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FROM SACRED TEXT TO STATUTE: HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT PRINCIPLES ACROSS RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS, CULTURAL NORMS, AND THE CODE OF HAMMURABI

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ABSTRACT

Objective. This paper compares the human resource management (HRM) principles embedded in the Code of Hammurabi and in the Jewish, Christian, Islamic, Buddhist, Indic, and ancient Chinese traditions, together with the informal institutions of custom and social norm, in order to identify their shared normative core and their principal points of divergence.

Methodology. It is a conceptual, literature-based study that reads canonical primary sources (legal and scriptural) alongside secondary management scholarship, analyzing each tradition against a common template of seven HRM dimensions: basis of obligation, selection, compensation, performance and accountability, welfare and rest, leadership, and equality.

Results. Beneath differing idioms, the traditions converge on a common ethical core—the dignity of the worker, fair and prompt payment, prohibition of exploitation, merit and trustworthiness in appointment, provision for rest, and leadership as service and stewardship. They diverge chiefly along a single axis, the basis of obligation, which runs from externally enforced rule (Hammurabi's codified liability), through the law-and-duty blend of Judaism and Islam, to the internalized disposition emphasized in Christian vocation and in Buddhist and Indic thought, with informal norms operating through relational reciprocity.

Conclusion. Because neither externally enforced rule nor internalized value is self-sufficient, contemporary cross-cultural HRM systems are strengthened when they draw deliberately on both poles, combining enforceable protections with values-based development and culturally congruent, relationship-sensitive practice.

Keywords: Human resource management; Work ethics; Comparative management; Religion and business; Confucian HRM; Code of Hammurabi.

1 INTRODUCTION

The formal vocabulary of human resource management (HRM)—selection, compensation, performance appraisal, employee relations, welfare, and leadership development—is modern, but the underlying human problem is ancient. Wherever people have worked for and alongside one another, communities have developed rules and expectations governing who is hired, how much they are owed, how their effort is judged, and how those in authority ought to behave. Long before management emerged as an academic field, these expectations were articulated by legal codes, sacred scriptures, and the quieter authority of custom.

A substantial literature has drawn management insight from particular traditions in isolation: the Islamic work ethic (Ali & Al-Owaidan, 2008), Indian ethos in management (Chakraborty, 1995; Chatterjee, 2009), Confucian human resource management (Warner, 2010), African communalism (Mangaliso, 2001), and Buddhist economics (Schumacher, 1973), among others. What is less common is a single, structured comparison that places these traditions—and the ancient legal codification that preceded them—side by side against a common analytical frame. This paper addresses that gap.

The objectives of the study are twofold. The first is to establish the *normative content* of seven streams of thought—the Babylonian Code of Hammurabi; the Abrahamic faiths of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam; the Buddhist and Indic religions of Hinduism, Jainism, and Sikhism; the philosophical traditions of ancient China; and the informal institutions of custom, tradition, and social norm—with respect to the core functions that HRM now studies. The second is to determine the *basis of obligation* on which each stream rests—external enforcement, internalized duty, relational expectation, or some combination—and thereby to identify both the shared ethical core of these traditions and the principal axis along which they differ. The paper argues that this comparison carries practical lessons for managing people across cultural and religious boundaries.

2 MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employs a conceptual, comparative, literature-based design rather than an empirical one; it does not collect primary behavioral data but interprets textual sources against a common analytical framework. The approach follows an established tradition of deriving management insight from religious, legal, and philosophical texts (Ali & Al-Owaidan, 2008; Chakraborty, 1995; Mangaliso, 2001; Schumacher, 1973).

2.1 Source selection

Two classes of source were used. Primary sources comprise the canonical legal and scriptural texts of each tradition: the Code of Hammurabi (in the translations of King, 1915, and Roth, 1997); the Hebrew Bible and the Talmud; the Christian scriptures and the magisterial documents of Catholic Social Teaching; the Qur'an and the Sunnah; the principal texts of the Buddhist, Hindu, Jain, and Sikh traditions; and the Confucian, Daoist, and Legalist classics of ancient China. Secondary sources comprise peer-reviewed articles and scholarly books that interpret these texts for management and organizational audiences, identified through academic databases using combinations of each tradition's name with terms such as 'work ethic', 'human resource management', 'labor', 'leadership', and 'business ethics'. A source was retained when it addressed the treatment of workers, wages, selection, authority, or welfare.

2.1.1 Analytical framework

To render heterogeneous traditions comparable, each was read against a common template of seven HRM dimensions: (i) the basis of obligation; (ii) recruitment and selection; (iii) compensation; (iv) performance and accountability; (v) welfare and rest; (vi) the model of leadership; and (vii) the stance on equality among workers. For every tradition, the relevant textual and scholarly material was mapped onto these seven dimensions, and the resulting profiles were then juxtaposed to reveal points of convergence and divergence, as summarised in Table 1. This template provides the study's replicable procedure: a researcher applying the same seven dimensions to the same corpus would generate comparable profiles and could extend the comparison to further traditions.

2.2 Scope and limitations of the method

Two methodological caveats apply throughout. First, each tradition is internally plural; the analysis foregrounds mainstream or representative positions and does not claim to capture every school, sect, or historical period. Second, the study describes normative ideals as expressed in texts and does not assert that those ideals were realized in historical practice, which was frequently stratified and coercive. The design therefore supports claims about normative content and structure, not about measured behavior or organizational outcomes.

3 ANCIENT CHINESE TRADITIONS: CONFUCIAN, DAOIST, AND LEGALIST

The ancient Chinese traditions warrant their own section because, uniquely among the cases examined here, they span the study's central axis within a single civilization—from the internalized virtue of Confucian and Daoist thought to the enforced rule of Legalism. Ancient China produced three enduring schools of thought that continue to shape the management of people in Chinese and diaspora organizations: Confucianism, Daoism, and Legalism (Ma & Tsui, 2015; Warner, 2010). Confucianism, the most pervasive, centers on *ren* (benevolence or humaneness), *li* (propriety and the observance of role and ritual), *yi* (righteousness), and *xiao* (filial piety), and it envisions society and organization as a web of reciprocal, hierarchical relationships in which superiors owe care and moral example to subordinates, who in turn owe loyalty and diligence. For HRM this yields a model of leadership by moral cultivation and exemplary virtue rather than coercion, an emphasis on harmony (*he*) and long-term relational commitment, and a meritocratic ideal expressed historically in selection by examination; scholars accordingly describe a distinctive 'Confucian HRM' marked by paternalistic care, seniority, the value placed on education, and the cultivation of trust (Warner, 2010; Lin, Ho, & Lin, 2013).

Daoism (Taoism) contributes the principle of *wu-wei*—'effortless action' or non-interference—which in an organizational register counsels leaders to govern lightly, minimize heavy-handed regulation, and allow systems to self-organize in accordance with their nature, together with the *yin-yang* sensibility that treats apparent opposites as complementary and equips managers for paradox and balance (Ma & Tsui, 2015; Lin et al., 2013). Legalism, by contrast, rests on a frankly instrumental view of human motivation and prescribes governance through explicit law (*fa*), positional authority (*shi*), and administrative technique (*shu*), enforced through clear rewards and punishments—an ancient analogue of rule-based control, performance contingency, and standardized procedure. The strategic tradition of Sun Tzu's *Art of War* adds an emphasis on foresight, adaptability, and the disciplined deployment of people. Contemporary Chinese leadership is widely read as a dynamic blend of these schools—Confucian relational virtue, Daoist flexibility, and Legalist structure—rather than any one alone (Ma & Tsui, 2015).

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Building on the focused treatment of the ancient Chinese traditions in Section 3, this section profiles the remaining traditions in turn (Sections 4.1–4.6) and then synthesizes all seven streams—the Chinese case included—to identify the shared normative core and the principal axis of divergence (Sections 4.7–4.9), before drawing out the implications for contemporary practice and the limitations of the analysis (Sections 4.10–4.11).

4.1 The Code of Hammurabi: codified labor regulation

The Code of Hammurabi (Babylon, c. 1754 BCE) is among the earliest surviving attempts to regulate work, wages, and the employer–worker relationship (Roth, 1997). Inscribed on a stone stele and framed as the king's mandate to establish justice in the land, it is a practical legal instrument rather than a moral-spiritual code, which is precisely what makes it valuable to HRM: it fixes concrete terms instead of general aspirations. The Code set out fixed rates of pay for numerous occupations—field laborers, herdsman, brickmakers, boatmen, physicians, veterinarians, and skilled artisans—commonly specifying the wage in grain or silver and, in some provisions, adjusting it to the intensity of the work across the year (King, 1915; OpenStax, 2019). This constitutes an early, state-mandated pay scale that standardized compensation and narrowed arbitrary bargaining, and it recognized hired labor as a distinct legal relationship, with terms for engaging workers and renting services, animals, and equipment.

The Code is equally notable for tying reward and penalty to results. A builder whose defective house collapsed and killed its owner could himself be put to death; a physician earned a set fee for a successful operation but risked severe penalty for a fatal or maiming one; herdsman and cultivators bore liability for negligence on their watch (Roth, 1997; King, 1915). In HRM terms this is an early—if harsh—system of performance standards, quality control, and professional liability, whose logic of proportional retribution (*lex talionis*) is ethically remote from modern practice even as its underlying principle—that obligations between parties should be explicit, public, and enforceable—anticipates contemporary labor law. Some provisions limited exploitation, notably by capping the term of debt-bondage, yet protection was stratified by social class, so the Code enshrined a fairness-within-hierarchy rather than equality. It represents the legalistic-contractual pole of the comparison developed below.

4.2 Judaism: covenantal labor ethics

Jewish labor ethics are unusually detailed, drawn from the Torah and elaborated at length in the Talmud, and framed by the conviction that human beings are created *b'tzelem Elohim* (in the image of God), which confers inherent dignity and dignifies labor rather than demeaning it (Tamari, 1987). Two commitments are especially salient for HRM. The first is prompt payment: scripture requires that a hired worker's wages not be held back overnight, a principle of timely compensation that anticipates modern payroll obligation. The second is mandated rest: the Sabbath extends its

protection to workers, dependents, and even animals, embedding a right to periodic rest into the moral order. The Talmud develops reciprocal employer–employee obligations, standards of honest dealing such as accurate weights and measures, and limits on how workers may be treated. Broader values of *tzedakah* (righteous justice and charity) and *tikkun olam* (repairing the world) frame fair treatment as an ethical duty rather than a mere legal minimum; Judaism thus blends codified law with covenantal moral duty.

4.3 Christianity: vocation, dignity, and servant leadership

Christian approaches rest on the belief that every person bears the image of God (*imago Dei*), grounding a claim to fair and respectful treatment. Three streams are especially influential for management. The first is the Protestant conception of work as a calling or vocation, analyzed sociologically by Weber (2001[1904–05]) as the “Protestant ethic,” which valorizes diligence, discipline, and the faithful stewardship of one’s talents. The second is Catholic Social Teaching, inaugurated by Pope Leo XIII’s encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (1891) and developed subsequently, notably in John Paul II’s *Laborem Exercens* (1981); this body of doctrine articulates the right to a just wage, the right of workers to associate, the priority of labor over capital, and the principles of solidarity, subsidiarity, and the common good. The third is servant leadership, modelled on the Gospel image of Jesus washing his disciples’ feet, which later informed Greenleaf’s (1977) influential secular theory of leadership as service. Together, compassion, the golden rule, and the teaching that the laborer deserves fair wages feed a humane, dignity-centered vision of management.

4.4 Islam: justice, trust, and the Islamic work ethic

Islamic HRM draws on the Qur’an and the Sunnah (the Prophet Muhammad’s example). Work performed for lawful (*halal*) ends is dignified and can itself be an act of worship, and scholarship on the Islamic work ethic treats work not as an end in itself but as a means to personal growth, social relations, and closeness to faith (Ali & Al-Owaihian, 2008; Yousef, 2001). Several principles bear directly on HRM. Justice (*‘adl*) and benevolent excellence (*ihsan*) are required in all dealings with workers. Selection is meritocratic: a Qur’anic narrative commends the hiring of one who is “strong and trustworthy,” and appointing the most competent person is treated as a trust (*amanah*) that must not be handed to the unqualified through favoritism. Wages must be fair, agreed in advance, and paid promptly—captured in the tradition that a worker should be paid “before his sweat dries.” Decision-making ideally proceeds through consultation (*shura*); exploitation is forbidden; and accountability to God (*taqwa*) underwrites managerial honesty. Non-discrimination is grounded in the equality of all people regardless of race or lineage, and provision for prayer, rest, and welfare reflects concern for the whole person (Ali, 2005, 2010). Islam, like Judaism, fuses legal prescription with moral-religious duty.

4.5 Buddhist and Indic religious traditions

Buddhism contributes “Right Livelihood,” one limb of the Noble Eightfold Path, which asks people to earn a living without causing harm—avoiding, for example, trades in weapons, intoxicants, and exploitation. Compassion (*karuna*), mindfulness, and non-attachment orient management toward well-being rather than pure output; Schumacher’s (1973) essay on “Buddhist economics” argues that the purpose of work is to develop character and community, not merely to maximize production. **Hinduism** offers the concept of *dharma* (duty appropriate to one’s role) and, from the *Bhagavad Gita*, the discipline of *niskama karma*—acting diligently while remaining detached from the fruits of action—which scholars have applied to leadership, motivation, and corporate responsibility (Chakraborty, 1995; Muniapan & Satpathy, 2013). The historical *varna* division of labor is part of this tradition’s legacy but is ethically contested and legally repudiated in modern India.

Jainism centers on *ahimsa* (non-violence) and a notion of trusteeship—that wealth and position are held in trust for the community—that influenced Gandhi’s economic thought. **Sikhism** promotes *kirat karni* (honest labor), *vand chakna* (sharing one’s earnings), and *seva* (selfless service), alongside a strong commitment to human equality symbolized by the communal kitchen (*langar*). Gandhian trusteeship (Gandhi, 1960), drawing on several of these currents, reframes employers as stewards responsible for workers’ welfare rather than mere owners of labor. Across the Indic traditions the emphasis falls on internalized disposition—duty, service, non-harm—more than on external enforcement.

4.6 Customs, traditions, and social norms

Beyond formal religion, informal institutions shape HRM powerfully. Cultural dimensions such as individualism versus collectivism, power distance, and orientations toward hierarchy and seniority strongly influence recruitment, reward, and authority structures (Hofstede, 2001). These norms are often invisible to the actors who follow them, yet they determine whether a formal HR policy is experienced as legitimate.

Concrete examples illustrate the range. *Ubuntu* in much of sub-Saharan Africa (“I am because we are”) favors communal, relational, consensus-oriented management and is argued to offer a culturally congruent alternative or supplement to imported HRM techniques (Mangaliso, 2001). *Guanxi* in China organizes hiring and cooperation around personal relationships and reciprocal obligation, while *wasta* in parts of the Arab world channels access to jobs through connections (Hutchings & Weir, 2006). Kinship networks, patronage, face-saving, and seniority-based advancement are

recurring norms that HR systems must either work with or deliberately counterbalance to preserve fairness. Informal norms thus govern the workplace through relational expectation rather than through statute or scripture.

4.7 Comparative synthesis

Read against the common template, the traditions display a striking convergence of content beneath their differing idioms. Table 1 summarizes the comparison across the seven HRM dimensions.

Table 1: HRM dimensions across the traditions.

HRM dimension	Code of Hammurabi	Judaism	Christianity	Islam	Indic & Buddhist	Ancient China
Basis of obligation	Codified state law; enforceable liability	Covenant with God; Torah & Talmudic law	Dignity (imago Dei); vocation; charity	Qur'an & Sunnah; accountability to God	Dharma, karma, ahimsa, right livelihood	Confucian virtue & role; Legalist law (fa)
Recruitment / selection	Occupation-based contracts	Honest dealing; reciprocal duty	Stewardship of talent; calling	Merit: 'strong and trustworthy'	Fit to dharma / role and character	Merit; moral cultivation; examination
Compensation	Fixed statutory wage scales	Timely pay; no overnight delay	Just wage (Rerum Novarum)	Fair, agreed, prompt payment	Honest earnings; sharing (vand chakna)	Fair reward; rectified roles
Performance / accountability	Result-linked penalties (lex talionis)	Mutual employer-worker duties	Diligence; serve others' good	Ihsan (excellence); amanah (trust)	Nishkama karma: act, not for fruit	Legalist rewards & punishments (shu)
Welfare & rest	Debt-bondage capped; some limits	Sabbath rest for all who work	Solidarity; common good	Prayer, rest, brotherhood, welfare	Compassion (karuna); trusteeship	Benevolence (ren); harmony (he)
Leadership model	Ruler as lawgiver / enforcer	Justice (tzedek) & responsibility	Servant leadership (foot-washing)	Consultation (shura); justice ('adl)	Seva (service); ethical detachment	Exemplary virtue; wu-wei (Daoist)
Equality stance	Stratified by class	Image of God; dignity of labour	Equal worth before God	Equality across race & lineage	Contested (caste) vs. equality (Sikh langar)	Hierarchical harmony; role duties (li)

Note. Entries summaries representative mainstream positions and are illustrative rather than exhaustive.

4.8 The shared normative core

Despite their theological distance, the traditions converge on a recognizable set of HRM commitments: the inherent dignity of the worker; a duty to pay fair and prompt wages; prohibitions on exploitation; merit and trustworthiness in appointment; provision for rest and welfare; leadership conceived as consultation, service, and stewardship; and accountability to a standard higher than profit. This convergence suggests that these are not parochial doctrines but recurring human answers to the perennial problems of organizing work, and it provides common ethical ground on which employees from very different backgrounds can meet. The ancient Chinese traditions reinforce this core rather than standing apart from it: Confucian ren and harmony echo the dignity and welfare emphases of the Abrahamic and Indic traditions, Confucian selection by merit parallels the Islamic stress on competence and trustworthiness and the Hammurabic concern to fit reward to role, and Legalist reward-and-punishment mirrors the codified accountability of Hammurabi—so that China restates the shared core in its own vocabulary even as it uniquely contains both ends of the axis discussed next.

4.9 From enforced rule to internalized value

The clearest line of difference concerns the basis of obligation. Hammurabi anchors labor ethics in codified, externally enforced law and liability. Judaism and Islam blend legal prescription with moral-religious duty. Christianity and the Buddhist and Indic traditions lean toward ethical disposition—calling, service, non-attachment, non-harm—cultivated within the person; and ancient Chinese thought spans the axis within a single civilization, with Legalism at the enforced-rule pole and Confucian and Daoist ethics at the internalized-value pole. Informal customs operate through relational obligation and reciprocity. Arranged this way, the traditions trace an arc from externally enforced rules to internalized values in the governance of work relationships. Neither pole is self-sufficient: rules without internalized value invite mere compliance and evasion, while disposition without enforceable rule leaves the vulnerable unprotected.

4.10 Implications for contemporary HRM

Three implications follow for practice in pluralistic, cross-cultural organizations. First, on recruitment and reward, the shared insistence on merit, trustworthiness, and prompt fair pay provides a principled basis for resisting favoritism where informal norms such as *wasta* or patronage press against it. Second, on ethics and culture, the axis from rule to value implies that codes of conduct (the Hammurabi pole) work best when paired with the cultivation of internalized professional and ethical disposition (the Christian and Indic-Buddhist pole); compliance systems and values-based development are complements, not substitutes. Third, on leadership development, the convergence of several traditions on service and stewardship—servant leadership, *seva*, *shura*, trusteeship, and Ubuntu's relational ethic—offers a cross-culturally resonant model for training managers who lead diverse teams. For multinational HR design, the analysis cautions against exporting a single culture-bound template: systems are more likely to be experienced as legitimate where they are built with, rather than against, the relational and communal expectations that customs such as Ubuntu and *guanxi* encode, while retaining the universal protections that the scriptural and legal traditions independently affirm.

4.11 Limitations and future research

This paper is conceptual and interpretive; its claims are about normative content and structure, not about measured behavior. Each tradition is internally diverse, and the summaries privilege representative positions over sectarian variety. The gap between ideal and historical practice—stratification, servitude, and discrimination that several of these same traditions tolerated—deserves fuller treatment. Future work could operationalize the seven-dimension template as a survey instrument to test, empirically and cross-nationally, whether professed traditional values predict HRM practices and employee outcomes; comparative case studies of organizations operating across these value systems would be especially valuable.

5 CONCLUSION

From a stone stele in Babylon to the encyclicals of Rome, the scriptures of Sinai, Mecca, and Varanasi, the classics of the Chinese sages, and the unwritten codes of village and clan, human communities have long insisted that work is a moral relationship and not merely an economic transaction. The traditions examined here differ in how they secure that relationship—through enforceable law, covenantal duty, internal calling, or communal expectation—but they converge remarkably on its substance: dignity, fairness, prompt payment, restraint of exploitation, merit, rest, and service. The principal contribution of this study is to make that convergence explicit through a single seven-dimension comparison, and to locate the traditions' main difference on one interpretable axis running from externally enforced rule to internalised value. The significance for practice is that contemporary HRM, often presented as a value-neutral technology, inherits this long moral conversation whether or not it acknowledges it; systems that draw deliberately on both the rule-based and the value-based ends of that inheritance are the most likely to be both effective and just.

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