

A COMMUNITY OF REVERTS IN PERKIM, MALAYSIA: OF SOCIO-RELIGIOUS ADAPTATION

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ABSTRACT

The complexity between one's religious and ethnic identity in Malaysia needs to be mitigated through education. Even after over six decades of declaring independence, racial and religious prejudice in Malaysia is still rampant. The purpose of this research was therefore to shed light on intercultural communication that occurs amongst a community of Muslim reverts in PERKIM Bahagian Wilayah Persekutuan, who previously came from various different languages, cultural and religious backgrounds. An ethnographic qualitative approach was used in order to address the objective of the paper by employing observations, interviews and document analyses. The study focuses on the Islamic faith as the one true religion and its new adherents on how they cope with life after conversion. The findings revealed a complicated relationship between religious and racial identity in a country which prides itself in religious and racial diversity. The paper concluded by proposing the notion of unity in diversity as the foundation of unification and harmony amongst Malaysians; which is achievable through mutual religious understanding; which essentially can be taught and learned.

Keywords: PERKIM, reverts, converts, muslims, religious adaptation, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

The late YTM Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Ibni Sultan Abdul Hamid Halim Shah (1903 – 1990), the first Prime Minister of Malaya was a people person and was well versed with the socio-cultural issue that had worried the recently liberated country. He had always understood the importance of unity in a country where different creed, colour, and language are of primary concern; consequently *Pertubuhan Kebajikan Islam Malaysia* (henceforth PERKIM) was initiated. His idea of PERKIM came around after his visit to Makkah, Saudi Arabia on August 19th 1960. While performing the Hajj pilgrimage, he could not help but notice the diversity of people from various countries all over the globe coming together under one notion; to submit to the Almighty Allah.

He saw Islam as an influential unifying tool that could suppress racial boundaries which soon became an inspiration for the establishment of what we now know as PERKIM; hence, in 1975, PERKIM Training Institute of Dakwah (IDIP) was established. The history of PERKIM is in itself the history of Islamic missionary work or *dakwah* (proselytism) in Malaya (1957 – 1963) and Malaysia (1963 – present); therefore it is considered as amongst the leading pioneer in *dakwah* and charity bodies in the country. Ever since it was founded, PERKIM has been focusing on these three domains specifically welfare, religion, and education.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Islam in Malaysia is often misunderstood by the non-Muslims in general as a religion belonging only to the Arabs, and the Malays. They view Islam as an exclusive religion, much like how Judaism is only for the Jews. Datuk Khalil Idham Lim, a former ADUN of Titi Serong had experienced having to explain his reversion to Islam to a fellow Chinese as a conversion of religion only, and not of his ethnicity (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LPzUCIhYOhY> 2017). According to him, many non-Muslim Chinese think that any conversion to Islam is similar to a conversion of ethnicity; which is incorrect. Ironically, Article 160 of the Constitution which states that a "Malay means a person who professes the religion of Islam, habitually speaks the Malay language, conforms to Malay custom..." (Federal Constitution Reprint 2010: 153) essentially solidifies their misbeliefs. It is no wonder that many non-Muslims are confused and prejudiced against "Islam". It is therefore evident that the relationship between religion and national identity is complex (Owoyemi 2014) particularly in Malaysia. Perhaps that is also why Malaysians are still segregated along racial and ethnic lines even after 62 years of declaring Independence (Hidayah Hairom 2012; Kaur 2018; Lee & Khalid 2016; Nakamura 2012; Shamsuddin, Liaw & Ridzuan 2015). Despite so, not many studies have been done pertaining to reverts specifically in Malaysia; therefore this present paper will attempt to shed some light on the possibility of harmonious living within diversity by exploring the harmonious intercultural communication that exist within a multiethnic and multilingual community of reverts in PERKIM BWP.

OBJECTIVE OF STUDY

This study will therefore attempt to address the following objective and research question.

- To examine how intercultural communication enables a multiethnic community of reverts to practice their faith.

RESEARCH QUESTION

- How does intercultural communication enable a multiethnic community of reverts to be formed?

METHODOLOGY

The ethnographic qualitative study had taken place from November 7th until the 14th of 2019 at PERKIM Bahagian Wilayah Persekutuan, at level 23, on Sultan Azlan Shah (Ipoh Street) road, 51200, Kuala Lumpur. The observations had taken place at the meeting and seminar room, Al-Khawarizmi, and at one of the office room on level 4 of Bangunan PERKIM. On the first day of the visit, the observation took place at Al-Khawarizmi, followed by the meeting room and Al-Khawarizmi on the second day, the meeting and seminar room on the third, and lastly at the office on level 4 on the fourth.

The participants of the study came from different generations with the youngest of them being 18 years old and the oldest being 73. The three interviewees were 33, around 40-50 and 61 years old at that time. Although the population size was 155 people, however the researcher had only managed to meet face to face with only a number of them. According to the attendance of every class the researcher had attended, the students added up to a total of 68 people only. Basically the researcher had employed a convenience sampling method in order to obtain the data needed by conversing with anyone who came her way. The participants involved were from various countries namely Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Myanmar, Philippine and Vietnam.

An anonym is used to describe the three participants who took part in the interviews by employing R1, R2, and R3 for each of the respective interviewees; whereas the other participants who were part of the observations are coded as P1, P2, P3, P4, and P5. The interviews, observations and document analyses were transcribed and grouped into twelve themes accordingly through the employment of thematic analysis.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Cultural Socialisation

The make-up of PERKIM BWP carries the embodiment of cultural socialisation in itself. Since cultural socialisation revolves around the promotion of one's cultural and linguistic identity at the very least, PERKIM BWP allows quite a number of its students to retain their linguistic identity by arranging a few of the classes in their mother tongues/first languages (L1). It allows for the reverts to learn about their new faith in their own comfort language which also allows for the process of "language maintenance" to occur despite the (major) change in religion and the marriage of multiple other languages (varieties).

In the case of R3 who is Chinese of Taoist background, as a father he makes sure to teach and inculcate his four children with the knowledge of his mother tongue at home. He [had] sent all his children to a Chinese vernacular school throughout their schooling years; although mainly because of other reason (to allow his kids to be able to do *dakwah* to the Chinese community). In brief, there is indeed evidences of cultural socialisation taking place in this community of (practice) reverts.

Promotion of Mistrust

In the case of R3, while growing up his mother once told him to be careful of the Malays as they are "hypocrites" because of the experience she had had with her Malay neighbour during Ramadan long time ago. R3 explained that during one Ramadan, one of their Malay neighbour had asked for their help to buy food for him as he cannot be seen eating in daylight. This instance had stigmatised the Malays as hypocrites to R3's mother. Later, she would teach (promote) this fallacious view to her son and offer it as an "advice".

Egalitarianism

Based upon the observations that had taken place within four days, the researcher was able to witness the fair treatment of all the students by the educators as well as the management. Every revert enrolled in the programme would be given 15 Malaysian Ringgit per daily attendance regardless of their racial/ethnic background. The very fact that PERKIM would even arrange six of the classes in Mandarin, Thai, Tamil and Tagalog aside from the conventional BM and BI as mediums of instruction proves that they do indeed practice the notion of egalitarianism. On one occasion, the researcher was invited to join them for [free] dinner in the seminar room; she saw how comfortable they were sitting together despite the difference in ethnicity and mother tongue. The understanding that everyone is equal and that the only difference between a person and another is by his or her *imaan*, can be further supported by PERKIM's '*Anugerah Pelajar Cemerlang*' where they give the recognition based on merits alone and never on skin colour.

Threatening of Linguistic Identity

As in the case of R1 (Chinese revert) and R2 (Indian revert), both of them are not able to speak their mother tongue. They prefer to identify with the Malays because of their religious belief, aside from the fact that while growing up they were surrounded by the Malays. R1 was born and raised in a *Perkampungan Jawa* in Kota Setia, Teluk Intan, Perak as Tee Cheng Peng. His family was the only Chinese family living in that village surrounded by Malays of Javanese descent. As for R2, he was born in Estet Bukit Jelutong Subang, Selangor in a ten sibling member family as the ninth child. His family was so poor, in fact even poorer after his biological father died that he and a few of his siblings had to be sent to welfare homes or homeless shelters. During his period living in various welfare homes, he was surrounded by Malays whereby he had learned about Islam by watching and joining them perform the five daily prayers as well as joining them to fast during Ramadan prior to his reversion. These instances had fossilised their identification with the Malays rather than with their own group; hence had fossilised their identification with

BM as well; although initially R1 was able to speak a significant amount of his mother tongue [Hokkien dialect]; however as time passed by he has lost the ability to do so and could only understand a limited amount of the dialect.

Threatening of Cultural Identity

Please be noted that the details and information regarding the customs and traditions mentioned below are taken from Seong (2015).

In the case of R1, ever since his reversion there are several Chinese rituals, customs and traditions that he can no longer observe as a Muslim. Several of these customs and traditions include Chap Goh Meh, Chinese New Year Celebration, Great Jade Emperor's Birthday Celebration, and Qing Ming (or Ching Bing). The main idea behind the first two mentioned is that it stems from the belief of mythical higher powers that could provide them protection which is considered as *shirk* (syirik in BM which means associating anything with Allah S.W.T) in Islam. As for Chap Goh Meh (or Yuen Xiao), its identification with Valentine's day – which is also tied with the history of the Romans and the Catholic Church – makes it impermissible to be celebrated. They would also utilise the mandarins to offer prayers to a deity in hopes of good fortune and prosperity aside from using it as a tool for matchmaking – which is also unacceptable in Islam.

As for Qing Ming, although the notion behind it is pure; a showcase of filial piety; however, it does revolve around food wastage and usually, wine is also present. This tradition also involves believing in spirits and how these spirits must be shown the respect that it deserves. One important aspect of Qing Ming is that it falls on one day only within a whole year. It follows the Chinese calendar therefore the date changes every year. Therefore, Qing Ming is a very important custom as it only occurs once a year and that it revolves around filial piety. Therefore, in spite of his new identity as a Muslim R1 would make sure to not miss a single Qing Ming ever since his reversion. He would drive all the way from KL to Teluk Intan, Perak no matter his schedule that day to at the very least, visit his father's graveyard despite not being able to observe the custom accordingly (like serving wine to his deceased father and tossing *tap bui* to get answers from the spirit).

R1 mentioned this as highly important to him because he wants to showcase the goodness in Islam and how Islam teaches its followers filial piety as the most important after Allah S.W.T and his Prophets A.S. This is his way of doing *dakwah* to his mother and siblings.

Assimilation

Although it was mentioned that R1 do observe Qing Ming annually, but it is only out of respect towards his mother (not towards his father since a Muslim can do supplication for another individual wherever he/she is); it is not because of to preserve his cultural identity as a Chinese. R1 also told the researcher that once he went out with the mother to eat in a *Baju Melayu*; this proves his preference for the Malay culture despite being around his Chinese mother. He also only speaks BM now as his mother tongue has deteriorated over the course of time. It was told that he would use "*rojak*" (of BM with a little bit of Hokkien) when speaking to his mother. His fluency in BM is similar to any other Malays', just like R2.

The case of R2 is similar to that of R1 whereby he can no longer speak his mother tongue (Tamil) because of his assimilation into the Malay community while growing up in various shelters. In fact, his passport sized picture used in the book 'Pengenalan Saudara Muslim Malaysia' is of him wearing a *songkok* (Malay traditional headgear). This proves his assimilation into the Malay community as well, just like R1.

Integration

As for integration, it is evident in R3's case. Although he is highly motivated in doing *dakwah* towards the Chinese community (by even training his son to become equipped with the skills to do *dakwah* to the Chinese as well), he is proud of his heritage language. He is fluent in several different dialects of the Chinese language even after being married to a Malay woman for 26 years. In fact, during the interview session he was clad in a *Baju Melayu* complete with a *songkok*. This shows how he is comfortable in adopting the Malay culture as part of his while still fully retaining his linguistic identity. He has managed to inculcate his three sons and daughter with the ability to speak Mandarin fluently by sending all four of them to a Chinese vernacular school. Moreover, he has even managed to instil the knowledge of the Arabic language into his first son whereby his son, who is now 23 years old is able to speak fluent Arabic; so much so that he has managed to memorise the whole Quran.

Aside from the Malay and Chinese culture, the snippet above proves the adoption of some of the Islamic culture through the inculcation of the Arabic language into his first born. This is because Islam means a great deal to him and therefore he sees the need for it to be spread to the disbelievers by training his son to become *dakwah*-abled. He even sent his second son to Egypt to learn Arabic as well as the Quran in order to fully equip his sons with the knowledge of *dakwah* for the greater good; with his reason being "...Rasulullah (SAW) taught us that everybody must do a *dakwah*...".

Discrimination

R3 experiences discrimination from his in-laws because of his ethnic background. His brother in-law is also married to a Chinese revert; the only difference is that the wife only converted to Islam in order to get married and afterwards was never taught the full understanding of Islam by the husband. Therefore, she does not embody the teachings of Islam in her practices in which according to R3, she "...*tudung pun tak pakai*..." (She does not even wear the headscarf). Despite it being his fault, the brother had warned his sister to never marry a Chinese revert because of what he has experienced with his own wife.

Furthermore, whenever a family gathering takes place, it is only natural for R3 and his in-law's wife to speak in Cantonese because they are both Chinese; however he was told off in a very condescending manner to only speak in BM whenever the in-laws are around whereby he stated "...They want me to be very Malay..." and that "...When I speak Chinese (to the brother in-law's wife) they are not happy...". This is clearly a form of oppression.

As in the case of R2, prior to his conversion he had once followed his Malay friends to the mosque out of curiosity and was denied entry based on an unsubstantiated reason; because R2 was not circumcised therefore he cannot enter the mosque. This reason is extremely unfounded especially coming from an "*ustaz*". This is again, a form of (racial) discrimination.

Diglossia/Polyglossia/Code-Switching

Based on the observations, diglossia, polyglossia as well as code-switching had occurred almost all the time as the demographics of PERKIM BWP consists of people of multiple different cultures and languages. An instance would be the case of P1 who is originally from Vietnam; she is fluent in four languages namely Vietnamese, English, Mandarin and BM; she would constantly code-switch between these four languages while she is there depending on who she is speaking to. While speaking to the researcher, she would very naturally switch from English to BM or vice versa.

During Ustaz Sulaiman Ding's 5.30pm-7pm class, P1 was seen happily laughing in his Mandarin class while responding to the Ustaz in Mandarin. Then, she would turn to the researcher and spoke to her in mostly English with a mix of BM. Another student of the same class, P2 was also code switching during the class. He would respond to the rest of the students in Mandarin and very naturally, turn to the researcher and spoke to her in fluent Malay. Besides, another two students of that class, P3 and P4 was seen happily chatting with each other at the back in Hokkien and would respond to the rest of the class in Mandarin, and would switch back to Hokkien whenever they speak to each other. Another instance would be when P5 who is originally from the Philippine, and is conversant in three languages namely Tagalog, English and BM would switch back and forth between these languages during dinner at the seminar room. The researcher saw her code-switch between BM with P1, and swiftly to Tagalog with the other Filipinos.

Diglossia and polyglossia therefore is the result of this constant code-switching amongst these speakers of different languages. They are also because of the fact that PERKIM BWP allows for it to happen due to the nature of certain classes; with these classes being taught in their mother tongue/L1. Please also be noted that most of the students here speak a minimum of three languages; their mother tongue, English and BM. This is also the reason for the occurrence of diglossia/polyglossia at PERKIM BWP.

Language as a Universal Identifier

This can be proven from the case of P1, where she was able to sit and learn comfortably with the other Chinese students despite being the only individual who is not ethnically Chinese during Ustaz Sulaiman Ding's class which was conducted fully in Mandarin. This is because of the fact that she is able to understand and speak their language well enough for her to be accepted as one of them. This occurrence is in line with the findings from Pawanteh and Kuake's (2016) where they also mentioned language as a universal identifier in the context of the Kelantanese community whereby outsiders who can speak their dialect are immediately considered as inner circle.

Complexity of Plural Identity

According to what is stated in the Malaysian Constitution under Article 160 page 153, the terminology "Malay" basically means an individual "...who professes the religion of Islam, habitually speaks the Malay language, conforms to Malay custom..."; whereby by reference of Article 160, R1, R2 and R3 are all ethnically "Malay", including every other reverters there who are originally from Malaysia. This legislative notion of a "Malay" makes no sense at all, since no individual under normal circumstances could ever change his/her biological make-up. Aside from that, one's belief is largely spiritual in nature which has got nothing to do with one's DNA; therefore again proving this particular element in Article 160 to be fallacious.

According to R2, in Indian families, it is unacceptable for them to convert to another religion; this is similar to what the Malays would call *murtad* (aka apostasy in English). However, it is even more highly impermissible for them to convert to Islam; hence why R2 was beaten by his stepfather the moment his stepfather found out about his fondness for Islam. As for the case of R1, he once went out with his mother for a meal during daylight in a Baju Melayu. The moment the other Chinese saw him dressed in such a manner when he and his mother arrived at the shop, they went to R1's mother and asked her an extremely rude question "...*kau tak reti jaga anak ke?*..." (Don't you know how to raise a child?). That incident had left the mother especially upset with his son's conversion. Afterwards, R1 made sure to dress in neutral clothing whenever he is with his mother; in order to not give off his identity as a Muslim. What is funny about the whole adversity was that he was only wearing the Malay's traditional wear and yet his religious identity was revealed instead. This instance is in agreement with their perception of Islam being a religion of the Malays; hence once you become Muslim it simultaneously means you have become Malay as well which is incorrect.

Religious Identity Equates Ethnicity

Part of this section has already been explained above, under Complexity of Plural Identity; however, it will further explain how and why one's religiosity equates his/her ethnic identity. As a Muslim woman, it is her duty to wear loose and modest clothing

by also covering her hair and chest; therefore a Chinese revert can no longer wear her *Cheongsam* (or Qipao) and an Indian revert can no longer wear her *Saree*; because these attires do not meet the standard of the Islamic *syariah*.

Aside from that, a Chinese revert can also no longer observe the Jing Xiang ritual which is a ritual of offering incense (accompanied by tea or fruits) as a way of offering prayers to the Chinese deities. They are also expected to kneel (and sometimes prostrate) during this ritual as a way of showing respect to the spirits (of their ancestors); which is forbidden in the Islamic teachings as a Muslim can and shall only submit his/herself to Allah and nothing else. It is considered *shirk* for a Muslim to kneel and prostrate to another beside Allah S.W.T.

As for an Indian revert, he/she can no longer observe the Deepavali (or Diwali) Celebration anymore as it revolves around offering prayers and showing respect towards Lord Krishna's victory over the king of demons and Lord Rama's return. It also revolves around going to temples for worship. All of this is again, forbidden in Islam as it equates to *shirk*; the renunciation of Allah. Both Chinese and Indians reverts can no longer observe their forefathers' customs and traditions after believing in Allah as the one true God and accepting Islam as a way of life.

The Islamic teachings also closely observe strict rules and regulations of how to live, what should be done and what cannot be done. There are plenty of rituals in the Chinese and Indian cultures that are not permissible for Muslims to keep due to the high possibility of committing *shirk*. When a Chinese or an Indian does not follow these customs and rituals anymore and does not inculcate them in their children, it basically means the abandonment of their cultural identity, which also entails the abandonment of their ethnic identity. This correlation between religious identity and one's identity in general is advocated by Abramson (1980), Futon (1997), Okon (2012) and Oppong (2013).

ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

There are three main issues and challenges that have been formulated based on the findings; that needed to be addressed, which are:-

- The importance of implementing one religious formal education in every school throughout Malaysia,
- Religions and races should not be politicised,
- Openness is still foreign in Malaysia.

Based on the above, it is highly needed for the government to offer Malaysian youths and students with religious understandings of one another's religion by implementing a formal religious education throughout the schools in the country. As what has been mentioned by Tahir and Ismail (2007), they (the expatriates) agreed that a cross-cultural awareness program aka cross-cultural training (CCT) is very much needed in order to be well adjusted in a new culture. The study revealed the problems these expatriates had faced because of the lack of cultural understanding of the host country; Malaysia. This is very similar to the case of religious understanding in Malaysia whereby many Malaysians are sadly, still clueless about one another's religions despite having lived side by side for officially over 61 years now. This adversity needs to be overcome with the administration of a cross-religious training or education in every school. It needs to be tackled on a national scale, now that 61 years after Independence have passed and racial tension is still present to this day.

CONCLUSION

Although these reverts come from a lower income group, in fact some of them were even homeless, they carry their identity as Muslims very seriously, as proven by their class attendance. They do not let their hardships interfere with their newly adopted religious identity. They were even seen laughing, smiling, and enjoying each other's presence during class and dinner time, in spite of the difference in languages. Besides, most of them could speak a minimum of three languages which perhaps might have made their inter-ethnic communication a lot easier. Quite a number of these reverts were senior citizens, and yet they were seen to have worked extra hard to learn the 99 names of Allah which are in Arabic; despite their age. To sum up, the researcher would like to propose the notion of "unity in diversity" as opposed to Pue's (2016) "diversity in unity" as the foundation of PERKIM; whereby Islam plays an integral part in their unity.

IMPLICATIONS

In order for progression to occur with regards to multilingualism and multiculturalism, perhaps Malaysia could employ a more practical multiculturalism model to be adapted and adopted into its legislative system. It can start by referring to its neighbouring countries such as Indonesia and Singapore. The former has adapted a model of multiculturalism in which it has allowed for the process of assimilation to take place; whereas the latter has adapted a model that is "guided by pragmatic realism and market fundamentals associated with the needs of a global city" (Noor & Leong 2013: 714). Both of these countries have been doing great over the past decades in dealing with its plural societies by advocating equal treatment for all races as opposed to how Malaysia "...used the groups' differences against one another" (Noor & Leong: 718). Personally, the researcher feels the need to empathise with the minorities by understanding things from their point of view. Although the researcher does agree with Indonesia's one language policy; however it is not realistic for Malaysia to start pushing for such an agenda throughout the country after 61 years of Independence. It is not realistic nor does it help in bringing the ethnic groups closer to one another. As for the case of Singapore, they had long ago understood the importance of unity in order for an island with no natural resources to survive by "...recognising and championing heritage maintenance within the different ethnic and religious groups even as it embraces principles of secularism and meritocracy" (Noor & Leong: 717). Singapore has managed to do so by implementing a language policy that is not bias to only one ethnic group, and by implementing a strict ethnic quota in public residential estates (Noor and Leong). By having said so, the researcher opines that Malaysia could start by promoting one unifying educational

system nationally, following Singapore and Indonesia. Their educational language policy allows for the employment of only one language throughout; hence its citizens are able to communicate with one another efficiently despite the difference in ethnicity. Aside from that, the researcher would like to propose a formal cross-religious class that is mandatory for every Malaysian to go through in order to pass examinations, to be implemented in its schooling system.

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