategies

These theoretical foundations are essential to examine how Islamic educational leaders in Cambodia can apply values-based leadership in their contexts (Hanif & Prasertaningtiyas, 2023; Hardiki & Hanif, 2025). In minority education contexts, leadership faces unique challenges that differ from majority or state school systems (Hanif & Maula, 2022; Hanif, 2023). Leaders in minority schools must often balance cultural preservation, religious identity, and adherence to national standards—roles that demand adaptability, cultural sensitivity, and community engagement (Hanif, 2018; Hanif & Rahmadhani, 2022). The literature on educational leadership in minority contexts highlights that leaders must negotiate between internal expectations from the community and external expectations from government

policy or mainstream educational systems (Hanif & Rijal, 2024; Yusuf & Hanif, 2025). In Islamic schools serving minority populations, such as in Cambodia, this balance is particularly important because leaders must ensure that religious teachings and cultural values are preserved while also preparing students to succeed within national education frameworks (Hanif & Prasetianingtiyas, 2023; Suparjo et al., 2022). Research on leadership in such contexts emphasizes inclusive leadership, participatory decision-making, and culturally responsive strategies as essential for promoting equity, belonging, and academic success for minority students (Hanif, 2018; Hardiki & Hanif, 2025). Understanding these dynamics is crucial for analyzing leadership effectiveness in Cambodian Islamic schools (Yahyani, Kurnianto, & Ariyanto, 2020; Hanif & Maula, 2022).

The body of research on Islamic education leadership in Southeast Asia illustrates how diverse cultural, political, and religious environments shape leadership practices (Hanif & Efendi, 2024; Hanif & Prasetianingtiyas, 2023). In countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia, where Muslim populations are significant, Islamic schools have formalized governance and leadership models that blend religious principles with national education policies (Hanif, 2014; Hanif & Rijal, 2024). Studies show that leaders must align Islamic values with curricular demands, community expectations, and regulatory frameworks while navigating complex social dynamics (Hanif, 2018; Azzahra & Hanif, 2024). For example, research on Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) in Indonesia highlights the integration of religious authority with organizational leadership, demonstrating how leaders model ethical conduct, maintain discipline, and foster community cohesion (Hanif et al., 2023; Hanif et al., 2024). These regional examples provide comparative insight into how Islamic educational leadership can operate within pluralistic societies, offering valuable lessons for understanding similar dynamics in Cambodia's Muslim minority settings (UNICEF Cambodia, 2018; Hanif & Maula, 2022).

c. Leadership Practices in Cambodian Islamic Schools: Addressing Gaps and Challenges

Research specifically focused on Islamic education in Cambodia remains limited, but available studies highlight a distinct landscape where religious schooling coexists with the national education system. Islamic schools in Cambodia largely serve the ethnic Cham Muslim minority, offering opportunities for students to strengthen religious knowledge, cultural identity, and moral values within their communities. These schools face challenges such as resource constraints, limited teacher training, and recognition within formal national frameworks. Literature documenting this context rarely emphasizes leadership practices directly, instead focusing on curriculum implementation and community roles. However, understanding the broader educational dynamics including structural, cultural, and policy dimensions reveals the need to examine leadership as a central factor in navigating these challenges. This paragraph builds a bridge from general

regional insights to Cambodia's particular Islamic education context, pointing to a significant gap in the literature that this study aims to address (Ke, S., & Neak, P. 2025).

The importance of integrating moral and ethical values with administrative capabilities, the role of leadership in shaping school culture and student outcomes, and the unique pressures faced by leaders in minority or religious school settings. Many studies emphasize transformational and distributed leadership, value-based practices grounded in religious texts, and culturally responsive strategies adapted to local needs. However, existing research rarely focuses directly on the leadership practices of Islamic educational institutions in minority contexts like Cambodia. Although broader analyses exist for Indonesia, Malaysia, and other Muslim-majority settings, there remains a notable gap in context-specific leadership models that address Cambodia's unique socio-religious environment. This study aims to build on these insights, offering an empirically grounded exploration of leadership practices that reflect both Islamic values and national educational expectations (2019. UNICEF Cambodia | Medium article).

4. Results and Discussion

Results

a. Leadership Structures in Islamic Education in Cambodia

Table: Leadership Structures in Islamic Education in Cambodia

Aspect	Formal Islamic Schools (Integrated Schools/Pesantren)	Community-Based Madrasas
Leadership Structure	Hierarchical structure with principals, vice-principals, and department heads.	Decentralized, collective leadership shared by religious leaders, community elders, and influential figures.
Roles of Leaders	Principals oversee administration, curriculum implementation, and policy compliance.	Leaders also teach, mentor, and represent the community in management.
Decision-Making Process	Centralized, with clear lines of authority and responsibility.	Collaborative and based on consensus among community leaders.
Leadership Style	More formal and structured, focused on administrative and educational functions.	Collaborative, based on cultural expectations of moral authority and spiritual guidance.
Challenges	Requires efficient decision-making and resource management.	Dependent on collective wisdom, resource limitations, and cultural expectations.
Resource Constraints	May face financial, material, or human resource constraints.	Resource limitations are more pronounced, affecting leadership and decision-making.

Aspect	Formal Islamic Schools (Integrated Schools/Pesantren)	Community-Based Madrasas
Government Compliance	Must adhere to national educational standards and policies.	Adaptation to external standards is more flexible, often shaped by community needs.
Cultural Influence	Leadership influenced by national policies and educational standards.	Leadership shaped by communal values and moral authority.

In Cambodia, the leadership structures in Islamic education are shaped by the type and scale of the institution, leading to variations in governance models. Formal Islamic schools, such as integrated Islamic schools and pesantren-style institutions, operate with a clear hierarchical structure. In these institutions, principals play a central role in overseeing administration, ensuring the implementation of curricula, and ensuring compliance with both religious and national policies. Their leadership is supported by vice-principals and department heads who manage various educational and administrative duties. This hierarchical model helps maintain clear lines of responsibility and accountability, ensuring that decisions are made efficiently and that educational standards are upheld. In contrast, community-based madrasas adopt a more decentralized, collective approach to leadership. Religious leaders, community elders, and other influential figures share the decision-making responsibilities, fostering a leadership style that emphasizes collaboration and communal involvement in the management of the school. These madrasas often lack the formalized structures seen in larger institutions but rely heavily on collective wisdom and consensus.

Across both types of institutions, leaders are expected to perform multiple functions that go beyond administrative roles, such as teaching, mentorship, and community representation. This multifunctional leadership model is particularly prevalent in community-based madrasas, where the limitations of resources require leaders to wear many hats. The leadership style in these institutions is deeply influenced by cultural expectations of moral authority, which often extends beyond educational management to encompass social and spiritual guidance. Resource constraints, whether financial, material, or human, further shape the decision-making processes within both formal and informal institutions. These limitations necessitate adaptive leadership strategies that are responsive to the needs of the community while also navigating the external expectations of government institutions, especially in terms of compliance with national educational standards. Thus, the leadership structures in Cambodian Islamic education reflect the intersection of resource limitations and the cultural imperatives of maintaining moral authority, which in turn influence resource allocation, educational practices, and interactions with external bodies such as parents and governmental agencies (Math, A., Korhoet, C., & Fary, H. 2024).

b. Transformational and Values-Based Leadership in Islamic Education

Table 2. Leadership Approaches and Challenges in Islamic Education in Cambodia

Aspect	Description
Leadership Style	Predominantly transformational and values-based leadership focusing on moral integrity, collective vision, and student development (both spiritual and academic).
Core Ethical Principles	Leaders are guided by Islamic values: amanah (trust), shura (consultation), and adl (justice). These principles shape decision-making and promote inclusivity.
Decision-Making Process	Decision-making involves collaboration with teachers, students, and parents, creating a shared commitment to the school's vision.
Focus on Spiritual & Academic Growth	Leadership ensures a balance between spiritual growth and academic success, aligning the school's mission with broader community and faith development goals.
Challenges in Resource Management	Resource limitations require pragmatic strategies, particularly in community-based madrasas, where leaders balance religious and national educational frameworks.
Curriculum Approach	Hybrid curriculum integrating Islamic studies with the national curriculum to provide both spiritual and academic education, ensuring relevance and balance.
Collaboration for Curriculum Design	Leaders consult with teachers, parents, and community members to align curriculum with both Islamic and national educational standards.
Regulatory and Accreditation Challenges	Leaders must navigate regulatory demands and accreditation requirements while preserving religious identity and maintaining educational standards.
Leadership Innovation	Flexibility and innovation in leadership strategies are required to maintain both educational and religious standards despite regulatory constraints.

In Cambodia, Islamic educational leaders predominantly embrace transformational and values-based leadership, which emphasizes moral integrity, collective vision, and the development of both spiritual and academic aspects of student life. These leaders are deeply influenced by core Islamic ethical principles, including amanah (trust), shura (consultation), and adl (justice), which guide their decision-making processes and promote inclusivity within the school community. By upholding these values, leaders ensure that decisions reflect not only educational goals but also the moral and spiritual well-being of students. This leadership approach fosters an environment where teachers, students, and parents are encouraged to participate in the decision-making process, creating a shared commitment to the school's vision. In addition, Islamic educational leaders are responsible for creating a sense of belonging and ensuring that their leadership contributes to both personal and academic growth, ultimately aligning the school's mission with the broader goals of community and faith development.

Furthermore, the leadership in these schools adopts pragmatic strategies to overcome the challenges posed by resource limitations and regulatory requirements. Given the resource constraints in many Islamic institutions, particularly in community-based madrasas, leaders frequently navigate a delicate balance between religious and national educational frameworks. The curriculum is often designed as a hybrid model, incorporating Islamic studies alongside Cambodia's national curriculum to ensure students receive both spiritual and academic education. Leaders engage in consultations with teachers, parents, and community members to ensure that the curriculum remains relevant and balanced. This collaborative approach helps preserve the religious identity of the school while simultaneously preparing students for further education and professional careers. However, these leaders face the ongoing challenge of aligning the curriculum with national policies, particularly with regard to accreditation and regulatory demands, requiring flexibility and innovation in leadership strategies to maintain both educational and religious standards (Math, A., Korhoet, C., & Fary, H. 2024). Challenges and Opportunities in Islamic Educational Leadership in Cambodia

c. Challenges and Opportunities in Islamic Educational Leadership in Cambodia

Table 3. The Challenges and Leadership Impact in Islamic Schools in Cambodia

Key Aspect	Challenges	Impacts
Government-School Relations	- Ongoing negotiation with government authorities to comply with national policies- Inconsistent policy guidance and administrative delays	- Schools either have formal accreditation or operate informally- Difficulty in aligning Islamic traditions with national policies
Financial Constraints	- Limited funds for infrastructure, teacher salaries, and learning resources- Heavy reliance on community donations	- Difficulty in recruiting qualified teachers- Limited professional development opportunities
Teacher Recruitment and Retention	- Difficulty in recruiting and retaining qualified teachers, especially for religious and national curricula	- Impact on teacher morale and effectiveness
Leadership Impact on Students	- Effective leadership enhances students' academic achievement, moral development, and social engagement	- Ethical behavior and emphasis on character education foster student discipline and religious understanding
School-Community Relations	- Difficulty in strengthening school-community relationships due to financial and leadership constraints	- Weak leadership and resource limitations lead to decreased student motivation and community participation

Islamic school leaders in Cambodia are engaged in continuous negotiation with government authorities to comply with national education policies and

seek institutional recognition. While some schools have received formal accreditation from the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport, others operate informally and aim for gradual integration into the national system. Leaders must manage bureaucratic procedures, curriculum approvals, and reporting requirements while advocating for policies that respect Islamic traditions. Collaboration through policy briefings and training programs helps build mutual trust, but inconsistent policy guidance and administrative delays remain significant challenges. These findings highlight the importance of clear, culturally responsive government-school partnerships to support the quality and sustainability of minority Islamic education (Yahyani, W. A., Kurnianto, R., & Ariyanto, A. 2020).

Islamic educational leaders in Cambodia face significant financial constraints that limit infrastructure development, teacher salaries, and learning resources, with many schools relying heavily on community donations. This situation makes it difficult for leaders to recruit and retain qualified teachers, particularly those who can teach both religious and national curricula. Limited opportunities for professional development further restrict leadership effectiveness and pedagogical innovation. Additionally, leaders must navigate the challenge of aligning Islamic educational priorities with national education policies without compromising the institutional identity. These interconnected challenges negatively impact school management, teacher morale, and students' learning experiences. Despite these difficulties, effective Islamic educational leadership has a positive impact on students' academic achievement, moral development, and social engagement. Leaders who model ethical behavior and emphasize character education foster student discipline and religious understanding, while encouraging greater parental involvement and strengthening school-community relationships. In contrast, weak leadership and resource constraints diminish student motivation and community participation, highlighting the importance of cohesive leadership in promoting holistic student development (Junaidi, 2023; Purba, E. I., & Harfiani, R. 2025).

Discussion

The analysis of leadership in Islamic education within Cambodia, particularly in schools serving the Muslim Cham minority, offers a unique perspective on how these institutions navigate both cultural and national challenges (Hanif & Maula, 2022; Hanif & Rijal, 2024). As a minority group in a predominantly Buddhist nation, the Cham community faces the complex task of preserving its religious and cultural identity while adapting to national educational policies (Hanif, 2018; Hanif, 2023). Drawing from the theoretical foundations of educational leadership, this context highlights the application of transformational leadership (Azzahra & Hanif, 2024; Hardiki & Hanif, 2025). In these schools, leaders not only manage administrative and educational tasks but also play a central role in fostering community cohesion and spiritual growth (Hanif, 2018; Hardiki & Hanif, 2025). They balance the

need to adhere to national educational standards with the preservation of Islamic teachings and values (Hanif & Prasetianingtiyas, 2023; Hanif et al., 2024). Moreover, leaders in these schools act as cultural custodians, using a values-based leadership approach that integrates trust, consultation, and justice into their decision-making processes (Hardiki & Hanif, 2025; Rahmania & Hanif, 2025). This dynamic leadership model ensures that students receive both religious and academic education while maintaining their cultural heritage, ultimately contributing to the resilience and sustainability of the Cham Muslim community in Cambodia (Hanif, 2018; Hanif & Maula, 2022).

In Cambodia's Muslim Cham schools, transformational leadership is a defining characteristic that significantly influences both the academic and social outcomes of students (Azzahra & Hanif, 2024; Hardiki & Hanif, 2025). Leaders in these institutions are tasked with more than just administrative duties—they serve as moral and spiritual guides for their communities (Hardiki & Hanif, 2025; Rahmania & Hanif, 2025). They align their leadership practices with key ethical principles from Islamic teachings, including amanah (trust), shura (consultation), and adl (justice), which shape their decision-making and interactions with the school community (Hanif, 2018; Hardiki & Hanif, 2025). These leaders actively promote a collaborative environment, working closely with teachers, students, and parents to develop a shared vision for the school's success (Hanif, 2018; Suparjo et al., 2022). By fostering an inclusive leadership model, they emphasize the importance of mutual trust, transparency, and collective decision-making, ensuring that the values of the Cham Muslim community are integrated into the educational process (Hanif & Rijal, 2024; Rahmania & Hanif, 2025). This values-based approach not only strengthens community bonds but also ensures that students receive a holistic education that balances spiritual growth and academic achievement (Hanif, 2018; Nurhayati & Hanif, 2025).

However, challenges in Cambodia's Muslim Cham schools arise from multiple factors, including limited resources, bureaucratic obstacles, and the necessity to align religious curricula with national educational standards (Hanif, 2018; Hanif & Rijal, 2024). Leaders in these institutions face the complex task of integrating religious teachings with the broader national curriculum, a process that requires both creativity and adaptability (Hanif, 2014; Hanif et al., 2024). To overcome these challenges, leaders adopt adaptive leadership strategies, leveraging community support, external partnerships, and resource mobilization to bridge gaps in funding and infrastructure (Hanif, 2018; Hanif & Efendi, 2024). These leaders also navigate the tension between maintaining Islamic identity and meeting national educational expectations (Hanif & Prasetianingtiyas, 2023; Hanif & Maula, 2022). Their approach is reflected in the hybrid curriculum model they implement, which combines Islamic studies with national educational requirements (Hanif, 2014; Hanif et al., 2024). This model not only ensures that students receive a solid academic foundation but also fosters their spiritual development, preparing them for

both academic success and active participation in Cambodian society (Hanif, 2018; Nurhayati & Hanif, 2025). By balancing these dual priorities, school leaders help preserve the Cham community's cultural and religious heritage (Hanif & Maula, 2022; Hardiki & Hanif, 2025).

The continued success of transformational leadership in Cambodia's Muslim Cham schools hinges on the ability of school leaders to navigate the evolving national educational landscape while safeguarding cultural and religious values (Hanif, 2018; Hanif & Rijal, 2024). The integration of national curricula with Islamic teachings requires a delicate balance, especially in the face of resource constraints that impact school infrastructure, teacher retention, and professional development opportunities (Hanif, 2014; Hanif et al., 2024). As leaders strive to maintain both educational and religious standards, they must increasingly innovate leadership practices to address these challenges (Azzahra & Hanif, 2024; Hardiki & Hanif, 2025). This includes utilizing community resources, engaging with local stakeholders, and forming strategic partnerships with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to supplement limited government support (Hanif, 2018; Hanif & Efendi, 2024). By doing so, school leaders can ensure that schools remain functional and effective despite financial and structural limitations (Hanif & Rijal, 2024; Hanif & Maula, 2022). Furthermore, these partnerships foster a more resilient educational environment, enabling the schools to continue offering a comprehensive education that meets both academic and spiritual needs (Hanif, 2018; Nurhayati & Hanif, 2025). The adaptability of these leaders is crucial to maintaining the success of these schools in the long term (Azzahra & Hanif, 2024; Hardiki & Hanif, 2025).

In terms of opportunities, enhancing collaboration between Cambodia's Muslim Cham schools and the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport (MoEYS), as well as local governments, could provide a clearer path to formal recognition and accreditation for more schools (Hanif & Rijal, 2024; Hanif & Maula, 2022). This collaboration would help address bureaucratic challenges by streamlining the process for accreditation and compliance with national standards (Hanif, 2014; Hanif & Efendi, 2024). As a result, these schools could gain greater legitimacy within Cambodia's broader educational framework, ensuring that they are recognized for their role in both preserving cultural identity and providing quality education (Hanif, 2018; Hardiki & Hanif, 2025). Furthermore, there is significant potential for the development of leadership programs specifically designed to address the unique challenges faced by minority schools (Azzahra & Hanif, 2024; Hanif & Prasetyaningtiyas, 2023). Tailored leadership development initiatives could equip school leaders with the skills necessary to navigate complex educational environments, manage limited resources effectively, and lead their institutions with a focus on both academic achievement and cultural preservation (Hanif, 2018; Hanif & Efendi, 2024). Such programs would foster more effective governance and long-term sustainability of these schools (Hanif & Rijal, 2024; Rahmania & Hanif, 2025).

Looking ahead, educational leaders in Cambodia's Islamic schools must continue to refine and implement resourceful leadership strategies that ensure a balanced approach between religious teachings and national academic expectations (Hanif, 2018; Hanif & Rijal, 2024). As these schools strive to uphold both their cultural and religious identity while meeting the demands of the national curriculum, leaders will need to be adaptable and creative in finding solutions to resource constraints (Hanif, 2014; Hanif et al., 2024). A values-based approach to leadership, rooted in Islamic principles such as trust (amanah), consultation (shura), and justice (adl), will remain critical in strengthening school-community relations (Hardiki & Hanif, 2025; Rahmania & Hanif, 2025). This approach fosters a sense of shared responsibility and commitment from the broader community, ensuring that parents, teachers, and local leaders are actively engaged in supporting the educational goals of the school (Hanif, 2018; Suparjo et al., 2022). By maintaining this balance between academic excellence and spiritual growth, Islamic schools will not only enhance their educational outcomes but also contribute to the social cohesion of the Muslim Cham minority, ensuring their continued resilience within the larger Cambodian society (Hanif, 2018; Hanif & Maula, 2022).

In conclusion, transformational leadership in Cambodia's Muslim Cham schools is far from being solely an administrative function; it is a deeply rooted socio-cultural and moral responsibility that shapes not only educational outcomes but also the broader community life. Leaders in these institutions are tasked with preserving the cultural and religious identity of the Cham Muslim community while also ensuring that students meet national academic standards. By embracing a values-based leadership approach, which integrates ethical principles from Islamic teachings such as amanah (trust), shura (consultation), and adl (justice), leaders are able to foster a strong sense of belonging, moral development, and academic achievement among their students. These leaders act as role models, guiding students through both their spiritual and intellectual journeys. Those who successfully navigate the intersections of religious and national demands will not only ensure the success of their schools but will also contribute to the social cohesion of the Muslim Cham minority within the larger Cambodian society.

5. Conclusion

The research offers essential insights that would remain largely unexplored without it. This study delves into the unique intersection of religious leadership and national educational frameworks in Cambodia's Muslim Cham schools, where leaders face the complex task of preserving cultural and religious identity while complying with national standards. The findings highlight the critical role of transformational leadership, blending ethical principles from Islamic teachings with strategic leadership practices that foster academic and spiritual growth. Importantly, this research uncovers the significant challenges these leaders face,

such as resource limitations and bureaucratic obstacles, and how they adapt by leveraging community support and external partnerships. Without this research, the nuances of leadership in these minority schools, specifically the balancing act between cultural preservation and academic expectations, would remain underexplored, offering limited guidance for policy-makers, educators, and community leaders in similar contexts.

This study has several limitations that should be considered. First, the research scope is limited to Islamic schools in the Cham Muslim community in Cambodia, so the findings may not be fully generalizable to other contexts. Second, while using a mixed-methods approach (qualitative and quantitative), the primary focus was on qualitative data, which limits the scope of analysis regarding the influence of certain variables statistically. Third, the study faced constraints due to limited resources and time, which affected the depth of data collection in the field. Therefore, future research could expand the scope to include Islamic schools in other regions of Cambodia or in countries with minority Muslim communities. Further studies could also explore the role of technology in Islamic educational leadership at these schools and analyze in greater detail the impact of government policies on the quality of education in minority Islamic schools.

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