



# Whole-of-Nation Moral Learning by Spiritual Hearts: A Case of Brunei's Transformation to tackle the COVID-19 Pandemic

Iznan Tarip<sup>1</sup> · Zuraihi Ashari<sup>2</sup>

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## Abstract

All nations are continuously learning how best to live with the COVID-19 pandemic. Utilizing organizational moral learning and Islamic spirituality perspectives, this paper proposes a learning framework called the whole-of-nation moral learning by spiritual hearts to understand the dynamics of learning and change in a nation tackling the pandemic. It proposes that to overcome the pandemic or any other crises, governance requires the combination of moral leadership and followership by spiritual hearts as agents for moral learning and change, supported by realigned and reconfigured systems for holistic growth. Brunei's journey in tackling the pandemic illustrates the framework.

**Keywords** Brunei · Spiritual heart · COVID-19 · Moral learning · Whole-of-nation approach

## Introduction

With the COVID-19 pandemic, many changes must be learned by all members of society. Not only by scientists racing to develop vaccination methods and politicians and government officials governing through this global crisis but also by businesspersons, school teachers, religious communities, and family members. Most, if not all, are affected by it, and all are required to learn and adapt to the ‘new normal,’ requiring physical, moral, and spiritual transformations. However, some countries

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✉ Iznan Tarip  
iznan.tarip@ubd.edu.bn  
<https://www.linkedin.com/in/dr-iznan-tarip/>

Zuraihi Ashari  
joe14853@gmail.com

<sup>1</sup> Universiti Brunei Darussalam, Tungku Link Road, Gadong BE1410, Brunei Darussalam

<sup>2</sup> Defence Academy, Royal Brunei Armed Forces, Mentiri, Brunei Darussalam

fare better than others. To understand the phenomenon of learning and change through crisis, this paper proposes a learning framework called the ‘whole-of-nation moral learning by spiritual hearts’ to understand the continuous learning processes needed to overcome the COVID-19 pandemic or any other crises requiring change for the whole nation.

Briefly, the framework is derived by synthesizing the field of organizational learning and Islamic literature, particularly on the role of the spiritual heart in moral learning and change. Two key roles of the heart are highlighted: a moral learning medium and a change agent. The heart is then operationalized within the socio-organizational and national settings to move beyond agency and into systems, structures, and cultures. In addition, the notion of moral learning by spiritual heart is combined with the whole-of-nation approach, emphasizing the need for collective decision-making and subsequent action. As a result, the ‘whole-of-nation moral learning by spiritual hearts’ approach is generally conceived, further elaborated in the next section.

Then, the paper illustrates the dynamics of ‘whole-of-nation moral learning by spiritual hearts’ in Brunei’s Islamic governance context, particularly its whole-of-nation approach to combat the COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 is a global pandemic that started in December 2019, with a high infection rate and fatality. Brunei’s first wave was in March 2020, the second was in August 2021, and the third was in February 2022, when there was a spike in the number of reported cases. According to Rampal and colleagues (2021), Brunei’s case fatality rate was 0.9 between January 2020 to March 2021, and the cumulative mortality rate per 100,000 population was 9.5, which was relatively low compared to neighboring ASEAN countries at 1.8 and 26.7, respectively. Despite limitations as a small state (Wong et al., 2020), Brunei successfully mitigated the first wave, flattening the curve on March 29, 2020 (Hamid & Karri, 2021; Pang, 2021), and continued to mitigate subsequent waves through its systemic whole-of-nation approach. Brunei’s whole-of-nation approach has been covered by various authors (Omar & Halim, 2021; Shahrill et al., 2021). However, the role of the spiritual heart in tackling the pandemic has not been sufficiently emphasized (Domaradzki, 2022; Hossain, 2020); hence, the value of the research framework and the illustrative case study. The paper concludes with practical implications for governance.

## Whole-of-Nation Moral Learning by Spiritual Hearts

Organizational learning is mainly concerned with the stock and flow of knowledge, arguably stemming from Cyert and March’s (1963) work and branched to a plethora of perspectives and worldviews (Easterby-Smith & Lyles, 2011). There is also literature on organizational learning for the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., Alonazi, 2021; Lyman et al., 2021). Organizational moral learning is another branch, dealing with the changes in moral values not only in the individual but also in the collective, the organizational systems, and the external environment (e.g., society, legislation) (Reidenbach & Robin, 1991; Sridhar & Camburn, 1993; Logsdon & Yuthan, 1997;

Falkenberg, 2004; Yuthas et al., 2004; Snell, 2000; Spitzeck, 2009). However, these works are built upon Kohlberg's (1975) stages of moral development, which contain various critiques, particularly in its rational approach to morality and ethics.

An alternative approach to understanding organizational moral learning is offered by Tarip (2020), involving the spiritual heart using three perspectives: organizational learning, Islamic and critical realist perspectives. The author utilized the 4I organizational learning framework (Crossan et al., 1999) to understand the knowledge flow between the individual, group, and organizational levels; the Islamic perspective explains the noetic of the spiritual heart in line with the traditional (al-Ghazalī, 2007) and contemporary sciences, suited to understand the dynamism of moral learning and action; and the critical realist perspective, as a meta-philosophy (Bhaskar, 2012), bridges between Islamic and contemporary sciences. All three perspectives underlined the importance of knowledge and learning for change. Tarip (2020) then conceptualized two antagonistic processes for organizational moral development: on one extreme is organizational *moral* learning by virtuous hearts, defined as 'the principal means of *moral*, strategic renewal of an organization towards achieving a *moral* end'; and on the other extreme is organizational *immoral* learning by corrupted hearts, defined as 'the principal means of *immoral* strategic renewal of an organization towards achieving an *immoral* end.' These two are at the two extreme ends of organizational development. The dynamics between the two extremes were also explored further.

This paper builds upon the existing literature on organizational moral learning by spiritual hearts with the whole-of-nation approach to understand the multi-level nature of moral learning (see Table 1).

### **Individual Learning by Spiritual Heart**

The role of the spiritual heart in moral decision-making and psychological well-being is well-recorded (Kim et al., 2021; Penman, 2021). From an Islamic perspective, the concept of the spiritual heart is distinct but interrelated with many others

**Table 1** 'Whole-of-nation moral learning by spiritual hearts' framework

Levels of moral learning:	'Whole-of-nation moral learning by spiritual hearts' framework:
Individual level	Live to fulfil a moral purpose through moral learning and moral action Holistic moral learning by heads, hearts and hands
Societal level	Moral learning among societal members for a shared moral purpose Purified and united hearts have a common understanding and congruent moral actions
National/ Organizational level	Institutionalization of moral learning into national/organizational systems, structures, cultures, procedures, rules and strategies Institutionalization by stakeholders to achieve a specified moral vision National/organizational leaders' alignment with the national/organizational moral vision
Global level	Moral learning across the globe to achieve shared moral goals Global leaders to navigate the complex and ever-shifting moral terrain using wisdom

within the vast supersystem, e.g., knowledge, spirit, intelligence, gnosis, wisdom, virtues, and vices (al-Attas, 2001). Many contemporary authors have covered this (Briki & Amara, 2018; Rothman, 2021; Rothman & Coyle, 2018). In this paper, the spiritual heart is defined as the perceiving and knowing essence of humans (al-Ghazālī, 2007), consistently defined within the Abrahamic tradition, i.e., Christianity (Kierkegaard, 2016) and Judaism (Wells, 2014). The heart is the seat of knowledge and comprehension and is a crucial apparatus to discern the truth. Decisions are also made by the spiritual heart in consultation with the sense knowledge from the ‘hand’ (i.e., psychomotor) and knowledge from the ‘head’ (i.e., cognition) (al-Ghazālī, 2007; Tarip & Abu Bakar, 2020).

Al-Ghazālī categorized three different states of the spiritual heart: purified, corrupted, and diseased. On one extreme, the purified hearts aim to know and worship God and possess many virtues (i.e., morally good characteristics). They generate *moral intuitions*, inspiring creativity and ingenuity to achieve the moral purpose of life. However, on the other extreme, the spiritually dead hearts reject truth, are filled with vices (i.e., immoral characteristics), and intuit towards achieving immoral purpose of life. Between the two lies the heart with spiritual diseases, having a commixture of virtues and vices. The diseased heart may intuit towards fulfilling either moral or immoral purpose, but not amoral. The categorical states are also supplemented by the understanding that the heart is constantly in flux, continuously influenced positively and negatively (Briki & Amara, 2018). To develop the heart, an individual has to continuously purify it (Rothman & Coyle, 2018), which entails the continuous struggle against vices and self-training of inculcating virtues (Sidani & Al Ariss, 2014), or in other words, undergoing moral learning and moral action (al-Attas, 2001). For holistic development, individuals not only have to have a critical ‘head’ and skillful ‘hand’ but also a virtuous ‘heart’ (Brühlmeier, 2010; Tarip & Abu Bakar, 2020), taking in all the means of knowing truth from various sources to become wise (Nasr, 2006). Doing so would lead to true happiness (Rizvi & Hossain, 2016; Wahab, 2022).

## Societal Learning by Hearts

Subsequently, the heart’s (im)moral intuition can aggregate to the collective or societal levels through the sub-learning processes of ‘interpretation’ (i.e., communicating and clarifying intuitions to self and others) and ‘integration’ (i.e., the formation of shared understanding and ensuing co-operative actions) (Crossan et al., 1999, 2011; Tarip, 2020), creating a community-of-practice (Brown & Duguid, 1991).

On the light side, the purified hearts share moral intuition with others, calling to achieve shared moral goods and fight against corruption and injustices. On the dark side, the dead hearts interpret immoral intuitions, inducing and manipulating others towards achieving immoral purposes, thus corrupting the world. These dead hearts can use various processes of socio-spiritual corruption, such as rationalization, socialization, and institutionalization of corrupting knowledge and actions (Ashforth & Anand, 2003).

In the middle grey area, the diseased heart possessing weaker moral consciousness may be persuaded, influenced, or forced by either the purified hearts or the dead hearts to ‘follow’ them, establishing the leader–follower relationships within a particular collective. Moral (Ciulla, 1998; Ciulla et al., 2005) and wise leadership (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 2011; Tarip, 2018; Yang, 2011; Zacher et al., 2014) with spiritual approaches (Abdul Aziz, 2020; Blackaby & Blackaby, 2011; Fry, 2003; Fry et al., 2005) are highly sought to ensure moral development for the collective. At this stage, moral agency plays an important part. In the following two sections, the concern is more on system, structure, and culture.

## National/Organizational Moral Learning by Spiritual Heart

Subsequently, moral learning on the individual and group levels can be ‘institutionalized’ in systems, structures, cultures, procedures, rules, and strategies (Crossan et al., 1999, 2011; Tarip, 2020). The literature is more concerned with organizational learning repositories. However, this can be transposed to the national level, whereby they also have similar learning repositories at this level. Once institutionalized, the process of unlearning will be complicated due to the set allocation of the necessary systems and resources, but not impossible.

These learning repositories shape the heart’s capability to make moral decisions (Trevino, 1986; Tenbrunsel, 1998; Tenbrunsel et al., 2003). The heart’s relationship to the learning repositories can be categorized into two, following the critical realist work of Margaret Archer on organization and society (Archer, 1995, 1996, 2007a, 2007b, 2012, 2015; Mutch, 2017). According to the author, agents are conditioned and constrained by structures and cultures, and subsequently, agents also configure, modify, elaborate, or abandon them. Two outcomes are projected: ‘morphostasis’ (i.e., keep the status quo) or ‘morphogenesis’ (i.e., pursue change) for the organization/nation. It is then the role of the ‘reflexive agents,’ or in this case, the reflexive hearts, to decide whether to maintain or change the existing learning repositories.

Equally important is the alignment and reconfiguration by leaders and members to the organizational/national vision to ensure development along a clear learning trajectory (Beer et al., 2005; Miller, 1996). There will be a clash of existence if there is misalignment, where one progresses while the others digress. A corrupt leader suppresses employees and develops the organization/nation immorally; suppressive organizational/national systems limit growth for leaders and followers; misbehaving employees hinder the moral development of leaders and organization/nation. For this, it can be proposed that if the purified heart is aligned to the moral vision and purpose of the organization/nation, then both the individual and organization/nation can develop morally. On the dark end, if the spiritually dead heart is aligned with the immoral vision and purpose of the organization/nation, then perpetual corruption ensues, further corrupting the global moral system. This is the case of bad apples corrupting other apples in the barrel and the apple orchards, e.g., lousy police corrupting police department and the whole policing system in a particular country (Kish-Gephart et al., 2010; Thoroughgood et al., 2011). Hence, the need for continuous purification within the organization/nation (Tarip, 2020).

Furthermore, the whole-of-nation approach can be adopted here due to its emphasis on collaboration and coordination among stakeholders, i.e., public, private, and the wider community, to holistically tackle common issues, such as national security (Berkowitz, 2012), health care (Gluckman & FRS, 2017), smart cities (Chia, 2016), and environmental protection (Daugherty & Towns, 2019). Specifically for tackling COVID-19, several works have elaborated on the whole-of-nation approach in different contexts, such as Brunei (Omar & Halim, 2021; Shahrill et al., 2021), Singapore (Qijia Chua et al., 2020), and Taiwan (Hsieh et al., 2021). However, these focused solely on biological, physical, educational, and/or financial measures, neglecting the role of the spiritual heart in change. The ‘whole-of-nation moral learning by spiritual hearts’ can then be formed, whereby all nation members operate co-jointly to achieve a specified moral vision or purpose, adding to the existing discussion on the whole-of-nation approach.

### Global Learning by Spiritual Hearts

There is also a need to widen the scope beyond the organizational and national levels. There are higher levels of learning beyond the organizational level, such as ‘inter-organizational learning’ between institutions (Coughlan & Coghlan, 2004), ‘population-level learning’ (Haunschild & Chandler, 2008), and even global learning (Nordén & Avery, 2021). These levels of learning extend beyond localized learning but are external to the organizational and national boundaries. These concepts also examine the stock and flow of knowledge but have broader scope beyond the organizational and national boundaries. Since the concern here is on moral learning, some similar concepts are readily available, such as global citizenship (Huckle, 2020) and global citizenship education (Franch, 2020). However, depending on the authors, they may have their respective ontological and epistemological assumptions. For global citizenship, Oxley and Morris (2013) demarcated eight distinct typologies: political, moral, economic, cultural, social, critical, environmental, and spiritual. These typologies are not exhaustive and mutually exclusive but somewhat interrelated. Oxley and Morris (2013) have shown how a particular learning curriculum (e.g., ‘Developing a Global Dimension in the School Curriculum’ in England) may have these typologies in varying degrees of prevalence.

However, this paper focuses on morality and spirituality and how these are related to global learning. The concept of ‘global learning by spiritual hearts’ here refers to the transfer of knowledge amongst the hearts around the globe. It builds upon moral learning on the individual, organizational, societal, and national levels to extend into the rest of the world. Such phenomena are nothing new. Global learning has been ongoing for a long time; following traders, explorers, and conquerors, the transfer of knowledge and moral values unfold throughout space and time, affecting humans’ hearts worldwide. Now with the advent of globalization, such global learning is catalyzed and is commonplace.

Similar to previous levels of learning, global learning by spiritual hearts also requires moral purpose to ensure the sustainable development of the world. Such global learning for sustainable development emphasizes transformation and

emancipation (Barker, 2020), considering both global and local contexts. At present, there are specific united goals, such as the United Nation's 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the World Health Organization's (WHO) goal to ensure global health security, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. The two are also aligned, with WHO utilizing the SDG in its annual reporting system. However, as observed by Nordén and Avery's (2021) systematic review, global learning for sustainable development has challenges, such as domination by the North, an emphasis on technocratic development, and limited learning outputs for sustainability.

It can be argued that the field of global learning is still evolving, particularly regarding values and change. Global leaders operating beyond their national state play an important role. Their ethics and morality will shape the transformation around the world, despite the challenges present. Thompson (2010) offered a 'Global Moral Compass' for leaders to navigate the complex and ever-shifting moral terrain by 'linking diverse value positions and wisdom tradition.' It is based on moral vision for inspiration, moral code for rationalization, moral fitness for habituation, and moral performance in situ. The adaptive leaders will then utilize the Compass for the transformational learning process to ensure moral development for their respective organizations and individuals. They may also influence society, and vice versa, towards sustainable moral development of the world.

## **Brunei's Whole-of-Nation Moral Learning by Spiritual Hearts**

This section aims to illustrate the whole-of-nation moral learning by spiritual hearts (WoNML-SH) framework. The case study methodology is employed to achieve this, as it enables deep exploration of relevant factors and processes underlying a poorly understood phenomenon through a case narrative (Myers, 2009; Yin, 2014). Brunei is selected as the case context in which WoNML-SH unfolds, particularly in its journey to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic. The case narrative draws upon news articles, official press, websites, and the author's experience living in Brunei during the pandemic.

The analytical generalization from a single case is particularly difficult, hence the paper's explorative nature. Despite such apparent weakness, a single case is still valuable to highlight unique instances. In the case of Brunei, its contemporary Islamic governance is distinctive in emphasizing the role of religion and spirituality in governance and moral learning.

Brunei is an Islamic state with a national philosophy of Malay Islamic Monarchy to chart development through the infusion of Malay culture, Islamic religion, and monarchical governance system. Although small ( $5,765\text{km}^2$ ), the Sultanate has a long history of global connections to many civilizations, including the Chinese, Islamic, Indic, Japanese and Western. According to the official history of Brunei, the first recorded Sultan of Brunei was Sultan Muhammad Shah, who ruled the Islamic kingdom from 1363 to 1402. By the mid-fifteenth century, the country reached its golden age during the reign of the fifth Sultan Bolkiah (1485–1524), whereby Brunei controlled the whole of North Borneo (present-day Sabah and Sarawak), the Sulu archipelago, and parts of the Philippines, and is a great trading hub. However,

due to colonial interventions and conflicts in the region, Brunei entered a state of decline in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It became a British Protectorate in 1906, but in 1984, the declaration of independence was announced by the current 29<sup>th</sup> Sultan of Brunei. Brunei has sustained itself with its unique national philosophy of ‘Malay Islamic Monarchy’ and natural resources, especially with oil and gas production. In 2020, Brunei was placed in the ‘very high’ category of the Human Development Index.

The case illustrates Brunei’s moral learning trajectory in combatting the COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 is a global pandemic that started in December 2019, with a high infection rate and fatality. Brunei had its first wave on March 9, 2020, with only three fatalities, the second wave in August 2021, and the third was in February 2022, when there was a spike in the number of reported cases. According to Rampal and colleagues (2021), Brunei’s case fatality rate was 0.9 between January 2020 to March 2021, and the cumulative mortality rate per 100,000 population was 9.5, which was relatively low compared to neighboring ASEAN countries at 1.8 and 26.7, respectively. Despite the challenges inherent in a small state (Wong et al., 2020), the Brunei government swiftly implemented a series of mitigation measures earlier. Brunei’s mitigation strategies during the first wave were adequate because the last locally transmitted case was on May 5, 2020. Since then, Brunei has not recorded any locally transmitted cases for more than a year. Brunei’s success in mitigating the pandemic can be attributed to various factors, which can only be done through the whole-of-nation approach, strong Islamic leadership, strong international relations, swift responses of the government agencies, and the grassroots level exercising collective wisdom.

## Global Learning

COVID-19 affects all operations and governance all over the globe. It also provides the context for learning and change. National alignment and adjustments are made possible with the right and up-to-date information regarding the shifting global landscape. As an international organization, the WHO plays a global health leadership role in addressing the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite its limited capacity, it has done a lot in coordinating national efforts around the globe. Brunei acquired up-to-date information about the global situation through this organization and others in the region to execute the appropriate strategies, exemplifying global learning to combat the pandemic.

Global learning via international relations also facilitates the moral development of the country (e.g., vaccination) while hindering immoral development (e.g., entry of smugglers). For example, acquiring health equipment and vaccination is also made through strong international relations. In terms of acquiring vaccines, it is made possible through the COVAX facility, an initiative co-led by WHO and the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations. With more vaccinations, the COVAX facility has played a role in distributing them despite the still-shocking disparity in global distribution. Brunei received its first vaccine shipment on April 2, 2021.

Brunei's strong international relations also enabled the donation of additional vaccines and other health equipment from neighboring countries such as Australia, China, and Japan. In another example, coordination with counterparts around the region and strong international relations enable the nation to tackle economic issues, such as tourism and logistics. Brunei began strict closure of borders on January 30, 2020, ensuring all travelers were quarantined while allowing international trade. There were also increased efforts in monitoring likely routes on both lands and rivers into Brunei, leading to the capture of smugglers and seizure of contraband in the process.

## National Learning

With the 'new normal,' many phases of system reconfigurations and re-alignment were needed. To mitigate the spread of coronavirus, the strategies were to control the spread of the virus through early detection, nationwide contact tracing using BruHealth mobile application, and quarantine orders and to vaccinate the citizen through robust and equitable vaccination programs. There was plenty of initial hesitancy and even rebellion from the public. The Infectious Disease Act (Chapter 204) was amended on 12 March 2020 to empower the Ministry of Health to implement compulsory swabbing and isolation and criminalize those that do not comply. As of October 2022, the Ministry shared that the vaccination rate of the general population is more than 94% for the mandatory two doses, and 78.6% for three doses. Internally, social distancing practices (e.g., no shaking hands or physical contact, wearing masks, sanitizing hands) were imposed. At the same time, places of mass gathering, such as schools and mosques, were prohibited as the number of local cases increased in March. An extension to the existing virology laboratory was also constructed and completed on 1 April to increase capacity and accelerate the testing process for the coronavirus.

As the situation improved in Brunei over a few months, the Ministry of Health then released the 'De-escalation Plan Implementation for the Reduction of Social Distancing Measures' based on the current local situation of COVID-19, divided into 6 phases: Level 0 with strict closure to Level 5 for the 'new normal' with many activities going back to normal, e.g., classes done face-to-face instead of online, mass gathering allowed, mosques opened. As of April 2021, Brunei implemented Level 5 for the 'new normal,' with nearly a year of zero local cases. The national vaccination program also started in early April 2021, with the Sultan receiving his first dose, and was displayed in various social media outlets to encourage its uptake by society. Even when the second wave of COVID-19 cases was detected in August 2021, the Government was swift to control the situation by limiting human-to-human transmission through immediate closure of public spaces and early identification of COVID-19 cases through active screening (Trivedi et al., 2022) and contact tracing.

Knowledge transfer is significant between various parties, both locally and internationally. The government organized press releases and disseminated information through various social media platforms, such as Instagram, Telegram, WhatsApp,

and official websites, to systematically counter misinformation and disinformation. A Health Advice line 148 was also made available to respond to any health-related inquiries from the public as a one-to-one learning. Through these multiple platforms, the public was notified of any changes, such as new cases, recovered or deceased patients, and changes to the existing guidelines on social interactions, vaccination procedures, and so on. In advancing research relating to COVID-19, companies such as EVYDResearch have partnered with the government and a local university to conduct pertinent studies and subsequently provide relevant policy recommendations to relevant bodies (Shim et al., 2022). On national education, the Ministry of Education also revised the education policy for the ‘new norm’ to shift to online learning to promote continuous lifelong learning.

However, due to globalization and multiple social media platforms, the dissemination of false and ill-motivated information cannot be blocked entirely. In this case, the government and society played continuous roles in ensuring that incorrect information was suppressed. The Sultan even reprimanded and corrected the misconceptions of some Bruneian Muslims early during the first wave regarding *tawakkal* (reliance on God) without making essential efforts while emphasizing the need for a whole-of-nation approach to combat this pandemic. In the second, the same strategy kicked in to ensure a well-informed society for whole-of-nation moral learning and action (Phan et al., 2021; Shahrill et al., 2021). Such strategies were also continued for subsequent waves for their effectiveness.

For the economy, the Government prudently spent the necessary amount to mitigate the risk of COVID-19. Economic activities have been guided since the very beginning. Guidelines on creating Business Continuity Plans for government agencies and businesses were provided and updated frequently on the official BizBrunei website. Such plans helped protect the workforce and, at the same time, ensured essential businesses were still carried out. Import and export of essential commodities, such as rice and sugar, were also monitored to ensure sufficiency for its population’s daily consumption. The Government has also introduced relief measures to alleviate the people’s hardship in Brunei during this pandemic, such as the COVID-19 Relief Fund, economic stimulus packages, and advising premises owners to reduce or waive their rents. Furthermore, the new Sultan Haji Omar’ Ali Saifuddien Bridge was opened on March 17, 2020, during the first outbreak, allowing direct commute between Temburong, an isolated Brunei land, and the rest of Brunei, uniting the country as a whole instead of having to pass through Limbang, Malaysia.

Uniquely, Brunei has positioned the Islamic faith as part and parcel of governance and social fabric, hence the need to place sufficient emphasis on faith and spirituality for the holistic moral development of the nation. Mitigation measures were taken, not only with the guidance from WHO but also in reflection to all spheres of Bruneian life, not only for organizing social events and traveling abroad but also for spiritual practices and personal learning. The Islamic religion was fortified right from the top until the grassroots level. At the top, the Sultan’s unwavering faith became a beacon for the people during these difficult times. He incessantly called for the people to be on guard with the latest health protocol and practice ‘*vaksin ketuhanan*’ (the divine vaccine approach) for self-protection. He even emphasized the effectiveness of the divine vaccine approach, evidenced by Brunei’s successful

mitigation of the pandemic for over a year. The divine vaccine approach, supported by the Ministry of Religious Affairs, includes the *Qunut Nazilah* prayer (i.e., a supplication for Allah's protection from harm such as droughts and diseases), frequently recited before every live press conference and event, and for every obligatory congregational prayer in the local mosques throughout the nation, even during the 'new norm' when there were no cases.

### Societal and Individual Learning

The Brunei society has also accepted the new reality and learned to exercise various modules of whole-of-nation moral learning and action to adapt to the changing landscape. In areas where the Government was shorthanded, the public and private sectors stepped up to fill the void. For example, the national Youth Volunteer group was hurriedly set up during the first wave to help fill in the many labor gaps, especially in the healthcare stations, and the public lent their helping hand, despite the risk. Where there are shortages in health equipment and even basic needs such as food and toiletries, both members of the public and private sectors tried to fill the void to mitigate the spread of the coronavirus.

In terms of knowledge and information, Bruneians organically exercised their agency to echo correct information through their social media networks and suppress false information as much as possible. The local press and social influencers (Mohamad, 2020) would also facilitate the dissemination of correct information to the people. Doing so would ensure equitable collective moral learning and action towards the same moral vision and purpose. Even when the Government shifted formal education to online learning and many underprivileged members of the society could not initially participate due to lack of resources, businesses, non-governmental organizations, and various public members quickly provided continuous support by donating new laptops and internet lines.

In the economy, many were affected, especially the micro and small enterprises, which possess minimal knowledge, skills, and capital to run their businesses and support their family's daily needs. Many initiatives, such as 'Community for Brunei,' were then generated, seamlessly connecting societal members and small businesses. The rise in online delivery platforms was also seen with increasing customer acceptance (Almunawar & Anshari, 2022; Azizi, Almunawar & Anshari, 2022). Also, local community-based tourism flourished despite the lockdown (Noorashid & Chin, 2021).

Indeed, stressful changes were affecting everyone, especially migrant domestic workers with little support locally. However, with people taking care of each other, society managed to mitigate COVID-19. For example, Maideen and colleagues (2022) captured that the 'mind and heart' of nurses were taken care of with assistance from the 'psychosocial system.' Even for migrant workers, Kumpoh (2022) and Ho (2022) discovered that their employment and well-being were still secured by various members of society, enabling them to ease their concerns during the pandemic and even comfort their familial burdens abroad by sending financial aid. This is also where the religious and spiritual communities strengthen themselves

within the confined of their physical homes but tap into their spiritual connectedness through other means such as self-meditation, familial prayers, and online religious gatherings. Overall, Brunei's WoNML-SH can be seen from the individual level up to the global levels (see Table 2).

## Study Limitations

The present research is limited to Brunei's context during the COVID-19 pandemic, in which generalizations on the WoNML-SH framework were derived. The country is unique with its Islamic governance approach (Abdul Rahman et al., 2021) and its condition as a highly developed small state. Hence, direct transference of these findings to other contexts is cautioned against. Additionally, despite contemporary research on this issue, the framework's focus on the spiritual heart may receive skepticism (Briki & Amara, 2018; Rothman, 2021; Rothman & Coyle, 2018). There is

**Table 2** Brunei's 'Whole-of-nation moral learning by spiritual hearts'

Levels of moral learning:	Brunei's 'Whole-of-nation moral learning by spiritual hearts':
Individual level	Individual agency trying to navigate the pandemic, undergoing moral learning and moral actions
Societal level	Active dissemination of correct information and simultaneous suppression of false information by community leaders, social media influencers, and members of the public Societal members stepped up to fill the void in: Healthcare, e.g., a national youth volunteer group was immediately established, and private sector and members of the public donated necessities and health-related equipment to healthcare workers and volunteers Education, e.g., donated laptops and internet lines to support online learning Economy, e.g., 'Community of Brunei' online platform established to connect micro and small enterprises with customers for purchasing and donation, and focused on community-based tourism Spirituality, e.g., familial prayers, and online religious gatherings
National/ Organizational level	Exercised spiritual leadership and introduced the 'divine vaccine approach' Active dissemination of correct information and simultaneous suppression of false information by the national leader and relevant authorities Institutionalized various control measures and reconfigured them according to the situation, e.g., upgraded health-related facilities, amended Infectious Disease Act with immediate enforcement, mandated vaccination, imposed social distancing for a selected period, closed public spaces for a selected period, and monitored through BruHealth application
Global level	Frequently updated findings and guidelines by the World Health Organisation and other international agencies to mitigate the pandemic Various moral learning across borders, agreed by leaders, e.g., border control, restricting international travels, enabling only essential travels, acquiring vaccines and other health-related equipment through international relations

thus a need for critical assessment and further validation of the WoNML-SH framework, both in theory and practice.

For future theoretical research, various dimensions and factors can be synthesized, examining multiple aspects of the framework. Many factors could not fit into the discussion here, such as the many tensions within the heart and in society, geographical locations, technological advancements, barriers to organizational learning (Schilling & Kluge, 2008), power and politics to drive or hinder learning and action (Lawrence et al., 2005) and more. Applying the framework in other settings may shed new light on the practice, such as in larger Muslim communities, secular nations, and nations with different religious stances.

## Concluding Remarks

The paper has presented an alternative and novel approach to governing during the COVID-19 pandemic by drawing upon the perspectives of organizational moral learning and the spiritual heart. The WoNML-SH framework unfolds on four distinct levels: global, national, societal, and individual levels. Guided by leaders with visionary hearts (Basir & Rahman, 2021; Pang, 2021), moral learning and changes on all levels to overcome the COVID-19 pandemic are made collectively with followers, embedding and realigning morality in the national/organizational structures, cultures, systems, and procedures. In turn, these organizational learning repositories act as catalysts for moral changes in the hearts of others. The ongoing positive interactions between hearts and the organization generate the virtuous learning cycle, as illustrated by Brunei's whole-of-nation moral learning by spiritual hearts in tackling the COVID-19 pandemic. The framework may also be applied to a similar context, especially in Muslim communities with Islamic governance. However, researchers and policymakers can scrutinize Islam-based practices for public health in non-Muslim contexts for 'moral and practical reasons' (Dajana et al., 2022).

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