

Toyol at the Desk: Cultural Narratives and Islamic HRM Approaches to Workplace Integrity

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100400128>

Received: 06 April 2026; Accepted: 12 April 2026; Published: 30 April 2026

ABSTRACT

This research explores the metaphorical application of the Toyol, a Malay folklore spirit thief, as an interpretive lens to covert workplace deviance in Malaysian organizations. Underpinned by symbolic anthropology and Islamic Human Resource Management (HRM), the study investigates how the "Toyol mentality" is used by employees to explain behavior such as time theft, electronic free-riding, and unethical self-enrichment. Using qualitative interview, digital ethnography, and Islamic text analysis methods, the study demonstrates how the cultural metaphor facilitates veiled criticism of unethical practice and mirrors underlying organizational blind spots. The research suggests that Islamic ethical values of amanah (trust), adl (justice), ihsan (excellence), and hisbah (accountability), provide spiritually underpinned alternatives to procedural ethics. Yet, HR systems neglect these values and do not operationalize them into actionable systems. The research prescribes an Islamically-coherent, culturally-appropriate HRM ethics template that aligns local metaphor and theological teaching with training, appraisal, and disciplinary practices. By renegotiating folklore as moral tale rather than superstition, the research presents a new approach to the reconstruction of workplace integrity in Muslim-majority cultures.

Keywords: Toyol metaphor, workplace misconduct, Islamic ethics, human resource management (HRM), organizational integrity

INTRODUCTION

In the increasingly complicated and digitized workplaces of today, the problem of dealing with unethical behavior has extended from recognizing overt transgressions to detecting subtle hidden misconduct. Examples of acts that have become ingrained in daily work are time theft, silent non-participation, credit manipulation, and passive exploitation of organizational resources (Appelbaum et.al., 2007). Even though it is hard to supervise those acts, they have the potential to slowly destroy organizational trust, decrease productivity, and fuel a toxic organizational culture. In a Muslim-majority Southeast Asian contexts like Malaysia where workplace relations are shaped by layers of cultural heritage and religious conviction, such acts are often described, discussed, frowned-upon, and even criticized usually indirectly in culturally resonant metaphors.

In country like Malaysia, workplace ethics are not just determined by corporate policies or secular legislation but they are very highly influenced by religious and cultural attitudes. One of the striking elements of Malay culture is that the existence of beliefs in supernatural or spiritual or paranormal beings such as ghosts like Pontianak, Langsuir, Penanggal, Hantu Raya and many others. Among these legendary ghosts, there is Toyol who is often associated with small bald and green boy who steals. Toyol is described as a small spirit boy who steal money from other people for its owner. Historically associated with black magic practices and the ritualistic abuse of child spirits, the Toyol is a cultural icon symbolizing stealth, greed, and unethical practices in acquiring money and wealth (Nicholas et al., 2013). In contemporary context especially among urban Malaysians, the discourse about the Toyol has evolved from mere spiritual fear to a satirical icon which is used to describe

surreptitious wrongdoing such as embezzlement, data theft, or opportunism in workplace settings (Shah & Shah, 2018).

This metaphor meaningfully maps onto a range of unethical behaviors in the Human Resource Management (HRM) literature including time theft, performance system manipulation, misappropriation of organizational resources, and hidden incompetence. All of these undermine workplace productivity and breach norms of organizational trust (Tayeb, 1997). These acts often in disguise and evidently very hard to supervise just like how Toyol steals imperceptibly, unethical employees conceal themselves behind the systems while taking advantage of the digital anonymity and gap in procedures. This is why in context of organizational rhetoric, Toyol mentality describes the broader anxiety of how individuals justify dishonest behaviors and avoiding responsibility and accountability.

From the view of Islamic perspectives, these behavior does not only promote unethical conduct but also dangerous to their faith as Islamic teaching highly emphasize on the values of Amanah (trust), ihsan (excellence in behavior), and hisbah (accountability). All these values require individuals to conduct their daily life with sincerity and integrity especially in relationships that involve finance. Islam in the Quran strongly condemn Gharar (deceit) and theft in all forms and promotes ethical works in order to gain lawful earnings. Tayeb (1997) notes, the aim of Islamic revivalism in human resource management (HRM) is to develop values beyond mere compliance by internalizing spiritual awareness in everyday professional practices. Thus, the persistence of Toyol stories, even symbolically, suggests a moral disconnect between compliance with external rules and an internal ethical commitment, and this is a gap which HRM needs to try to bridge.

Furthermore, cultural branding, digital communication, and hybrid work environments have increased the chances of unnoticed misconduct, leading to a necessity for developing ethical resilience internally. In this context, the Toyol represents more than just a symbol of fear or a satirical tool; it acts as a means to reveal the hidden aspects of organizational corruption. The metaphor holds cultural significance, enabling employees to express their discontent with immoral leadership, poor colleague dynamics, or erosion of ethical standards in the corporate environment (Nicholas et al., 2013). Recognizing these metaphorical frames can help HR leaders understand the cultural language employees use to describe moral hazards and system gaming.

Hence, this study seeks to fill a critical gap by connecting folklore-informed ethical metaphors with formal HR practices in Muslim-majority workplaces. In doing so, it hopes to contribute both theoretically to the understanding of cultural symbols in ethical decision-making, and practically to the design of Islamic-aligned HRM frameworks that promote integrity, trust, and social responsibility. By engaging with the Toyol as a living metaphor rather than a mere superstition, the study offers an original approach to enhancing workplace ethics through context-sensitive and spiritually coherent strategies.

Problem Statement

Workplace misconduct is a persistent and evolving challenge for organizations globally. While overt misconduct such as fraud, harassment, and embezzlement can be identified and penalized through clear HR policies, more covert unethical behavior remains far more insidious. These include acts such as time theft, data manipulation, credit claiming, and resource hoarding, often referred to as "invisible deviance" (Appelbaum et.al., 2007). In the Malaysian context, these behaviors are not only operationally harmful but often coded within cultural metaphors, making them difficult to detect or confront directly.

One such metaphor is the Toyol, a folkloric spirit in Malay culture said to steal money for its master, operating unseen and in secrecy. While the Toyol was once considered a supernatural agent, today it is widely used as a metaphor for exploitative, selfish, or unethical behavior particularly in workplace settings where accountability is blurred or avoided (Nicholas et.al., 2013). This "Toyol mentality" is reflected in how employees describe colleagues who take shortcuts, benefit from others' labor, or misuse organizational systems. However, despite the cultural salience of this metaphor, academic HR literature in Malaysia has not adequately explored how such folklore reflects or influences employee behavior.

More importantly, existing HR frameworks in Malaysia largely adopt Western-centric approaches, which emphasize compliance-based ethics without integrating culturally rooted or religiously informed ethical systems.

This creates a disconnect between HR policy and employee moral consciousness. In a Muslim-majority society like Malaysia, where over 60% of the population identify Islam as a primary ethical compass (Shah & Shah, 2018), this gap is especially problematic. Islamic principles such as amanah (trust), adl (justice), hisbah (accountability), and ihsan (sincerity) offer not only theological directives but also practical models for ethical work behavior (Beekun & Badawi, 2005; Tayeb, 1997). Yet these principles are rarely embedded into HR training, performance appraisal, or disciplinary frameworks in a systematic way.

The problem, therefore, lies at the intersection of three realities: (1) the persistence of covert misconduct in Malaysian organizations, (2) the symbolic but under-theorized role of cultural metaphors like the Toyol, and (3) the underutilization of Islamic ethics in shaping HRM strategies. Although the metaphor of the Toyol gives workers a culturally meaningful vocabulary to explain unethical conduct, HR departments do not have an orderly system to confront such conducts through values workers already know and honor. Absent a model that renders Islamic ethics into organizational action while honoring cultural lore, attempts to stem unethical conduct continue to be superficial, legalistic, or ineffective.

Thus, this research attempts to bridge this important gap by examining how the "Toyol mentality" is employed to conceptualize surreptitious wrongdoing at work and by suggesting an Islamically grounded, culturally responsive HR ethics framework. By synthesizing knowledge from Malay folklore, workers' experiences, and Islamic moral philosophy, this study endeavors to create a grounded and spiritually consistent model of workplace integrity.

Research Objectives

The overarching aim of this study is to explore the metaphorical use of Toyol folklore in understanding unethical workplace behavior, and how Islamic ethical principles can guide Human Resource Management (HRM) in promoting integrity. The specific objectives are as follows:

1. To examine how Malaysian employees interpret the metaphor of the "Toyol mentality" in relation to workplace misconduct.
2. To identify the forms and patterns of covert unethical behavior (e.g., time theft, resource misuse, free-riding) present in organizational settings.
3. To explore how Islamic ethical principles such as amanah (trust), adl (justice), and ihsan (sincerity) inform employee attitudes toward workplace integrity.
4. To analyze how HR managers currently address covert misconduct and to what extent they incorporate spiritual or moral training.

Significance of the Study

This study provides a unique input at the intersection of organizational behavior, Malay cultural studies, and Islamic ethics by redefining workplace misconduct through the lens of folklore. By employing the Toyol as a symbol for hidden wrongdoing, the research provides a culturally relevant tool for understanding how employees perceive and rationalize unethical behavior. This is particularly important in Southeast Asia, where cultural symbols and indirect communication are often used to discuss sensitive issues like corruption or moral failures.

Theoretically, this research enhances the expanding realm of organizational metaphor theory by showing how local narratives influence employees' perceptions of integrity and deviance. Moreover, it adds to the body of work on Islamic human resource management by providing an ethical framework rooted in faith-driven principles to address contemporary workplace challenges, frequently overlooked in typical corporate training initiatives.

Essentially, the study offers HR professionals insights on recognizing and mitigating "soft deviance" that bypasses formal disciplinary processes. Incorporating Islamic principles of amanah, ihsan, and hisbah into HR policies allows organizations to promote not just adherence but also ingrained ethical behavior aligned with employees' faith. In a time when trust within organizations is fragile and digital anonymity allows misconduct to flourish, this research promotes spiritual accountability and cultural awareness as cornerstones of ethical leadership in the workplace.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Malay Folklore and the Symbolic Function of the Toyol

In Malay mythology point of view, Toyol who is commonly portrayed as the spiritual child that is summoned by black magic to rob money for its master. In the conventional setting, Toyol is transformed into a covert, immoral path to wealth that is a spiritual allegory for unseen theft (Nicholas et.al., 2013). Although literal belief in spirits has declined among urban communities, the Toyol's cultural memory remains. It is used regularly as a metaphor in daily language, especially when describing mysterious losses, hidden wrongdoing, or predatory actions.

In contemporary digital environments, the Toyol has been remade in satire and memes as a symbol of cybercrime, concealed corruption, and even predatory colleagues thus implying its ongoing cultural applicability (Shah & Shah, 2018). For Nursyakirin (2020), the metaphor is a social instrument for commenting on systemic injustice without making personal accusations. The myth of the Toyol thus not just serves as folklore but as symbolic vocabulary for unseen exploitation hence an effective cultural prism for interpreting workplace unethical behavior.

Unethical Behavior in the Workplace: A Human Resource Challenge

Unethical behavior in the workplace is a growing concern in organizational studies. Covert misconduct such as time theft, data manipulation, credit stealing, and shirking responsibilities has significant implications for productivity, morale, and corporate integrity. These behaviors often go unreported or unnoticed due to their “invisible” nature (Appelbaum et.al., 2007). Within Human Resource Management (HRM), there is increasing emphasis on identifying and managing such subtle misconducts through ethics policies, whistleblower systems, and integrity training programs.

However, as much of HRM practice in Southeast Asia is imported from Western corporate models, many existing frameworks neglect cultural metaphors and local belief systems that shape employee perceptions. As such, behaviors rationalized through folklore or coded cultural narratives (such as the “Toyol mentality”) may not be effectively addressed. Incorporating local cultural understandings into HR discourse is therefore essential for context-sensitive ethics management (Tayeb, 1997).

Islamic Work Ethics and Organizational Behavior

Islamic teachings provide a comprehensive ethical framework for workplace behavior. The concepts of amanah (trust), adl (justice), ihsan (excellence in conduct), and tawakkul (reliance on Allah) are central to the Qur’anic view of labor and organizational life. Work is seen as both a moral obligation and a form of worship (ibadah) when conducted ethically and for halal (lawful) purposes (Beekun & Badawi, 2005).

From an Islamic HR perspective, covert misconduct such as time theft or resource exploitation is classified not only as organizational deviance but as spiritual corruption (fasad). Tayeb (1997) highlights how Islamic revivalism in Asia has led to a renewed emphasis on embedding Islamic values in HR systems, including employee evaluation, incentives, and disciplinary action. The need to establish alignment between HR policies and fiqh al-muamalat (Islamic commercial jurisprudence) has been more recognized by organizations in Malaysia particularly in sectors where religious ethics are upheld fiercely. Unlike secular ethics systems that rely heavily on external controls, the Islamic model emphasizes taqwa (God-consciousness) as a self-regulating force against misconduct. This theological component can serve as a critical moral compass in addressing behaviors aligned with the “Toyol mentality.”

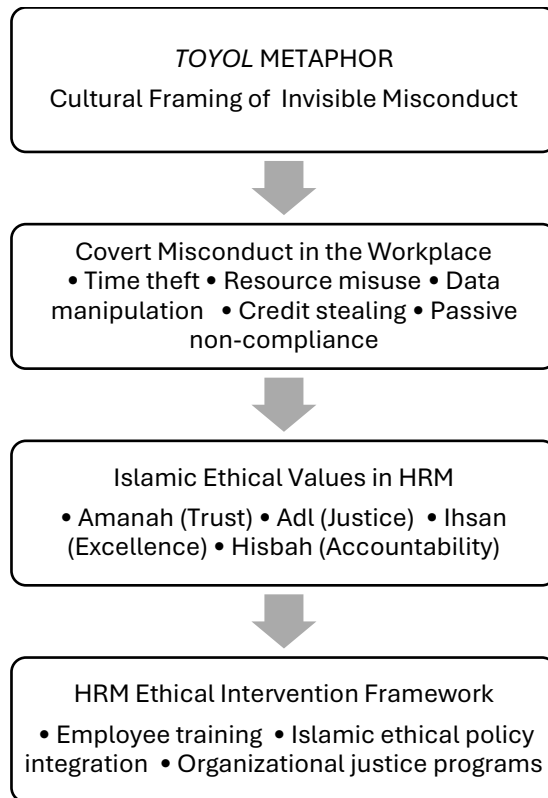
Folklore as Organizational Discourse and Moral Satire

Recent scholarship in cultural studies and organizational anthropology has emphasized the role of folklore and metaphor in shaping organizational discourse. Metaphors serve as “sensemaking devices” that allow employees to interpret complex moral and professional situations (Morgan, 2006). In Malaysia, the use of the Toyol metaphor reflects deeper anxieties about economic injustice, leadership betrayal, and invisible exploitation within bureaucratic systems (Nicholas et al., 2013).

Such metaphors are particularly effective in environments where direct confrontation is culturally discouraged. The Toyol as an invisible thief enables workers to make indirect reference to unethical co-workers or corrupt activities. Ong (1988) proposes that Southeast Asian spirits and supernatural beliefs tend to encode political or economic criticism subtly. In HR practice, grasping such metaphors is important not for folklore verification, but for deciphering the ways that workers cognitively construct unethical behavior.

Incorporating folklore within organizational training using satire, storytelling, or scenario-based learning, can help enrich ethics education by rooting it in recognizable cultural idioms. As Wisker (2022) suggests, cultural ghosts and spirits are both warnings and mirrors to institutional breakdowns. Therefore, working with the Toyol metaphor within HR training can shed light on the unseen ethical stresses that formal codes on their own cannot.

Figure 1: Illumination of Toyol Metaphor to HRM flow



CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework illustrates the relationship between three major components as presented in the Table 1 below.

Table 1: Components in Conceptual Framework

Component	Description
Cultural Metaphor (Toyol)	Symbolic representation of covert, unethical workplace behavior, including time theft, sabotage, passive aggression, and free-riding.
Islamic Ethical Principles	Includes: * Amanah (trustworthiness) * Adl (justice) * Ihsan (spiritual sincerity) * Hisbah (accountability system) All are drawn from Qur’anic ethics and Islamic work culture.
HRM Intervention	Current practices of HR management in managing misconduct, ethical culture building, and potential for integrating Islamic ethical training into employee development

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative exploratory research design, grounded in interpretivist and cultural constructivist paradigms. Given the symbolic nature of the Toyol and its cultural adaptation into workplace metaphors, a qualitative approach is suitable for uncovering subjective interpretations, deep-seated moral reasoning, and ethical perspectives. The research draws on semi-structured interviews, digital discourse analysis, and document-based Islamic ethical interpretation to investigate the intersection between cultural belief, workplace behavior, and HRM.

The study does not aim to measure prevalence but to understand meanings, narratives, and culturally embedded ethics, especially how symbolic folklore like the Toyol is employed by employees to critique, rationalize, or resist unethical conduct in the workplace.

Research Setting and Participants

The study was conducted across three types of organizations in Malaysia under those categories of private corporate companies, public and government-linked agencies, and Islamic or Shariah-compliant organizations.

A purposive sampling strategy was used to select participants based on their familiarity with Malay culture, workplace ethics, and Islamic values. Based on that reason, 30 participants were recruited which are 15 employees (junior to mid-level), 10 HR managers, 5 Islamic consultants and teachers.

Data Collection Methods

The main instrumentation in this study included Semi-Structured Interviews that were done with all informants. The interviews were structured to explore employees' awareness and use of the "Toyol" metaphor in workplace contexts, their personal experiences with subtle or hidden misconduct, their perceptions of Islamic teachings regarding trust, accountability, and work ethics, and the HR managers' strategies for addressing invisible misconduct and integrating ethical values. Interviews were conducted in English, recorded with consent and transcribed for analysis.

Second method used in this study is Digital Ethnography and Discourse Analysis. This was done by collecting relevant content such as memes, social media posts (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, TikTok), and YouTube clips that were analyzed to examine how the Toyol is depicted in contemporary work-related satire. This revealed popular and informal representations of the "Toyol mentality" among younger professionals.

Another data collection method used in the study is Islamic Document Analysis where Qur'anic verses, Hadith, and works by Islamic scholars (e.g., Al-Ghazali, Al-Qaradawi, Beekun) on business and workplace ethics were examined to identify ethical principles applicable to covert misconduct. This theological layer helped interpret employee behavior through the lens of fiqh al-muamalat and akhlaq (morality).

Data Analysis Techniques

The analytic approach in this research was informed by Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis guide that offered a step-by-step method of discovering, arranging, and explaining patterns of meaning across the various data sources. The process started with Phase 1 which is Familiarization, where the researcher became familiar with the data through reading interview transcripts carefully, scrolling through digital artifacts, and reading classical Islamic texts. The phase set the ground for analytic sensitivity as the researcher soaked up not only explicit content but also subtle subtexts.

In Phase 2 of Generating Initial Codes, the data were broken up systematically with the aid of NVivo 12 software, allowing for accurate coding across various forms of data such as transcribed interviews, social media posts, memes, and Islamic moral texts. Coding was carried out inductively, with themes allowed to surface from the

data, as well as being guided deductively by prominent Islamic moral principles such as amanah, adl, and tawakkul.

Phase 3, Searching for Themes, consisted of bringing together related codes into more overarching conceptual categories. In the subsequent fourth phase, Reviewing Themes, themes were assessed for coherence, depth, and representativeness across data sources. This involved a cross-check between digital representations of "Toyol mentality" and formal interview narratives, and noting overlaps and contrasts.

Phase 5 or Defining and Naming Themes involved profound interpretive work in order to define the nature of each theme in relation to wider theoretical constructs, specifically Islamic ethical theory, symbolic anthropology, and cultural HRM.

In the last stage that is Producing the Report, themes were developed and situated in the academic discussion, substantiated with illustrative quotations, digital snippets, and theological analysis. This step also incorporated critical triangulation with Islamic teachings, particularly drawing upon Qur'anic ethics, Hadith literature, and scholarly writings of thinkers like Imam Al-Ghazali, Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, and Rafik Issa Beekun. The incorporation of theological analysis added depth to the interpretation by identifying ethical tensions and convergences between prevalent workplace practices and Islamic moral expectations.

This multi-layered analytical process allowed the research to progress from descriptive themes to a theologically-informed cultural critique, yielding findings of both academic profundity and practical applicability to Islamic HRM.

Trustworthiness and Validity

In ensuring the trustworthiness, rigor, and credibility of the research, a range of established qualitative validation strategies were employed during the study. Foremost among these was the use of methodological triangulation through the engagement of three different but complementary sources of data: digital content analysis, in-depth interviewing, and Islamic textual material. The use of this triangulated approach allowed for a deeper and more complex insight into the phenomenon being examined, namely the metaphorical application of the Toyol to hidden wrongdoing within the workplace, by allowing cross-validation across sources of evidence that differed in form.

In tandem with triangulation, member checking was employed as an essential validation strategy. Once the preliminary thematic interpretations had been formulated, key findings were returned to selected participants to gather their responses. The participants' insights and assurances were used to refine the analytical framework in order to ensure that interpretations resonated with their experiences and precisely captured the intent and nuances of their stories. This iterative feedback process not only added credibility to the study but also boosted its cultural and contextual validity. To minimize researcher bias further and maximize interpretative reliability, peer debriefing was carried out with two different groups: Islamic scholars and human resource (HR) practitioners. Islamic scholars provided theological and ethical insights into the scriptural and doctrinal aspects of the research, whereas HR practitioners shared pragmatic and practical insights into organizational behavior and the administration of ethical policies. These expert consultations produced multifarious opinions, shed light on potential blind spots, and challenged any grand generalizations, consequently bolstering the interpretative validity of the study.

Also, reflexivity was maintained throughout the research process by using journals. The researcher engaged in regular self-reflection, documenting beliefs, personal values, and emotional responses that arose during data collection and analysis. This reflexive practice enabled the recognition and exploration of the researcher's positionality, particularly in relation to cultural familiarity, religious affiliation, and interpretative biases, to ensure results were reported openly and with awareness of interpretative limitations.

This reflexive journaling provided a valuable audit trail, contributing further to the methodological rigor of the research.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical integrity was essential in this research because of the sensitive cultural and religious factors involved. The research obtained ethical approval from the research ethics committee of a reputable university prior to commencing data collection. This ensured that the study adhered to organizational standards in relation to participant safety, data handling, and cultural sensitivity. Participants were all provided with full details of the purpose, scope, and nature of the study and provided their voluntary informed consent before participating.

To protect the privacy and identity of informants, names and all identifiable information were obscured using pseudonyms in both the transcripts and the final report. Permission to audio record interviews was given, and these audio records, along with their transcripts, were stored securely in encrypted and access-restricted digital files in accordance with data protection guidelines.

Because of the study's emphasis on religious beliefs, Islamic ethics, and local myth, a higher degree of cultural sensitivity was observed throughout the research process. The researcher took great care to respect the religious beliefs and personal values of participants, avoiding the use of language or framing that could be interpreted as dismissive, reductionist, or inaccurate. Discussions of metaphysical beliefs such as the Toyol spirit were conducted with respect for their symbolic significance and socio-cultural relevance rather than as mere superstition. Through the use of rigorous ethical safeguards and culturally respectful approaches, the research sought to uphold the highest standards of research ethics, build trust with participants, and uphold the integrity of the subject.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Data for the study was gathered via a multi-method qualitative design with the objective of excavating the symbolic, ethical, and managerial facets of covert misconduct in the workplace, illustrated through the metaphor of the Toyol, a mythological character in Malay mythology imbued with the characteristics of secrecy and moral violation. Thirty in-depth semi-structured interviews were carried out with a heterogeneous group of thirty participants comprising employees, human resource managers, and Islamic scholars in three diverse organizational settings: the private corporate sector, public administration organizations, and Islamic-oriented organizations such as religious non-governmental organizations and Shariah-compliant organizations.

This broad field allowed the study to explore the differences in interpretations and reactions to unethical workplace behavior, guided by elements such as organizational culture, governance structures, and religious ideologies. To complement the interviews conducted, a digital ethnographic analysis was also performed on a curated collection of 40 digital artifacts, including memes, TikTok videos, Facebook posts, and YouTube comments. These artifacts were selected based on their pertinence to the discussion on workplace behavior, satire, and ethical critique, especially where the figure of Toyol was used metaphorically. These digital expressions served as a way to discover informal, peer-created discussions about organizational ethics, showing how younger groups use humor, symbolism, and folklore to critique or normalize behavior that escapes formal human resource review.

In addition to primary interviews and electronic media, the study conducted an in-depth document analysis of Islamic ethical sources, including selected verses of the Qur'an, Hadith accounts, and classical and contemporary fiqh literature, particularly from authors such as Imam Al-Ghazali, Yusuf al-Qaradawi, and Rafik Beekun. These documents formed the normative basis used for the interpretation of contemporary workplace practice, enabling a link between spiritual-ethical principles and real organizational life.

A rigorous thematic analysis performed using Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework revealed four major themes from the triangulated data. The first theme that emerged is The Cultural Manifestation of "Toyol Mentality" Illustrating Underhanded Behavior. This theme examines how workers and internet users employ the Toyol metaphor to express different kinds of surreptitious, unethical behaviors that escape management attention—like time theft, company resource misuse, or passive resistance to work. The metaphor serves as cultural shorthand for conveying moral discomfort while preserving conversational ambiguity, thereby offering social protection for both criticism and complicity.

The second theme is centered on Types of Hidden Workplace Misconduct and Organizational Oversights. This theme included the cases interviewees described of unethical practices commonly disregarded or normalized as part of organizational daily routines, including selective rule enforcement, "ghost attendance," and unofficial favoritism. In this theme, the organizational culture, specifically in bureaucratic or highly hierarchical settings, is often blind to or ignores small-scale offenses, allowing them to accumulate into entrenched patterns of deviant behavior. The Toyol metaphor accurately depicts this invisibility, often signifying both ethical corruption and institutional complicity.

The next theme explores Islamic Ethical Perspectives through the comparison of "Toyol" Behavior with the values of Amanah and Adl. Based on theological analysis and consultation with Islamic scholars, this study explores the portrayal of hidden wrongdoing as a breach of basic Islamic ethical values of amanah (trust) and adl (justice). Theologically educated informants viewed the Toyol mindset as a spiritual betrayal that risks both the integrity of the organization and one's relationship with God (tawakkul and taqwa). Theological interpretations demonstrated that even apparently minor unethical acts have significant spiritual consequences under Islam, which stands in stark contrast to the dismissive attitude of some online discussion.

The general theme discerned is The Missing Link: The Challenge Faced by Human Resource Management in Integrating Cultural Symbolism and Islamic Ethical Principles. In this regard, HR practitioners, particularly those working in secular and public-sector organizations, have indicated challenges in transposing cultural metaphors of symbolic meaning, including the Toyol, into practical HR policy. Although some Islamic institutions have been able to integrate the principles of akhlaq and fiqh al-muamalat into their governance structures, others have indicated their challenges in linking informal ethical discourse with formal accountability structures. This theme highlights the gap between prevailing moral discourse and institutional structures, proposing a need for ethics education embedded in cultural contexts within HRM practices.

The Cultural Deployment of "Toyol Mentality" to Describe Covert Misconduct

Participants across all sectors frequently used the term "Toyol mentality" to describe a range of unethical workplace behaviors. While the term originates from Malay folklore as a supernatural thief, participants made it clear that they were not referring to actual belief in spirits. Instead, they invoked the Toyol as a culturally resonant metaphor or a symbolic figure used to characterize stealthy, self-serving, and manipulative actions that are difficult to detect within organizational systems.

One participant described it poignantly: "A Toyol doesn't get caught. It doesn't break the rules directly, but things go missing such as time, effort, money. It's someone who lets others do the work and benefits silently." (Employee, Corporate Sector, Interview 7). This metaphor was applied to behaviors such as free-riding in team assignments, manipulating attendance records, passive non-performance, and claiming credit for others' achievements and all subtle forms of misconduct that fall under the radar of conventional disciplinary frameworks.

The metaphor thus enabled participants to name and discuss unethical behavior indirectly, offering a form of moral critique without open accusation. This corresponds with the research of Nicholas et al. (2013), who contend that Malay supernatural beings frequently act as social allegories, discreetly challenging authority, injustice, and concealed exploitation. In the high-context, relationship-focused atmosphere of Malaysian workplaces, where cultural values prioritize group harmony and the avoidance of conflict, the Toyol metaphor provides a socially acceptable and emotionally secure means of communication. Instead of directly branding someone as unethical, referring to "Toyol mentality" enabled employees to express their unease or disapproval while maintaining diplomatic relationships.

Forms of Hidden Workplace Misconduct and Organizational Blind Spots

The analysis uncovered several covert workplace behaviors that respondents consistently associated with the Toyol metaphor, representing forms of unethical behavior that are deliberately subtle and designed not to be observed. Table 2 below encapsulates these behaviors, bringing out both the types of misconduct and their perceived frequency extrapolated from thematic patterns in the interviews.

Table 2: Types of Misconduct Prevalence

Type of Misconduct	Description	Prevalence (based on interview themes)
Time Theft	Faking work hours, idling while appearing active online	Very High
Effort Sabotage	Withholding help or information to protect own status	High
Digital Free-Riding	Claiming productivity in remote work with no output	High
Reputation Exploitation	Taking credit for team results without contribution	Moderate

These behaviors often occur in ambiguous areas of responsibility, rendering them hard to track, measure, or formally penalize. Numerous participants noted that although these actions raise ethical concerns, they often remain unreported and unpunished, especially due to the absence of explicit policy breaches. HR managers from various sectors recognized the ongoing challenge of pinpointing “soft corruption,” a term some used to refer to ethically questionable behavior that, while not violating official regulations, still undermines trust and efficiency. As one HR manager at an Islamic financial institution noted, “We have KPI reports and HR audits, but no system can capture the sneaky ones because Toyol employees are quiet, polite, and politically smart.” (Interview 22). This highlights how the Toyol metaphor captures not only the stealthy nature of misconduct but also its strategic masking within organizational cultures.

This theme reinforces the findings of Appelbaum et al. (2007), who describe such behaviors as "deviant but normalized" within bureaucratic structures, settings where procedural gaps, power asymmetries, and overly rigid oversight mechanisms can be manipulated or circumvented. The behaviors examined are not blatant acts of corruption; instead, they consist of a series of small violations that take advantage of organizational blind areas. The Toyol metaphor acts as a storytelling tool that highlights the unseen ethics of daily employment, enabling workers to discuss dysfunction without outright conflict, while also exposing the shortcomings of official HR processes in dealing with morally ambiguous, low-profile misconduct.

Islamic Ethical Perspectives: Contrasting “Toyol” Behavior with Amanah and Adl

Islamic scholars and committed Muslim participants in the research firmly dismissed the idea that actions linked to the “Toyol mentality” could be considered justifiable or ethically neutral. The participants stressed that these actions represent evident breaches of fundamental Islamic ethical values, especially amanah (trust), hisbah (responsibility), and adl (justice). For them, the symbolism of the Toyol, though culturally significant, embodies a clear opposition to the ethical and spiritual obligations anticipated of a Muslim in any workplace or organizational setting. They contended that these actions are not only unprofessional but also spiritually unacceptable. An Islamic scholar declared strongly: “The Prophet (PBUH) stated, ‘Whoever deceives us is not among us.’” If a person receives pay without putting in genuine effort, it’s stealing. "Whether by Toyol or through silence, it remains haram." (Interview 29).

These perspectives emphasize a significant religious issue regarding hidden misdeeds, particularly when they erode community trust or societal accountability. The academics cited various verses from the Qur'an to support this ethical stance. For example, Surah An-Nisa (4:58) advises the faithful to restore trusts to their rightful possessors and to adjudicate fairly, whereas Surah Al-Baqarah (2:283) emphasizes the need for written accountability in dealings to avoid conflicts and deceit. An ustaz cited Surah Al-Mutaffifin (83:1–3), which condemns those who cheat in measure, something metaphorically akin to taking more while giving less. He said this warning is applicable to workers who underperform but nonetheless receive full wages, framing it as a religious transgression, more than just an employment issue.

In this view, the Islamic work ethic is more than external compliance and is based on inner sincerity (ikhlas), consistency in ethical conduct (istiqamah), and personal responsibility (muhasabah). These traits are in direct opposition to the Toyol mentality, which thrives on secrecy, opportunism, and strategic retreat. Participants emphasized that a believer's relationship with work is essentially a form of 'ibadah (worship), and is thus under divine observation and reward. Beekun and Badawi (2005) support this observation, arguing that Islamic ethics require that work has spiritual intention and social responsibility.

Any alteration of effort, time, or trust is regarded not just as a professional shortcoming but also as a breach of divine responsibility. In the end, this theme highlights that the Toyol metaphor serves not only as a critique of workplace wrongdoing but also as a theological divergence that clarifies the moral limits between cultural acceptance of “soft” misbehavior and the strict ethical principles maintained in Islamic teachings.

The Missing Link: HRM’s Struggle to Integrate Cultural Symbolism and Islamic Ethics

While HR managers across the sectors acknowledged the presence of ethical lapses within their organizations, many candidly admitted that their existing policies were largely reactive, procedural, and rule-based, lacking any form of deeper moral or spiritual engagement. There was a recurring theme of disconnection between organizational ethics frameworks and the Islamic moral values that are integral to the personal beliefs of the majority of the workforce. Despite Islam offering a well-developed and widely respected ethical framework including values such as amanah (trustworthiness), ihsan (excellence), and adl (justice), very few HR practitioners had received formal training in how to incorporate these values into HR systems or governance structures. As one HR manager from a government-linked agency noted, “We talk about integrity, but our code of conduct is secular. We don’t really connect it to Islam, even though most staff expect that guidance.” (Interview 17). This observation points to a structural and pedagogical gap between personal moral expectations and organizational ethical practice.

Interestingly, none of the organizations studied seem to have integrated Islamic ethical principles into specific HR practices such as performance appraisal, training modules, employee rewards programs, or disciplinary procedures. Even in those organizations that were considered Shariah-compliant, ethics training was largely viewed as a legal necessity focused on avoiding regulatory non-compliance rather than on developing spiritual consciousness or ethical introspection on the part of employees.

This approach is quite different from the Islamic approach to workplace ethics, which emphasizes inner motivation, sincerity (ikhlas), and accountability to God (muhasabah), as opposed to mere technical compliance with rules. Furthermore, HR managers expressed unfamiliarity with cultural metaphors like the Toyol, which, while commonly used by employees to describe unethical acts, might also be used as reflective tools in training or ethics discussions. While the Toyol character often appears in a comic or satirical mode, its symbolic value in depicting hidden misbehavior, exploitation, or selfish gain offers a culturally grounded vehicle for exploring ethical boundaries that resonates with local values. Failing to tap into these metaphors represents a missed opportunity to integrate folk wisdom, religious ethics, and HR practice in a contextually meaningful and spiritually engaged way.

This gap validates Tayeb's (1997) warning that many Western HRM models, when exported, often underperform or fail altogether in Muslim-majority contexts because they are incongruent with religious and cultural values. It also validates Ong's (1988) contention that spirits and folklore persist in modern schemas as symbolic solutions that help people express critique or discomfort about institutional failings, ethical disconnection, or bureaucratic indifference. In this case, the Toyol works not only as a metaphor of misbehavior, but as a cultural cue of ethical dissatisfaction which serves as a prompt to HR to rethink policies that address both professional conduct and the moral imagination of their workforce.

SYNTHESIS AND DISCUSSION

The triangulation of interview data, digital ethnography, and Islamic textual analysis provides a rich but complex picture of ethical behavior in Malaysian organizational life. Most perhaps striking was the prevalence of the Toyol metaphor as a shared and culturally rooted way for employees to characterize insidious forms of wrongdoing such as time theft, passive avoidance, or silent exploitation of the labor of others. Despite being common both in daily life and online spaces, this metaphor is noticeably absent from formal HRM systems, which maintain secular, procedural strictness that overlooks culturally salient narrative. HR practitioners, even in Islamic institutions, appeared reluctant or unready to appropriate this metaphor as a pedagogical or reflective practice, thereby missing a fertile avenue for linking policy and lived employee experience.

Furthermore, subtle unethical behavior was found to be pervasive, particularly in settings where digital autonomy, absence of monitoring, or dense bureaucratic control prevail. The online data and interviews confirmed that such behavior is typically not reported or routinized since it is insidious, socially normative, or due to people's fear of disrupting organizational harmony. This resonates with the concept of "deviant normality" in organizational ethics literature; whereby incremental but small transgressions yield long-term corrosions of trust.

Crucially, the research illustrates that Islamic ethics supply a strong moral framework to counter these invisible acts. Values like amanah (trust), adl (justice), ikhlas (sincerity), and muhasabah (self-accountability) present definite spiritual guidance that can neutralize the invisibility of wrongdoing. Yet, these values are seldom infused into HR policies, training modules, or performance evaluations. Even within institutions that assert Islamic identity, ethics training tends to be procedural thus more concerned with regulatory compliance instead of moral character and awareness building. This gap highlights a wider institutional chasm between religious ethics and management practice.

One of the strongest findings of the research is the cultural and spiritual disconnect between the way employees discuss ethics, usually in terms of Toyol, halal income, or Amanah, and the way organizations practice ethics that is mainly in terms of audit systems, compliance codes, and KPI metrics. This disconnect not only disenfranchises employees who are trying to find moral meaning in their work but also undermines the success of ethics programs that are unable to connect to local values.

Cumulatively, these findings call for an urgent context-aware, values-integrated HR ethics framework, the one that is sensitive to folklore not as superstition, but as a cognitive shorthand for moral breakdown, and Islamic ethical values not simply as individual beliefs, but as organizational resources that can institute greater integrity, trust, and accountability. By closing the distance between symbolic cultural knowledge and formal HR systems, Muslim-majority context organizations are able to develop ethical excellence that is both spiritually informed and operationally viable.

Limitations of the Study

Notwithstanding these insights, the study is not without its limitations. The sample size, although adequate for qualitative depth, was restricted to purposively sampled organizations in Malaysia and may impact the generalizability of findings beyond other Muslim-majority nations or international contexts. In addition, the analysis was based on self-reported narratives and digital artifacts that are prone to social desirability bias and interpretive uncertainty. The religious framing of ethics could also exclude or marginalize secular Others, which would require greater examination within pluralistic or multi-faith work settings. Lastly, although the Toyol metaphor was analytically fruitful, it may not adequately represent the wider range of unethical behavior, nor address more structural or systemic forms of injustice. Future research should therefore expand the scope to encompass institutional power dynamics, inter-religious comparisons, as well as longitudinal evaluations of ethical interventions in practice.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

The present research has explored the "Toyol mentality" as an embedded cultural metaphor among Malaysian workers to explain surreptitious unethical behavior within workplace settings, including time theft, passive exploitation of teamwork resources, and electronic free-riding. With extensive qualitative analysis, the study has revealed how the Toyol, a traditional folkloric spirit with connotations of invisible theft, has been recontextualized in modern discourse for critiquing moral lapses in contemporary work settings.

The Toyol metaphor is more than satire or superstition because it serves as a symbolic moral diagnostic. Workers utilize the term to explain misconduct that is otherwise hard to report or detect using normal HR systems. Such behavior, though subtle, undermines organizational trust, creates resentment, and sabotages ethical cultures. Even with the clarity with which workers explain such concerns using cultural terminology, the official HR

systems examined lean towards Western-centric, rule-based ethics frameworks that tend to neglect spiritual accountability and cultural sensitivity.

The research also shows that Islamic ethical values, specifically amanah (trust), adl (justice), ihsan (moral excellence), and hisbah (accountability), offer a strong moral basis for dealing with such conduct. In contrast to compliance models, Islamic ethics encourage internalized self-regulation via faith, sincerity (ikhlas), and a sense of accountability to God (taqwa). Interviewed Islamic scholars stressed that furtive workplace abuse breaches divine trust, not merely company policy. This renders the Islamic moral system exceptionally appropriate for confronting unseen or naturalized wrongdoing like the "Toyol mentality."

Yet, the research also discovered a systemic gap in which HR managers frequently did not possess the cultural lexicon, let alone theological background, to converse with such ethical ideas, even in Shariah-compliant or public organizations. Metaphors surrounding Toyol were deemed "informal," and Islamic values were compartmentalized into corporate social responsibility or finance, with little reach into fundamental HR practices such as recruitment, training, or performance management.

In conclusion, this research highlights the pressing necessity for a localized, spiritually engaged HRM model that weaves together cultural storytelling and Islamic moral teachings. The Toyol metaphor, rather than obsolete folklore, presents a culturally literate starting point for envisioning ethics training and worker engagement. Closing the distance between traditional wisdom, religious ethics, and organizational behavior will be the key to developing trust-based, morally resilient institutions in Malaysia and other Muslim-majority settings.

Recommendations

In line with the findings, this research proposes a number of practical suggestions for human resource practitioners, organizational leaders, and researchers operating at the nexus of ethics, culture, and HRM in Muslim-majority societies. For HR practitioners, the first is the pressing need to develop culturally-sensitive ethics training from local metaphors such as the Toyol. As demonstrated in this study, the Toyol metaphor is a powerful narrative device that connects with workers and, therefore, can be used in storytelling-based training modules to stimulate reflection about insidious types of wrongdoing. The method alchemizes abstract ethical dilemmas into locally rooted controversies, which enhances relatability and employee engagement (Nicholas et al., 2013).

Second, HR departments can go beyond procedural ethics by embedding Islamic ethical values such as amanah (trust), adl (justice), and ihsan (excellence) within formal performance appraisals, leadership development, and growth plans. In doing so, HR practice can be aligned with the moral aspirations of a majority Muslim workforce, creating a regime of moral accountability rather than compliance (Beekun & Badawi, 2005). Complementing these structural efforts, organizations can roll out ethical reflection tools, such as weekly muhasabah (self-accounting) diaries or integrity discussion groups, to support individual ethical development. This would be particularly important for remote or hybrid workers who may feel less supervised and more morally ambiguous in virtual workplaces.

Further, collaboration with Islamic scholars in developing HR policies can ensure disciplinary actions and codes of ethics based on fiqh al-muamalat (Islamic commercial jurisprudence). Consultation with experts such as ustaz, muftis, or Islamic ethicists can provide HR systems with both theological authenticity as well as legal compliance (Tayeb, 1997), reduce the distance between secular HR policy and religiously rooted ethical expectations.

At the organizational leadership level, the study argues that leaders not only espouse values but also actively foster a culture of trust and transparency. Ethical leadership involves daily exemplification of values of amanah and adl, and not simply their enshrinement in vision statements or corporate charters. Leaders are also required to institutionalize governance structures based on Islamic ethics, such as the establishment of Hisbah committees or internal integrity boards to audit soft corruption and entrench fairness (Beekun & Badawi, 2005). Reward systems also need to be reconfigured to reward ihsan (moral excellence) and istiqamah (steadfast integrity), even when such behaviors do not necessarily yield visible performance outcomes. This works against the "Toyol" dynamic, where visibility and credit-taking of unethical behavior are rewarded over quiet sincerity and diligence.

For scholars and universities, this research highlights the imperative to further investigate cultural metaphors in HRM. Subsequent studies may examine how other Southeast Asian mythological characters like the Pontianak, Hantu Raya, or Orang Bunian are symbolically used in workplace discourse to convey fear, blame, or moral limits (Wisker, 2022). Scholars should also attempt to empirically test Islamic-integrated HRM models using mixed-methods research, assessing their impact on reducing deviance and improving trust and moral leadership (Tayeb, 1997; Appelbaum et al., 2007). Comparative investigations involving various religious and cultural traditions are also invited, in order to better grasp how societies differently construe and react to unseen workplace deviance, and design ethics systems that are both culturally appropriate and spiritually consistent.

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