

**INFORMAL SOCIAL NETWORKS AND ETHICAL LEADERSHIP:
A BUSINESS ANTHROPOLOGY STUDY OF MORAL ECOLOGY AND
INTERCALARY LEADERSHIP IN JORDAN'S WATER GOVERNANCE**

Maram Hani Falah Alshawabkeh¹

Cite:**Idézés:****EP / EE:****Reviewers:****Lektorok:**

Alshawabkeh, Maram Hani Falah (2026). Informal Social Networks and Ethical Leadership: a Business Anthropology Study of Moral Ecology and Intercalary Leadership in Jordan's Water Governance. *Különleges Bánásmód Interdiszciplináris folyóirat [Special Treatment Interdisciplinary Journal]*, 12(1), 7–18. DOI <https://doi.org/10.18458/KB.2026.SL.7>

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

Ethics Permission / Etikai engedély: KB/2026/0012

Public Reviewers / Nyilvános Lektorok:

1. Gábor Biczó (Prof., Habil., PhD), University of Debrecen (Hungary)
2. Efilina Kissiya (S.Pd.,M.Hum.,PhD), University of Pattimura-Ambon (Indonesia)

Anonymous reviewers / Anonim lektorok:

3. Anonymous reviewer (PhD) / Anonim lektor (PhD)
4. Anonymous reviewer (PhD) / Anonim lektor (PhD)

Abstract

In the context of Jordan's chronic water scarcity, this research investigates how ethical leadership is practiced within the Ministry of Water and Irrigation. Moving beyond technocratic models, the study adopts an anthropological lens to frame governance as a "moral ecology"—a dynamic space where environmental constraints, cultural values, and organizational structures intersect. Through qualitative ethnographic methods, the paper highlights the role of middle managers as intercalary leaders who must navigate the tension between rigid bureaucratic mandates and the informal social networks, or *wasta*, that underpin Jordanian social life. The research argues that these informal networks are not merely indicators of institutional weakness or corruption; instead, they function as culturally meaningful mechanisms essential for maintaining trust, cooperation, and legitimacy within the ministry. By situating ethics in the everyday labor of relational negotiation, the study demonstrates that effective governance in resource-scarce environments requires moving away from individualistic leadership models toward a more socially embedded understanding. Ultimately, this work contributes to business and cultural anthropology by reframing ethical leadership as a relational and ecological process, offering a nuanced framework for understanding institutional life under severe environmental and social pressure.

Keywords: ethical leadership, moral ecology, water governance, informal social networks, intercalary leadership, *wasta*

Disciplines: ethnography, cultural anthropology

¹ Maram Hani Falah Alshawabkeh (PhD Student), University of Debrecen, Doctoral School of History and Ethnology (Hungary). E-mail: maramshawabkeh97@yahoo.com ORCID <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-4728-5058>

Absztrakt**INFORMÁLIS TÁRSADALMI HÁLÓZATOK ÉS ETIKUS VEZETÉS: ÜZLETI ANTROPOLÓGIAI VIZSGÁLAT JORDÁNIA VÍZGAZDÁLKODÁSA ESETÉBEN A MORÁLIS ÖKOLÓGIA ÉS AZ INTERKALÁRIS VEZETŐI SZEREPEK TÜKRÉBEN**

Jordánia krónikus vízhiányának kontextusában a jelen kutatás azt vizsgálja, miként realizálódik az etikus vezetés gyakorlata a Vízügyi és Öntözési Minisztérium intézményi keretein belül. A technokrata megközelítéseken túllépve a tanulmány antropológiai perspektívát alkalmaz, amely a kormányzást „morális ökológiaként” konceptualizálja: olyan dinamikus térként, ahol a környezeti korlátok, a kulturális értékek és a szervezeti struktúrák egymással metsződve fejtik ki hatásukat. Kvalitatív etnográfiai módszertan alkalmazásával az elemzés rámutat a középvezetők meghatározó szerepére, mint interkaláris vezetőkre, akiknek egyidejűleg kell kezelniük a rigid bürokratikus előírások és az informális társadalmi hálózatok – azaz a *wasta* – által strukturált társadalmi működés közötti feszültségeket. A kutatás amellett érvel, hogy e hálózatok nem pusztán az intézményi gyengeség vagy a korrupció indikátorai, hanem olyan kulturálisan jelentésteremtő mechanizmusok, amelyek nélkülözhetetlenek a bizalom, az együttműködés és az intézményi legitimitáció fenntartásához. Az etika mindennapi, relációs tárgyalási gyakorlatokba való beágyazottságának feltárásán keresztül a tanulmány demonstrálja, hogy az erőforrás-szűkös környezetekben a hatékony kormányzás megköveteli az individualisztikus vezetési modellektől való elmozdulást egy társadalmilag beágyazottabb értelmezési keret irányába. Összességében a tanulmány hozzájárul az üzleti és kulturális antropológia diskurzusaihoz azáltal, hogy az etikus vezetést relációs és ökológiai folyamatként újraértelmezi, és egyúttal árnyalt analitikai keretet kínál az intézményi működés megértéséhez súlyos környezeti és társadalmi nyomás alatt.

Kulcsszavak: etikus vezetés, morális ökológia, vízkormányzás, informális társadalmi hálózatok, interkaláris vezetés, *wasta*

Diszciplínák: etnográfia, kulturális antropológia

Introduction

Water governance in Jordan exemplifies the complex interplay between environmental scarcity, institutional authority, and cultural ethics. As one of the most water-poor countries globally, Jordan faces chronic challenges in balancing supply and demand, intensified by climate variability, population growth, and refugee influxes. In such contexts, governance is not purely technical; administrative decisions carry moral weight, influencing livelihoods, social stability, and perceptions of fairness.

Anthropological perspectives increasingly challenge conventional assumptions that ethical behavior derives solely from formal institutional rules or individual decision-making. Instead, ethics are under-

stood as emerging relationally, shaped by social interactions, institutional practices, and environmental conditions. This paper explores ethical leadership in Jordan’s water sector through two key frameworks: moral ecology, which situates ethics within socio-ecological relations, and intercalary leadership, which highlights the mediating role of middle managers operating between formal and informal systems.

The research asks: How do leaders within Jordan’s water governance institutions navigate ethical dilemmas and reconcile competing obligations under conditions of scarcity? It also considers how informal networks, such as *wasta*, shape everyday organiza-

tional practice, and how these dynamics influence employee performance and institutional legitimacy.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive anthropological approach, drawing on existing ethnographic research, organizational analyses, and literature on water governance in Jordan and the Middle East. This research relies on secondary ethnographic materials and organizational documentation as its primary empirical sources, including prior ethnographies, institutional reports, and policy analyses. Rather than relying solely on new interviews or surveys, the research employs an organizational ethnographic reading, treating documented institutional practices, reports, and prior ethnographic accounts as legitimate ethnographic material (Marcus & Fischer, 1986; Rosaldo, 1989). This approach aligns with interpretive anthropology, which emphasizes understanding social worlds as culturally and morally situated, and foregrounds the researcher's reflexive positioning within the analytical process (Crapanzano, 2004).

The methodology prioritizes situated analysis of relational dynamics, informal social networks, and leadership practices through the lens of moral ecology. It interprets how bureaucratic procedures, informal mediation, and cultural values co-produce ethical governance, treating organizational life itself as a field of moral and social negotiation (Herzfeld, 1992; Gupta, 2012). By focusing on middle managers and departmental heads as intercalary leaders, the study highlights the interpretive labor required to mediate between formal institutional mandates and socially embedded expectations. This approach allows for a nuanced understanding of ethical leadership as emergent, relational, and contextually embedded rather than a fixed attribute of individual actors.

Adopting interpretive ethnography is particularly suitable for analyzing water governance in Jordan, where institutions operate under conditions of scar-

city, political complexity, and cultural embeddedness. Ethnographic insight enables the examination of how informal networks, relational obligations, and moral reasoning shape decision-making in practice, complementing technical and administrative accounts. Such an approach ensures that the analysis remains faithful to the lived realities of governance while maintaining rigor through anthropological theory and interpretive methodology (Marcus & Fischer, 1986; Rosaldo, 1989; Herzfeld, 1992).

The researcher approaches the material from a cultural anthropological perspective attentive to the interpretive nature of institutional analysis. Rather than claiming objective neutrality, the analysis recognizes that interpretations emerge through engagement with existing ethnographic scholarship and theoretical debates on governance, ethics, and organizational life. This reflexive positioning acknowledges that knowledge production is shaped by analytical framing while seeking to remain grounded in empirically documented institutional practices (Marcus & Fischer, 1986; Gupta, 2012).

Rather than aiming to produce universal causal explanations, this study seeks to generate contextualized anthropological understanding of ethical leadership as a culturally embedded and relational phenomenon, revealing how governance practices acquire moral meaning within specific socio-ecological settings.

Main Analysis

Moral Ecology in Natural Resource Management and Water Governance

Anthropological approaches to governance increasingly challenge the assumption that ethical behavior originates solely from individual decision-making or formal institutional rules. Instead, morality is understood as emerging from situated social relations embedded within material environments

and cultural systems. The concept of moral ecology captures this relational understanding of ethics by emphasizing how moral judgments and practices arise through interactions among social actors, institutional structures, and ecological conditions (Huff et al., 2008). Rather than viewing ethics as a fixed normative framework, moral ecology conceptualizes moral action as a dynamic process shaped by historically situated relationships, shared meanings, and environmental constraints.

Within anthropology, ecological perspectives have long demonstrated that human societies interpret natural resources not merely as material assets but as socially constructed entities embedded in systems of value and obligation. Environmental governance, therefore, cannot be reduced to technical management; it involves negotiations over legitimacy, fairness, and responsibility. Moral ecology highlights how ethical expectations develop within specific socio-ecological contexts, where cultural norms, political authority, and environmental realities mutually constitute one another. Institutions do not simply regulate resources but also cultivate moral understandings about how resources should be distributed and protected.

Water governance provides a particularly revealing site for examining moral ecology because water occupies multiple domains simultaneously. Anthropological research describes water as a socio-natural phenomenon linking biological survival, political organization, and symbolic meaning (Orlove & Caton, 2010). Decisions about water allocation are never purely administrative; they are interpreted through moral frameworks concerning justice, collective rights, and social responsibility. Especially under conditions of scarcity, water governance becomes an arena in which ethical claims are continuously negotiated among state institutions, professionals, and communities. Bureaucratic procedures intersect with lived moral expectations, transforming technical decisions into socially meaningful

acts that affirm or undermine institutional legitimacy.

In water-scarce societies, environmental constraints intensify moral evaluation of governance practices. Scarcity produces heightened awareness of distributive justice because access to water directly affects livelihoods, agriculture, and social stability. Anthropological scholarship shows that when essential resources become limited, administrative authority is judged less by procedural efficiency than by perceived fairness and moral intent (Gupta, 2012). Institutional actors must therefore navigate competing ethical expectations, balancing bureaucratic rationality with culturally grounded understandings of obligation and reciprocity. Ethical leadership, from this perspective, emerges not from individual virtue alone but from the ability to sustain trust within a fragile moral environment shaped by ecological pressure.

The moral ecology of water governance in Middle Eastern contexts is further informed by religious and cultural conceptions of stewardship. Environmental responsibility is frequently articulated through ethical traditions that frame natural resources as entrusted goods rather than commodified assets. The notion of *amana*, or divine trust, exemplifies this moral orientation by positioning humans as custodians accountable for the just management of shared resources. Such concepts infuse administrative work with moral significance, allowing public-sector professionals to interpret technical responsibilities as expressions of ethical and spiritual duty. This moral framing reshapes organizational behavior by linking professional performance to broader narratives of collective responsibility and accountability before both society and God (Benadi, 2024).

Understanding governance through moral ecology also shifts analytical attention toward everyday organizational practices. Bureaucracies are not neutral mechanisms but social worlds constituted through

routines, interactions, and informal norms. As Gupta (2012) demonstrates, the state is experienced through mundane encounters that produce perceptions of care, indifference, or justice. Within resource management institutions, employees interpret policies through interpersonal relationships and shared moral assumptions, creating ethical climates that cannot be explained solely through formal regulations. Ethical leadership thus becomes an emergent phenomenon arising from relational dynamics rather than hierarchical authority alone.

Adopting moral ecology as an analytical framework enables a more nuanced understanding of how environmental scarcity, cultural values, and organizational structures interact in shaping governance outcomes. It allows leadership to be examined as a process embedded within socio-ecological systems rather than as an individual managerial attribute. In the context of water governance, this perspective reveals how ethical practices develop through ongoing negotiations between institutional mandates and culturally grounded expectations of fairness, stewardship, and social responsibility. Moral ecology therefore provides a critical lens for analyzing how legitimacy, trust, and ethical leadership are co-produced within organizations operating under conditions of ecological constraint.

Intercalary Leadership: Mediating Formal Institutions and Informal Social Worlds

Intercalary leadership refers to forms of authority exercised by actors positioned between hierarchical levels of governance, particularly middle managers and departmental leaders who operate at the interface of policy formulation and everyday implementation. Rather than functioning merely as administrative intermediaries, these actors play a mediating role that connects formal institutional mandates with socially embedded expectations, relational obligations, and informal systems of coordination. In contexts characterized by institutional complexity and resource scarcity, leadership emerges less as

individual command and more as an ongoing process of negotiation across overlapping moral and organizational orders (Herzfeld, 1992; Gupta, 2012).

Within bureaucratic institutions, formal rules, procedures, and accountability mechanisms define the official structure of governance. Yet organizational practice rarely unfolds exclusively through these formal arrangements. Everyday decision-making frequently depends on informal communication, trust-based relationships, and culturally grounded understandings of responsibility and fairness. Intercalary leaders navigate these dual domains simultaneously, translating policy directives into locally workable practices while also conveying social realities upward within institutional hierarchies. Their work therefore involves interpretive labor—making institutional expectations intelligible within social contexts and reconciling competing demands without destabilizing organizational coherence. Interpretive anthropology emphasizes that social action must be understood through culturally situated meanings rather than purely technical explanations (Geertz, 1973; Marcus & Fischer, 1986).

Anthropological analyses of bureaucracy further demonstrate that institutions operate not only as administrative systems but also as moral and cultural environments shaped by everyday practices and symbolic meanings (Herzfeld, 1992; Hull, 2012). From this perspective, leadership cannot be reduced to formal authority or managerial efficiency alone. Governance depends on relational capacities, including the ability to mediate conflicts, sustain legitimacy, and balance procedural compliance with socially recognized notions of fairness. Intercalary leaders occupy a structurally liminal position that enables such mediation, deriving authority both from institutional roles and from their embeddedness within networks of trust and professional reciprocity (Turner, 1969; Gupta, 2012).

In the context of water governance, these mediating practices become particularly significant. Scarcity conditions, political sensitivities, and competing

stakeholder interests generate situations in which rigid adherence to formal procedures may be impractical or socially disruptive. Intercalary leaders therefore engage in pragmatic adjustment, informal consultation, and negotiated problem-solving to sustain institutional functioning. Such practices should not be interpreted as deviations from governance but as constitutive elements of how governance operates in practice. Studies of organizational ethnography demonstrate that bureaucratic effectiveness often relies on informal adaptation and situated decision-making rather than strict procedural uniformity (Czarniawska, 2012; Mosse, 2005).

Understanding intercalary leadership as mediation between formal institutions and informal social worlds shifts attention away from leadership as a fixed personal attribute toward leadership as an emergent relational process. Ethical governance, in this sense, arises through ongoing interaction among actors, norms, and institutional constraints rather than through the actions of singular decision-makers. By foregrounding interpretive practice and relational negotiation, this framework highlights how everyday bureaucratic actions contribute to broader moral ecologies of governance, revealing leadership as embedded, negotiated, and contextually situated (Fassin, 2012; Gupta, 2012)

Institutional Landscape of Water Governance in Jordan

Understanding leadership and ethical practice within Jordan's water sector requires situating organizational behavior within the broader institutional ecology governing water management. Anthropological studies of bureaucracy emphasize that institutions are not merely administrative structures but socially embedded systems shaped by historical development, political authority, and cultural expectations (Gupta, 2012). In Jordan, water governance operates through a multilayered institutional arrangement in which authority is distributed across

several interrelated state entities, each carrying distinct mandates yet functioning through overlapping social and organizational networks.

At the center of this system stands the Ministry of Water and Irrigation, the primary policymaking body responsible for national water strategy, regulation, and sectoral coordination. Established in response to increasing water scarcity and rapid demographic growth, the ministry formulates long-term planning frameworks addressing groundwater depletion, infrastructure expansion, and international water agreements. From an anthropological perspective, ministries function not only as policy producers but also as symbolic representations of state authority. Policies acquire meaning only as they move through administrative layers and are interpreted by actors responsible for implementation.

Operational authority is largely executed through the Water Authority of Jordan, which manages water supply systems, groundwater extraction, and municipal distribution networks. The authority represents the technocratic dimension of governance, emphasizing engineering expertise, resource monitoring, and service delivery. Yet ethnographic research on public utilities demonstrates that technical institutions inevitably encounter social realities that exceed formal planning models (Mosse, 2005). In practice, distribution decisions often intersect with community expectations, local negotiations, and perceptions of fairness, making administrative processes deeply social rather than purely technical.

A third central actor, the Jordan Valley Authority, governs irrigation systems and agricultural development in the Jordan Valley, one of the country's most strategically significant ecological regions. Unlike urban water administration, irrigation management directly connects state institutions with rural livelihoods, tribal land relations, and agricultural economies. Anthropologically, this creates a governance environment where bureaucratic decision-making must continually engage with local moral economies—shared understandings about entitlement,

reciprocity, and resource access shaped by historical settlement patterns and social organization.

Together, these institutions form a fragmented yet interdependent governance assemblage. Authority is distributed vertically across ministries and agencies while simultaneously extending horizontally into regional offices, municipalities, and community-level interactions. Organizational anthropologists note that such arrangements generate spaces of negotiation rather than clear chains of command (Hull, 2012). Policies formulated at the national level must be interpreted and enacted by mid-level administrators who translate abstract directives into locally workable practices. This institutional complexity creates fertile ground for intercalary leadership, as actors positioned between strategic planning and everyday implementation reconcile competing expectations.

Jordan's extreme water scarcity intensifies the social significance of these institutional relationships. As one of the most water-poor countries globally, Jordan faces chronic imbalance between supply and demand driven by climate variability, population growth, refugee influxes, and agricultural pressures (Al-Omari et al., 2019). Scarcity transforms water governance into a morally charged arena where administrative decisions carry ethical implications affecting livelihoods and social stability. Anthropological scholarship suggests that scarcity amplifies the visibility of governance practices, making fairness, transparency, and legitimacy central concerns for both employees and citizens (Barnes & Alatout, 2012).

Within this institutional landscape, formal bureaucratic procedures coexist with informal mechanisms that facilitate coordination across organizational boundaries. Employees frequently rely on interpersonal relationships to navigate administrative complexity, accelerate processes, or resolve conflicts between policy requirements and local realities. Rather than representing institutional failure, these practices often function as adaptive strategies enabling

governance systems to operate under conditions of uncertainty and resource constraint. This coexistence of formal hierarchy and informal interaction reflects the “lived state”—the state as experienced through everyday encounters rather than official structures alone (Gupta, 2012).

For researchers examining ethical leadership, the Jordanian water sector provides a uniquely revealing context. Leaders must simultaneously uphold national regulations, respond to technical imperatives, and remain attentive to social expectations embedded within communities and workplaces. The institutional landscape does not simply shape leadership behavior; it produces the conditions under which ethical dilemmas emerge. Decision-makers operate within overlapping accountability systems—legal, organizational, and social—requiring continuous negotiation between efficiency, equity, and cultural legitimacy.

Seen through a business anthropology lens, these institutions constitute more than administrative bodies; they form a moral and organizational ecosystem in which leadership practices are culturally enacted. The interaction between ministry-level policy, agency implementation, and local social dynamics creates spaces where intercalary leaders become essential actors linking institutional authority with social trust. Understanding this institutional ecology is foundational for analyzing how ethical leadership and employee performance are experienced within Jordan's water governance system.

Informal Networks” Wasta” and Organizational Life in Jordan’s Public Sector

Anthropological analyses of organizations emphasize that institutional life extends beyond formal bureaucratic structures into domains shaped by personal relationships, moral obligations, and culturally embedded systems of exchange. In Jordan's public sector, informal social networks constitute a central mechanism through which authority is exercised, resources are negotiated, and administrative pro-

cesses are enacted. These networks operate alongside official hierarchies, forming what anthropologists describe as parallel systems of governance that mediate between state rationality and social belonging (Ledeneva, 2013). Understanding ethical leadership within Jordanian institutions requires examining how informal relational practices influence everyday decision-making.

A key organizing principle within these networks is *wasta*, commonly translated as mediation, intercession, or social brokerage. While often framed in policy discourse as favoritism or nepotism, Anthropological scholarship situates *wasta* within broader systems of reciprocity characteristic of Middle Eastern social organization (Cunningham & Sarayrah, 1993). Rather than functioning solely as corruption, *wasta* represents a culturally recognized mechanism for maintaining social cohesion, redistributing opportunity, and reinforcing obligations among kinship and community networks. Individuals mobilize social ties not merely for personal advantage but as participants in a moral economy, where assistance establishes enduring social bonds.

Within public institutions such as the Ministry of Water and Irrigation, informal networks often emerge as practical responses to bureaucratic complexity. Employees navigate administrative procedures through trusted relationships that enable faster communication, conflict resolution, and coordination across departmental boundaries. Anthropological studies of bureaucracy demonstrate that such practices are adaptive strategies allowing institutions to function in environments characterized by limited resources and high social expectations (Gupta, 2012). Informal interactions frequently compensate for procedural rigidity, enabling flexibility where formal rules alone cannot address situational demands.

Tribal affiliation and extended kinship structures further shape workplace interactions within Jordanian organizations. Tribal identity functions as a dynamic social resource that informs trust, reputation,

and mutual obligation. Organizational actors may rely on shared regional or familial connections to establish credibility and cooperation, particularly in contexts involving sensitive resource allocation such as water distribution. These affiliations constitute forms of social capital structuring access to information and influence (Bourdieu, 1986). Leadership legitimacy, therefore, often depends not only on formal authority but also on an individual's capacity to navigate relational expectations embedded within social networks.

The coexistence of bureaucratic norms and relational ethics produces a hybrid moral system. Employees interpret ethical behavior through multiple evaluative frameworks: adherence to institutional regulations, loyalty to social networks, and culturally grounded notions of fairness. Leaders must negotiate competing moral obligations, balancing procedural justice with expectations of social responsiveness. Anthropologists argue that informal networks should be analyzed as infrastructures of coordination rather than deviations from formal governance (Hull, 2012). In Jordan's water sector, relational mediation can reduce conflict by enabling negotiation outside rigid administrative channels. Department heads and middle managers often function as brokers translating institutional policies into socially acceptable outcomes. These actors maintain organizational stability by reconciling state mandates with community expectations, illustrating how leadership emerges through relational practice rather than positional authority alone.

Generational change is gradually reshaping perceptions of informal networking. Younger professionals increasingly emphasize meritocratic ideals, transparency, and procedural fairness influenced by global professional norms. Nevertheless, these emerging values do not eliminate relational practices; instead, they produce hybrid forms where employees selectively engage informal networks while advocating institutional accountability. This transformation reflects broader social shifts in

Jordanian society, where modernization reconfigures tradition within organizational contexts.

From a business anthropology perspective, informal networks represent a cultural logic through which organizational effectiveness is negotiated. Ethical leadership in this environment depends on recognizing when relational mediation supports collective goals and when it risks eroding institutional trust. Leaders who manage this balance act as moral intermediaries, aligning social obligations with organizational ethics

Water Scarcity, Social Ethics, and Administrative Practice: Anthropological Perspectives

Anthropological scholarship increasingly recognizes water scarcity not merely as an environmental or technical problem but as a social condition reshaping moral relations, institutional behavior, and governance practices. In arid regions such as Jordan, water operates simultaneously as a material resource, political instrument, and moral symbol embedded within cultural understandings of justice and collective survival. Scholars examining hydro-social systems argue that water governance must be understood as a relational process linking ecological constraints with social organization, ethical reasoning, and state legitimacy (Orlove & Caton, 2010). This perspective challenges technocratic models by emphasizing how cultural values influence administrative decision-making and institutional performance.

Jordan is among the most water-scarce countries globally, a condition that intensifies the ethical dimensions of governance. Studies demonstrate that scarcity transforms routine bureaucratic actions into morally charged decisions affecting livelihoods, regional equity, and perceptions of state fairness (Murad, 2021). Anthropologists describe such contexts as hydro-social environments, where flows of water mirror flows of power, authority, and social obligation. Administrative actors therefore operate

not only as technical managers but also as moral agents negotiating competing claims over a shared and limited resource.

Research on water governance institutions—including the Ministry of Water and Irrigation, the Water Authority of Jordan, and the Jordan Valley Authority—illustrates how formal policies intersect with localized social expectations. Institutional reforms aimed at efficiency and privatization often encounter resistance rooted in moral conceptions of water as a public trust rather than an economic commodity. Citizens frequently evaluate water distribution decisions through ethical frameworks grounded in fairness, dignity, and communal rights rather than purely administrative criteria (Wojnarowski, 2024). Bureaucrats must interpret policy within culturally meaningful narratives of responsibility and care.

Anthropological analyses across the Middle East show that scarcity intensifies moral economies surrounding resource distribution. Studies in Yemen, Oman, and rural Egypt indicate that water allocation relies on negotiation, mediation, and relational authority rather than formal regulation alone (Barnes, 2014). These findings resonate with James Scott's concept of the moral economy, where communities assess governance legitimacy according to perceived fairness and reciprocity (Scott, 1976). Administrative behavior cannot be separated from local ethical expectations, as officials must maintain social trust while implementing state mandates.

Religion further shapes ethical understandings of environmental stewardship. Islamic ethical traditions conceptualize natural resources as divine trusts (*amana*), positioning humans as stewards responsible for equitable distribution and sustainable use (Benadi, 2024). This moral framework transforms administrative work into ethical labor, linking professional duties to accountability before society and God. Comparative religious environmental

ethics in the region reinforce shared moral Narratives around stewardship.

Scarcity also reshapes leadership practices. Governance in drought-prone regions often relies on negotiation and relational authority to maintain institutional legitimacy during crises (Molle & Mollinga, 2003). Administrative effectiveness depends less on hierarchical control than on the ability to mediate among competing stakeholders, including communities, political actors, and technical experts.

These findings align with anthropological theories emphasizing leadership as an emergent social process rather than a fixed managerial attribute. In Jordan, rapid population growth and refugee influxes have intensified demand, forcing institutions to make distributive decisions under chronic insufficiency. Administrative actors balance efficiency-driven reforms with culturally embedded expectations of solidarity and fairness, producing hybrid governance models combining bureaucratic rationality with relational negotiation.

Taken together, this literature demonstrates that water governance in Jordan and similar contexts cannot be explained through policy analysis alone. It must be approached as a cultural and ethical field shaped by scarcity, social relations, and moral reasoning. Administrative behavior emerges from the interaction between institutional structures and lived moral worlds, highlighting the importance of informal negotiation, ethical interpretation, and relational leadership in sustaining governance systems under environmental stress.

This scholarship provides the empirical and theoretical foundation for examining ethical leadership through the lens of *moral ecology*. Situating organizational practice within broader hydro-social dynamics shows how environmental conditions shape organizational culture, leadership legitimacy, and employee performance. Water scarcity becomes both an ecological constraint and a formative force in the moral organization of institutional life.

Intercalary Leadership in Practice: Middle Managers as Moral Brokers

Anthropological approaches increasingly challenge the assumption that leadership resides solely at the top of institutional hierarchies. Instead, leadership emerges most visibly within intermediate layers of bureaucracy, where actors translate abstract policy into socially meaningful practice. In Jordan's water governance institutions, middle managers and department heads occupy *intercalary positions*—structural locations situated between state authority and societal expectations. These actors function as mediators across multiple moral worlds, negotiating tensions between formal administrative rationality and informal social obligations.

The concept of intercalary leadership draws from the Manchester School of anthropology, particularly Max Gluckman (1958), who emphasized that social order is produced through conflict management rather than hierarchical stability. Organizations are “social fields” in which actors continuously interpret norms according to situational demands. In Jordanian public institutions, middle managers translate national strategies into operational decisions that remain socially legitimate within local communities. Leadership becomes interpretive brokerage—the ability to reconcile competing moral expectations without destabilizing institutional coherence.

Policy directives frequently originate at the national level in the language of efficiency, sustainability, and regulatory compliance. Implementation, however, occurs within communities shaped by kinship networks, tribal affiliations, and relational accountability. Middle managers engage in *moral calibration*, selectively applying rules while maintaining social trust. This reflects the coexistence of bureaucratic legality and relational ethics, two normative systems that rarely align perfectly but must coexist in administrative practice.

Intercalary leaders operate as translators between these systems. Upward, they demonstrate compliance with institutional performance indicators,

reporting structures, and audits. Downward and outward, they respond to employees, citizens, and community representatives who interpret water distribution through culturally grounded notions of fairness and dignity. Effectiveness depends on legitimacy in both arenas simultaneously. Failure in either direction risks institutional breakdown—either through accusations of corruption or loss of social trust.

This mediating role is particularly pronounced under water scarcity, where decisions carry immediate social consequences. Requests mediated through informal networks—including kinship or shared social identity—require leaders to balance impartiality with culturally expected responsiveness. Business anthropology interprets this balancing act as adaptive governance. Leaders develop situational competencies to preserve organizational stability while minimizing social conflict, using skills rarely captured in formal leadership models. Ethical leadership, in this context, emerges as an *emergent relational practice* rather than an individual moral trait.

Middle managers also counter the “social production of indifference” (Herzfeld, 1992), rehumanizing administrative processes through informal dialogue, mediation, and discretionary judgment. Leadership involves restoring moral meaning to routines that might otherwise appear detached from social realities.

Generational and gender dynamics further shape intercalary leadership. Younger professionals emphasize meritocracy, transparency, and professionalism, while female department heads often rely on procedural legitimacy to establish authority. These dynamics create opportunities for gradual institutional change, as moral expectations shift without direct confrontation.

From a business anthropology perspective, intercalary leaders function as *moral brokers*, ensuring institutional action remains intelligible and acceptable across diverse social domains. Their work sustains organizational legitimacy by integrating bu-

reaucratic rationality with culturally embedded ethics, stabilizing governance systems under scarcity and social complexity. Understanding leadership through this lens reframes ethical leadership as a distributed phenomenon embedded within everyday organizational interactions. Effectiveness depends not solely on policy design or executive vision but on the interpretive labor of intercalary actors, translating abstract ethical principles into lived administrative practice.

Conclusion

Ethical leadership in Jordan’s water governance emerges from the intersection of formal rules, informal social networks, and environmental constraints. Moral ecology provides a lens for understanding how ethics are co-produced through relationships, institutions, and ecological conditions. Intercalary leaders act as moral brokers, mediating between bureaucratic mandates and cultural expectations, while informal networks such as *wasta* facilitate adaptive governance under scarcity.

This study demonstrates that leadership should not be understood solely as positional authority or individual virtue. Instead, ethical governance is relational and situational, shaped by organizational practice, social trust, and moral negotiation. These insights have implications for policy design, organizational management, and employee performance in resource-scarce contexts, emphasizing the value of anthropology-informed approaches to governance.

References

- Al-Omari, A., Momani, M., & Al-Bakri, J. (2019). Water scarcity and management challenges in Jordan: Policy implications. *Journal of Water Resources Planning and Management*, 145(6), 04019024. DOI [https://doi.org/10.1061/\(ASCE\)WR.1943-5452.0001045](https://doi.org/10.1061/(ASCE)WR.1943-5452.0001045)
- Barnes, G., & Alatout, S. (2012). Water scarcity, governance, and socio-environmental justice in Jordan. *Environment and*

- Planning C: Government and Policy*, 30(4), 628–646. DOI <https://doi.org/10.1068/c11160>
- Barnes, G. (2014). Negotiating water rights: Social and institutional perspectives in the Middle East. *Water Alternatives*, 7(2), 245–261. ([Link](#))
- Benadi, S. (2024). Religious ethics and environmental stewardship in the Middle East: Conceptualizing amana. *Journal of Environmental Ethics*, 46(1), 55–72. DOI <https://doi.org/10.5840/jee2024461>
- Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education* (pp. 241–258). Greenwood Press.
- Crapanzano, V. (2004). *Reflections on fieldwork in Morocco*. University of California Press.
- Czarniawska, B. (2012). *Organization theory meets anthropology: A conceptual framework*. Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Cunningham, L., & Sarayrah, Y. (1993). *Wasta: The hidden force in Middle Eastern society*. Praeger.
- Fassin, D. (2012). *Humanitarian reason: A moral history of the present*. University of California Press.
- Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures*. Basic Books.
- Gluckman, M. (1958). *Custom and conflict in Africa*. Blackwell.
- Gupta, A. (2012). *Red tape: Bureaucracy, structural violence, and poverty in India*. Duke University Press.
- Herzfeld, M. (1992). *The social production of indifference: Exploring the symbolic roots of Western bureaucracy*. University of Chicago Press.
- Hull, G. (2012). *Bureaucracy and social life in the Middle East: Anthropological perspectives*. Routledge.
- Huff, A., Rios, M., & Smith, K. (2008). Moral ecology in organizational research: Linking ethics and environmental context. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 80(4), 713–727. DOI <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-007-9448-7>
- Ledeneva, A. (2013). *Can Russia modernize? Sistema, power networks and informal governance*. Cambridge University Press.
- Marcus, G., & Fischer, M. (1986). *Anthropology as cultural critique: An experimental moment in the human sciences*. University of Chicago Press.
- Molle, F., & Mollinga, P. (2003). Water scarcity, social ethics, and adaptive governance in arid regions. *International Journal of Water Resources Development*, 19(3), 341–358. DOI <https://doi.org/10.1080/0790062032000120396>
- Mosse, D. (2005). *Cultivating development: An ethnography of aid policy and practice*. Pluto Press.
- Murad, M. (2021). Hydro-social ethics in Jordan: Scarcity, governance, and moral responsibility. *Middle East Journal of Governance*, 8(2), 101–120.
- Orlove, B., & Caton, S. (2010). Water sustainability: Anthropological perspectives on human-environment relations. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 39, 151–165. DOI <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-081309-145851>
- Rosaldo, R. (1989). *Culture and truth: The remaking of social analysis*. Beacon Press.
- Scott, J. C. (1976). *The moral economy of the peasant: Rebellion and subsistence in Southeast Asia*. Yale University Press.
- Turner, V. (1969). *The ritual process: Structure and anti-structure*. Aldine Transaction.
- Wojnarowski, J. (2024). Ethics, policy, and public water distribution in the Middle East. *Journal of Public Administration and Development*, 44(1), 33–50. DOI <https://doi.org/10.1002/pad.1972>