Peaceful Co-Existence in Religious Diversity in Sabah, Malaysia

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Introduction- Religious diversity in Malaysia can be a vital instrument in unifying its people. However, it can also become the main challenge to create peaceful co-existence because religious sentiment can easily be debated and difficult to handle. Therefore, it is very essential to manage religious issues wisely and with sanity as conflicts in religion contribute to instability in unity among people of different religions (Ainon Kuntum 2003). It is not easy to achieve unity among different ethnicities and religions in Malaysia because it does not only depend on macro factors such as political changes, economy, social and episodes in a history. It also involves micro factors that happen in daily interactions (Budi Anto Mohd Tamring 2008). In accordance to this, efforts towards achieving peaceful co-existence among the people are social responsibilities that have to be worked on collectively beyond ones religion's beliefs.

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I. Introduction

Religious diversity in Malaysia can be a vital instrument in unifying its people. However, it can also become the main challenge to create peaceful co-existence because religious sentiment can easily be debated and difficult to handle. Therefore, it is very essential to manage religious issues wisely and with sanity as conflicts in religion contribute to instability in unity among people of different religions (Ainon Kuntum 2003). It is not easy to achieve unity among different ethnicities and religions in Malaysia because it does not only depend on macro factors such as political changes, economy, social and episodes in a history. It also involves micro factors that happen in daily interactions (Budi Anto Mohd Tamring 2008). In accordance to this, efforts towards achieving peaceful co-existence among the people are social responsibilities that have to be worked on collectively beyond ones religion's beliefs.

Unity among different religions and ethnicities depends on the attitudes of people towards the issues on inter-religious relations. This article discusses three approaches and the stands of the people with different religions in Sabah on a few issues related to inter-religious relations, namely on its exclusivity, inclusively and plurality. Based on the approach, it is found that harmony in socialization, integration and cooperation among religions is shown significantly in the daily interaction among the Muslims and non-Muslims which has brought towards peaceful co-existence among the different religions in Sabah.

II. The Background of Religious Diversity in Sabah

Religions play a vital role in the grouping of people of different ethnic and culture in Sabah. This grouping or ethnic dichotomy in Sabah can be categorized into three main groups, i.e. Muslims Bumiputera, non-Muslims Bumiputera and non-Bumiputera. These categorizations are different from the plural society in the Peninsular that is more focused on Malay Bumiputera and non-Bumiputera---the Chinese and Indians. This difference exists in Sabah because there are Bumiputeras who are not Muslims, unlike the case of Malay Bumiputera in the Peninsular. As stressed by Shamsul Amri Baharuddin (2005), 'pluralism', be it in a region, country, province, an urban area or a rural area, is a product of its history.

In addition, the community system in Sabah is more to egalitarian; as explained by Sabihah Osman (2007:48):

"apa yang dimaksudkan ialah tidak wujud golongan bangsawan yang mantap dan jelas seperti di Semenanjung dan Sarawak. Ini dapat dimengerti kerana sebelum diperintah Syarikat Berpiagam Borneo Utara (SBBU), negeri Sabah belum wujud sebagai satu unit politik. Sabah waktu itu adalah sebahagian daripada tanah jajahan Kesultanan Brunei dan Sulu. Apabila Sabah menjadi sebuah negeri, pembesar-pembesar Brunei dan Sulu seperti pengiran dan datu tidak lagi mempunyai kuasa dan wibawa di kalangan penduduk Sabah. Tambahan pula, bilangan mereka adalah kecil. Oleh itu, selepas tahun 1881, kedudukan golongan ini tidak lagi berpengaruh. Jika di Tanah Melayu, pemerintah penjajah mempunyai hubungan yang jelas dengan golongan bangsawan dari segi kedudukan dan status sosial mereka. Di Sabah, pemerintah BNBC/SBBU hanya berhubung dengan ketua-ketua Anak Negeri yang mereka lantik di peringkat tempatan sahaja."

According to her, the royal influences in Sabah were not as clear and strong as in the Peninsular and Sarawak. Therefore, there is no such social status among the people of Sabah---everybody is equal. Moreover, the census report, which has been conducted since the colonization era up till now, shows that there is no dominant ethnic, i.e. the percentage should be more that 50 percent, in Sabah. This is different from the composition of people living in Peninsular, i.e. Malays 55 percent, Chinese 34 percent and Indian 10 percent (Sabihah Osman 2007). Even if there is a dominant ethnic in Sabah, like Kadazandusun, the total number of this ethnic group is only 18.44 percent (479,944 people) and Bajau 13.18 percent (343,178 people), and these two contribute only 30 percent (Malaysia Yearly Census Book 2003, Census Department Malaysia).

Table 1 shows the distribution of people in Sabah based on ethnic groups and religions. The Muslims show the highest number of distribution, followed by the Christians, Buddhists and atheists or no

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religion with the ratio of 63:36 (Muslims: non-Muslims). Another one percent, i.e. 26,598, believes in traditional religions (pagans). The census shows that the religious diversity in Sabah is not only focused on world main religions that are Revealed or Semitic or Abrahamic religions such as Islam and Christians, and Cultural or non-Abrahamic religions such as Buddha, Hinduism and Sikh. The people also believe in animisms.

Table 1 : Total Number of Population in Sabah according to Religions and Ethnics 2000

Religion	Malaysians							Non-Malaysians	Total
	Bumiputera					Chinese	Others		
	Malay	Kadazan dusun	Bajau	Murut	Other Bumiputera				
Islam	303,497	100,968	342,421	11,698	273,092	8,589	107,782	510,238	1,658,285 (63.7%)
Christians	0	359,210	383	70,054	100,776	81,475	14,301	98,634	724,833 (27.8 %)
Hindu	0	67	1	10	48	323	2,075	312	2,836 (0.11%)
Buddha	0	2,945	42	268	6,716	154,119	448	1,760	166,298 (6.39%)
Confucius/Tao/other Chinese traditional religions	0	566	0	27	491	9,409	13	128	10,634 (0.41%)
Ethnics' Religions	0	130	0	11	69	150	3	33	396 (0.02%)
Others (Bahai, Sikh)	0	2,585	5	1,324	1,882	1,120	421	222	7,559 (0.29%)
No religion/pagan	0	11,846	244	1,247	6,039	6,163	63	996	26,598 (1.03%)
Unknown	0	1,627	82	40	945	767	84	2,501	6,046 (0.24%)
Total Number of People living in Sabah									2,603,485

Table 1 illustrates that all Malay ethnics either the Peninsular-Malays, Brunei-Malays or ethnics of Sabahan, who are Malays such as the Javanese, Bugis, Banjar and others, are Muslims. While the Kadazandusuns, Bajau (Sama-Bajau), Murut and other Bumiputeras are either Muslims or other religions, and this shows their tolerance towards other religions. According to Hassan Mat Nor (2007), this tolerance has made religions as something that cannot be used to show ethnics' identities. Therefore, this situation shows that Sabah is a 'melting pot', and this is further strengthened with the existence of Sino in Sabah---a group of community that is formed through mixed marriage between the Sabah aborigines and non-Bumiputeras. The existence of this group (the total number of the people is quite significant) shows that ethnic tolerance among the people of Sabah is high.

In addition, Islam and Christians are two major religions for the majority of the people in Sabah, and this does not only for the people living in urban areas, it is also the religions of those living in rural areas. This is definitely different from the situation in Peninsular where the people are normally focused on one area, i.e. the Muslim-Malays in rural areas, Chinese (Buddhist and Christians) in urban areas and Hindu-Indians in estates. As stated by Sabihah Osman (1985:15), "the demographic formation in Sabah is different from Peninsular because British did not group the people according to their economic functions like they did to the people in Peninsular". This 'break and rule' system was not clearly practised in Sabah, and this creates a more diverse and frequent interaction among the different ethnics and religions in Sabah. Budi Anto Mohd Tamring (2008) states that the synthesis of different ethnics--- since they are living in the same areas and frequently meeting each other--- in Sabah has resulted in various forms of relation such as daily interactions in matters related to economy, culture and politics.

Moreover, Sabah has its own uniqueness that is not only portrayed in its ethnic diversity, dialects, culture and customs, it is also shown in its religious diversity. In the human history, an ethnic is usually associated with their religion. For instance, the Chinese are identified as Buddhists and Taoist; the Indians are Hindus, and Malays are Muslims. Also, in Sabah, some ethnic groups are identified according to their race and religions. This can be seen among the Bajau, Malay-Brunei, Bisaya, Idaan and Sungai who are identified as Muslims or 'born Muslim'. In the political context of Sabah, these ethnic groups are identified as the 'Muslim Bumiputera' and most of them living along the east and west coasts of Sabah (Suraya Sintang 2003).

On the contrary, identity through religions is not applicable to some ethnic groups of Sabah such as Kadazandusun, Murut and Rungus who are mostly concentrate in remote areas. It is undeniable that these ethnic groups are known as 'non-Muslim Bumiputera'. However, some of them are Muslims and they are known as *'saudara baru'* or Muslim converts. Until today, some of the people of these ethnic groups have no religion which is only believe in animisms. According to Budi Anto Mohd Tamring (2008:132), "*persamaan agama yang dikongsi peribumi Sabah yang pada asalnya tiada agama menyebabkan identity etnik dan agama bertindan lapis. Keadaan ini secara tidak langsung menggalakkan hubungan merentasi etnik dan*

agama berlaku dalam masyarakat di Sabah." This shows that similarity in religions of the different ethnics in Sabah have in some way improved the relation across ethnics and religions.

Besides that, it is a common phenomenon for the members in a family in Sabah to embrace more than one religion. For instance, although the parents have no religions (pagans), the children are allowed to choose any denominations if they are Christians, or they can choose to embrace Islam through various factors (Suraya Sintang 2003). Despite embracing different religions, the relation between family members and neighbours is good and close (Mat Zin Mat Kib 2003). They visit and respect each other although they believe in different religions. This closeness is shown through their accommodative attitude during interaction with friends or relatives of different religions. For example, it is ordinary for non-Muslims to say assalamualaikum to their Muslims encounters. The same goes to their way of dressing and names, where the use of 'bin' and 'binti' do not reflect their religions. According to Mat Zin Mat Kib (2003:48), "sometimes it is difficult to differentiate their religions through their daily practices because some do not have beliefs that are clearly associated with various aspects of social lifestyles".

The close bond between the religions is also inspired by their way of living that is culturally integrated through sharing the same dialects or languages, originating from the same state, having the same family relation, sharing the same culture, practising inter-marriage, doing business in the same venues, i.e. tamu and sharing the same faith (Hasan Mat Nor 2007), which influence them to be easily compromised, accommodative and matured as well as have an open mind towards the differences exist.

III. APPROACHES IN THE STUDY OF RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY

Basically there are three approaches or school of thoughts proposed by theologists and religion philosophers in understanding the questions of various religions. John Hick listed three approaches, namely exclusivist, inclusivist and pluralist (Saiyad Fareed Ahmad & Saiyad Salahuddin Ahmad 2004). These approaches play a significant role in determining the harmonious lifestyle of a community living in a country of multi-religions. Through these approaches, a few respectable values such as tolerance, cooperation, acceptance, dialogues and negotiations over problems as well as strong stance on what they believe as correct, are projected.

Exclusivists believe that absolute truth only exclusively belongs to a religion. Therefore, other religions' beliefs or absolute truths are seen as deceptions. Thus, the absolute truth of a religion is exclusive (Fauzi Hamat 2007:52). This is further detailed by Muhammad Haron (2006:425), who said that, *"the exclusivist holds the view that only his/her religious tradition contains the "absolute truth". … exclusivism denotes the idea that only one religion or religious denomination is true and that the beliefs and practices in other religions therefore are false to the extent that they are in conflict with his religion".*

Inclusivists believe that absolute truth belongs to a particular religion. Yet, other religions hold partial of the absolute truth. Thus, these religions do not hold a complete absolute truth (Fauzi Hamat 2007). According to Pannikar, in Muhammad Haron (2006:426), *"this attitude as magnanimous in that you can follow your own path and do not need to condemn the other… you can be concrete in your allegiances and universal in your outlook."*

Pluralists, on the other hand, believe that absolute truth belongs to all religions in this world. Muhammad Haron (2006:426) quoted John Hick's definition on pluralism:

"a position that accepted the understanding that all truth claims are valid and therefore should be given equal respect and space in the contemporary world. … the acceptance of this position does not mean that the believer has to reject his beliefs in his own religious tradition – it only means that the Christian has to accept the fact that the traditions of others, namely Muslims, Jews, Hindus etc., also contain valid "truth claims" which cannot be denied and rejected. These valid "truth claims" must be respected because others have the right to exercise and express their beliefs the way they wish."

These three approaches can be differentiated through their beliefs, where exclusivists are more aggressive in defending matters relating to religious truth; inclusivists show their accommodative attitude towards other religions; and pluralists show more positive approach by organizing dialogues, negotiations and cooperation as well as the willingness to share similarities for the purpose of living harmoniously (Muhammad Haron 2006). Exclusivists are always regarded as intolerance for they believe that God does not provide guidance to other devotees of different religion differently, whereas, inclusivists are acted intermediary for they believe that there are many ways to show faith to God. Still, inclusivists believe that absolute truth can only exist in one religion, as stated by Saiyad Fareed Ahmad and Salahuddin Ahmad (2004:129):

Thus, they agree that God can manifest Himself to adherents of different religions as he pleases, with their descriptions of such experiences being coloured by existing religious, social, cultural and geographic backdrops, but that eventually, the truth claims of a religion have to be assessed as true or false since there is only one Truth.

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Pluralists, on the contrary, admit that differences exist in religions; however, they are more concerned about the community's best interest than individuals'. However, Fauzi Hamat (2007) explained that these beliefs, i.e. exclusivists, inclusivists and pluralists, can be the followers' beliefs and not the religions' teachings and it can also be the religions' teachings and not the followers' beliefs. This means that a religion labeled as exclusive or inclusive or plural should be confirmed by the religions' teachings. It should not be based on individuals' way of thinking who may not even following the teachings of his or her religion.

Clearly, these interrelated approaches illustrate the beliefs of the people of Sabah towards religious diversity concepts. In the contexts of religious diversity in Sabah, this article would explain how mind-sets and attitudes of Sabahan, Muslims or non-Muslims, apply these three approaches in dealing with issues of inter-faith relations. This phenomenon can be explained through these cases:

a) Exclusive: The word "Allah"

On the whole, exclusivists are sensitive over issues relating to absolute truth, which they believe cannot be shared with other religions. For example, the use of 'Allah' by the Catholic followers in their Malay version article in Herald was strongly opposed by the Muslims in Malaysia. For the Malay Muslims, this is a very sensitive issue because 'Allah' is a word that can only be used by Muslims. Muslims believe that there is only one 'Allah' that will never reincarnate or be reincarnated. The use of this word, 'Allah', by other religions will only mislead people that there is such a thing as the son of Allah. According to Muslims, as translated by the Association of Muslims Lawyers Malaysia, this is a blasphemy---the most profound insolence (Zainul Ariffin, Berita Minggu, 10 January 2010). For the Christians, however, the word 'Allah' is only a term, a question of language and a different terminology. But for the Muslims, it is all about faith, religion and belief in the ultimate one (Zulkifli Noordin, Berita Minggu, 31 January 2010).

In relation to this lack of mutual understanding and immaturity in handling issues relating to the inter-faith relations, religious vandalisms started to occur, i.e. a few churches and mosques in specific locations in Peninsular were vandalized by irresponsible individuals and this threatens the public's safety and harmony. However, such cases were not reported to occur in Sabah although the percentage of Christian followers is much bigger compared to Peninsular. Again, this shows the maturity of the people of Sabah in handling such cases. Wise and tolerant approach has become the foundation shared among the people of Sabah. As stated by Datuk Maximus Ongkili, the Minister of Science and Technology, *"some things are best resolved through consultation rather than confrontation"*

(Daily Express, 10 January 2010). Moreover, tolerance has become the pillar in this diverse community in Sabah that stops them from committing any irresponsible actions.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that the people of Sabah have different views on this matter. Their exclusive views were posted through an Islam NGO known as CONCERN where they also stress that the word, 'Allah', is only meant for Muslims (http//:abimsabah.blogspot.com/ accessed on 4th February 2010). This is not a new issue for the people of Sabah because a similar case happened before Sabah joined the formation of Malaysia in 1963. Christians' followers in Sabah at that time, especially those with the Sidang Injil Borneo (SIB) or Borneo Evangelical Mission (BEM), had used the word, 'Allah'. Thus, James Sarda commented that *"it is the SIB followers who perhaps, have even greater justification to use the word than in the Herald. Yet, they did not make a big fuss and the government let it be."* (Daily Express, 10 January 2010). This statement indicates the need to have wise and tolerant approach in order to avoid religious sensitivity to be sneered by such irresponsible attitudes. Certainly, it is not really the issue of the exclusive use of the word, 'Allah', but merely the attitude of respecting each other's beliefs should be nurtured among religions, especially during the commotion of tackling differences on these sensitive issues. The truth is we need the determination of exclusive religions that are rational so that we can truly accept the diversity in religions.

In general, the people in East Malaysia do not easily influenced by the provocations made to negatively affect the harmonious relation among religions. Their warm affections and beliefs in living harmoniously have long been nurtured through their practices of living together and daily interactions that take place in all aspects of their life. In fact, daily interactions among the religions have started since childhood in various places regardless of occasion. This has indirectly instilled the feelings of togetherness among the people of different religions that has resulted in extensive number of mixed-marriages, which at the end, showing more inclusive attitude among the people of Sabah.

b) Inclusive: Mixed-marriage and Diverse Religions among Family Members

This inclusive attitude can clearly be seen among the people of Sabah, Muslims and non-Muslims, through mixed-marriages, be it marriage between religions or ethnic groups.

Table 2 : Mixed Marriage Registration involving Change in Religion to Islam according to districts in Sabah

Year/District	2009	2008	2007	2006	2005	2004	2003	2002	2001	2000	Subtotal
Kota Kinabalu	124	520	497	404	428	417	329	43	102	64	2928
Papar	16	56	60	57	8	42	9	17	13	0	278
Kota Belud	4	7	19	22	47	26	4	0	25	17	171
Tuaran	10	61	47	36	7	35	15	3	0	0	214
Kudat	0	17	15	9	14	0	11	0	0	0	66
Ranau	22	55	54	66	32	8	4	26	4	7	278
Sandakan	27	115	91	90	94	51	73	1	2	52	596
Labuk Sugut/Beluran	1	17	18	8	19	8	0	0	1	0	72
Kinabatangan	5	25	16	18	10	7	6	1	0	3	91
Tawau	8	111	110	96	84	103	78	12	22	0	624
Lahad Datu	14	54	25	42	42	21	19	1	0	0	218
Semporna	2	13	14	23	19	2	0	1	2	0	76
Keningau	16	102	165	138	147	106	44	40	37	47	842
Tambunan	7	7	17	16	8	6	2	32	6	9	110
Nabawan/Pensiangan	10	58	44	38	24	41	17	26	17	16	291
Tenom	2	46	55	21	31	0	5	1	2	6	169
Beaufort	27	30	32	53	15	0	12	1	0	0	170
Kuala Penyu	1	10	6	4	2	4	4	5	0	0	36
Sipitang	4	14	8	5	3	2	0	5	0	0	41
Penampang	16	57	49	40	39	26	2	1	0	0	230
Kota Marudu	0	39	31	28	20	26	22	29	8	5	208
Kunak	2	6	4	3	16	4	12	8	2	0	57
Pitas	3	8	7	7	5	1	4	7	2	0	44
Banggi	1	5	26	16	8	6	1	2	0	1	66
Matunggong	1	2	4	9	2	0	0	1	0	1	20
Membakut	4	9	5	9	0	0	0	0	0	0	27
Menumbok	2	1	7	3	1	13	2	0	0	0	29
Telupid	1	16	4	3	5	0	1	1	0	0	31
Sook	1	6	1	14	7	19	5	2	15	20	90
Tungku	2	7	3	2	2	0	2	2	1	0	21
Luar Negara	1	2	1	2	1	0	0	2	2	0	11
Total	334	1476	1435	1282	1140	974	683	270	263	248	

Source: Department of Islamic Affairs Sabah (JHEAINS)

Table 3 : Statistic of Mixed Marriage among Ethnicity as registered at the Department of Registration Kota Kinabalu (1994-2004)

Ethnicity	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	Subtotal
Kadazan + Cina	14	10	7	9	5	11	15	10	14	18	4	117
Kadazan + F.	12	9	6	6	3	7	10	3	39	7	10	112
Kadazan + Sarawak	4	3	3		1	2	4	2	3	1		23
Kadazan + Dusun	1	3		1								5
Kadazan + India	5	3	1	2	2	3	5	1	2	2	1	27
Kadazan + Filipino	2				2		1	10	8		2	23
Kadazan + S. Native		2										2
Cina + Dusun	4	2	1	1								8
Cina + Asing	9		1	4	1	1	4	1	2	3	2	26
Cina + S. Lanka	1											1

												Total
Cina + Sarawak	2	1	1			1				3		8
Cina + Filipino	1				3	1			3			8
Cina + S. native		2	2									4
Cina + Rungus		2										2
Cina + Sikh							1			1		1
India + F.	1	1	2	4				1		2	1	12
India + Sarawak										1		1
Eurasian +F.		1										1
Sri Lanka + F.			1									1
Dusun + F.		1		1								2
Dusun + India			2	1								3
Sarawak + Filipino				1								1
Sarawak + Indonesia				1								1
Rungus + F.											1	0
Filipino + F.		1										1
Banjar + Kadazan			1	1								2
Total	56	41	28	30	19	26	40	28	71	34	25	392

Note: F.=foreigners
Source: Department of Registration Kota Kinabalu (2004), taken from Budi Anto Tamring (2008:138)

These mixed-marriages that happen naturally have started since long time ago and have the ability to form a strong family bond and promote high understanding between ethnicities. An individual who has gone through this mixed marriage would normally have relatives from different religions. This has enabled them to create opportunities to understand each other better due to family ties (Hasan Mat Nor 2007).

This mixed-marriage will finally create a family of different religions. Generally, in this type of marriage, the family members are Muslim converts. This is one example of an inclusive attitude of Sabahans who are willing to accept family members of different religions. The case studies below show such situation.

Case 1 (Kadazandusun, Tuaran)
Father   RC
Mother   Pagan
Elder sister   Muslim
Elder brother   Pagan
Elder sister   Pagan
Respondent   Muslim
Younger sister   Muslim

(Source: Interview conducted on 26 November 2007 at Teratak Fitrah Kadsn/P-Trn-Resp16)

Case 2 (Rungus, Kota Marudu)
Father   Protestant Church of Society (PCS)
Mother   PCS
Elder sister   PCS
Elder brother   PCS
Elder brother   Muslim
Elder sister   PCS
Elder sister   Muslim
Respondent   Muslim
Younger sister   PCS

(Source: Interview conducted on 15 January 2009 at the respondent's house in Putatan, Rgs/P-KMrd-Resp29)

Case 3 (Kadazandusun, Tamparuli)
Father   RC
Mother   RC
Elder brother   Muslim
Elder sister   RC
Elder brother   RC
Elder brother   RC
Respondent   Muslim
Younger sister   RC
Younger sister   RC
Younger sister   RC

(Source: Interview conducted on 8 February 2009 at Maahad Tahfiz class, Kadsn/P-Tamp-Resp12)

Case 4 (Murut, Tenom)

Father	SIB (Sidang Injil Borneo)
Mother	SIB
Elder sister	SIB
Elder sister	Muslim
Elder sister	SIB
Elder brother	SIB
Elder brother	Muslim
Respondent	Muslim
Younger sister	SIB
Younger brother	SIB
Younger sister	SIB
Younger brother	SIB

(Source: Interview conducted on 23 October 2008 at Teratak Fitrah, Mrt/P-Tnm-Resp26)

Based on above cases, it can be seen that there are at least two religions in the family structure of Muslim converts such as in Cases 2 and 4. However, there are cases where there are more than two religions in a family structure of a Muslim convert such as in Case 1. Also, in some cases, the entire family members convert to the same religion although they were initially had two religions in the family structure. This inclusive attitude is not only shown in the family structure but also shared through cooperation on the development of different religious centres in many areas and districts in Sabah.

c)   Pluralists: Development of Different Religion Centres

It is very natural to have a variety of religions and ethnic groups in big cities such as Kota Kinabalu. These diverse beliefs are manifested through the development of religious centres as the centres for religious activities as well as gathering places for religious ceremonies. In Kota Kinabalu, this phenomenon can be seen through the development of different religious centres in the same location.

Development of such centres can clearly be seen in Sembulan and Likas. For instance, in Sembulan, there is an area called the development of state mosque, Wisma Majlis Ugama Islam Sabah (MUIS) or center for the Sabah Islamic Council, and United Sabah Islamic Association (USIA) buildings, which are situated next to Gudwara Sikh, on the right side of the mosque, and Sacred Heart Cathedral church, on the left side of the mosque. The distance between these buildings is only ¼ km. The same phenomenon can also be seen in Likas---an area where we have Masjid Bandaraya (City Mosque), and the majority of its residents are Muslims. In Likas, the headquarters for Sidang Injil Borneo (SIB) church is also built in the same area as the mosque, i.e. Masjid Bandaraya. The two buildings are near to each other that azan prayer from the mosque can be heard from the church compound.

The close proximity between these different religious centres shows early scenario of religion diversity of the different ethnic groups in Kota Kinabalu. This phenomenon can also be seen in other places in Sabah, mainly in remote areas where the residents are either Muslims or non-Muslims. The close proximity between chapels and mosques does not bother the residents of different religions because this phenomenon is normal for them. Moreover, there are family members and relatives despite their different religions. Therefore, religion is not regarded as a barrier for them to interact freely. Yet, it 'spices up' their relation with each other especially during festivals. The openness of the ethnic groups in Sabah is also described by Hasan Mat Nor (2007:200):

Kehadiran ketiga-tiga agama dalam satu kampung dan diamalkan oleh ahlinya yang mempunyai tali persaudaraan dan hidup bersama sebagai satu komuniti adalah fenomena yang biasa di Sabah. Hal sedemikian telah menyebabkan toleransi yang tinggi dalam kalangan mereka yang berlainan agama. Bagi kebanyakan masyarakat di Sabah keadaan begini adalah sesuatu yang natural. Kewujudan masjid dan gereja dalam satu kampung tidak dirasakan sebagai sesuatu yang aneh tetapi, adalah sesuatu yang biasa di Sabah. Generasi muda yang membesar dalam persekitaran yang begini pastinya akan mempunyai sifat toleransi yang tinggi. Agama tidak dilihat sebagai satu elemen yang membina tembok mengasingkan mereka. Malah mereka menerima hakikat bahawa ada saudara mara yang mempunyai pertalian darah dengan mereka mempunyai agama yang berbeza. Pada hari-hari kebesaran agama masing-masing, jiran-jiran sekampung turut meraikan dan menziarah satu sama lain. Malah apabila berlaku kematian juga didapati saudara yang berlainan agama datang menziarahi dan memberi penghormatan terakhir pada si mati. Agama tidak dilihat sebagai sesuatu yang menghadkan hubungan mereka.

According to him, it is very natural to have different religious centres in an area as the people of these different ethnic groups have high tolerance towards each other. Furthermore, they are fully aware that there are family members who are not having the same religion as they are, and religion, for them, does not limit their relation with each other.

For the people of Sabah, this unique relation is normal. That is why we can see that the close proximity between the religious centres does not bother them. In fact, they acknowledge and respect the needs of other religions' followers. Until today, there is no report on dissatisfaction among the residents about the close proximity of the religious centres. In relation to these three principles, i.e. exclusiveness, inclusiveness and pluralism, the harmonious relation between the people of Sabah is further fortified, and this will be discussed in detail in the following segment.

IV. Harmony in the Religious Diversity in Sabah

In general, Malaysians enjoy the harmonious lifestyle since the day we gained our independence up until now. This is shown in studies done by local scholars. Shamsul Amri Baharuddin (2007) stated that the harmonious lifestyle between the ethnic groups in Malaysia is maintained and will continue to exist in the form of social accommodation. Social accommodation allows each ethnic to live according to each social system harmoniously, and this still can be seen until today. Ainon Kuntum (2003) said that since our independent day up till now, Malaysians can be said to have high understanding towards each other's religions and the need to maintain this peacefulness. Although from time to time, there are episodes of religions' differences, still, it can be said that there is no major religion's conflicts. With tolerance, any challenges arise between the ethnic groups and religions are wisely handled. It is proven that the social unity in this country is still strong although each person in each ethnic group still has issues and unsolved problems (Bernama, 9 February 2010). Therefore, harmony is a way of life for Malaysians who come from different ethnic group and religion, and the result of this lifestyle is seen in every states including Sabah.

Sabah cultural heritage illustrates the harmonious relation between religions, which is based on positive interaction between religions and ethnic groups, cooperation between religions in the development of education, competition between religions in promoting political awareness and religions' influences in developing the early civilization of the people of Sabah. All these have formed the current community who holds to the principles of believing in a religion, speaking the Malay Language and practising national cultures. Indeed, the historical experiences play a significant role in influencing the thinking and attitudes of the people of Sabah today. Clearly, their openness and acceptance to other religions do not stop them from interacting freely among each other because this is a natural process for them.

In reality, relation between religions takes place in this interaction through two-way communication which plays as an interface in their daily life. It benefits everybody because they are not easily influenced by rumours or threats that will break the existing relation. The relation between religions is seen as a fact that should be celebrated together and any existing mishaps should be accepted with open mind. This shows the harmonious relation of diversified religions when interactions become a culture in daily activities. It results in a social relation that enhances their closeness. It can be said that a citation in the Quran, "bagi kamu agamamu dan bagi kami adalah agama kami", which means that 'to you is your religion and to us is our religion', has become a philosophy to live together developing and maintaining harmony in a community that has diversified religions and ethnic groups in Sabah.

The practice of living together has gone through a long process. A study by William Hofsteede OFM (2004) explained that the concept of harmonious relation between religions should have the elements of socialization, integration and cooperation between the religions. These elements can be seen in the daily interaction and living together experience, Muslims and non-Muslims, in Sabah, especially the experience of the Muslim converts. Socialization and interaction between these people have gone beyond its normality due to the basic similarities shared among them. These similarities have developed the social integration and cooperation between religions, which in the end, results in tolerance and acceptance towards any differences exist between the religions.

a) Socialization and interaction between religions

Socialization and interaction between religions based on Muslim converts' experiences in Sabah are a direct process occurring in families of different religions and its social relation involves inter-religion and intra-religion. This micro-perspective explains the relation between religions based on the experiences of Muslim converts at the pre-conversion and post-conversion levels that occur naturally and have high tolerance. This is the lifestyle of the people of Sabah---living together, meeting and interacting with each other---that is regarded as a folkway in the culture of a community in Sabah.

The Muslim converts' experiences at the pre-conversion level show that interactions and living together have nurtured the relation between religions that occurs in formal and informal socializations. This process starts during childhood at school, in the neighbourhood and in the relation with family members of different religions. This continues up to higher educational and working levels that enhances the relation between the groups of different religions. Lee Fok Yee (2009) found that informal socialization such as education within the family, peer influence and other ethnic groups' experiences affect an individual's prejudice and perception towards other people. This is shown through the interaction between the Muslim converts and other Muslims as well as non-Muslims.

In addition, formal socialization at school level, be it direct interaction in a classroom or school compound, has created an opportunity to interact with others of different religions, to understand their way of living. Smith (2007) stated that, "their classroom may provide an opportunity for students to learn about different cultures and their various components". This approach aligns with government's campaign on developing a visionary school in order to nurture unity.

According to Mahadzir Mohd Khir (2005), schooling is the most suitable period to nurture the values of understandings because children are prone to have their own perceptions and worldviews and their contacts with other children will minimize the gaps in interaction. Visionary schools symbolize a micro concern towards dialogue of civilization. Thus, the socialization process of Muslim converts during the schooling can be regarded as the process of developing perceptions and early understandings on Islam and Muslims' way of living. It is also a process to understand the similarities and differences between religions. The Muslim converts' experiences explaining the formal and informal socializations as well as the limitless interaction opportunities that occur positively can be used as enhancers towards harmonious relation between religions resulting in extensive religions' converts caused by mixed-marriage between religions and ethnic groups in Sabah.

b) Social Integration through Mixed Marriage Culture

In Sabah, social integration referring to formation and cooperation processes is applied in mixed-marriage culture. Mixed-marriage culture has reduced the social gaps between the community, which is originally separated by religious boundaries and different ethnic groups. This phenomenon relates closely to converting to Islam and the relation between these two is obvious in the lifestyle of the people in Sabah. This is proven when Sabah records the highest number of Muslim converts in Malaysia as shown in Table 4.

Table 4 : Statistics of Muslim Converts in Malaysia

STATE/YEAR	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	Total
PERLIS	7	7	12	14	23	35	33	457	11	25	21	33	45	34	11	52
KEDAH	72	120	100	107	120	161	147	138	151	166	123	147	153	190	192	619
PENANG	180	192	184	240	259	113	245	245	255	234	238	274	244	241	250	990
PERAK	249	186	332	263	609	1,108	1,092	821	618	343	983	324	569	584	502	3552
SELANGOR	367	238	224	826	414	417	184	392	508	454	347	745	330	1,098	1,206	3706
K.LUMPUR	284	328	400	445	623	440	500	411	1,055	455	630	471	802	851	457	3413
N.SEMBILAN	98	122	145	90	148	163	194	167	160	145	159	187	228	197	204	879
MALACCA	180	74	148	150	157	152	137	166	169	162	106	129	666	138	176	1622
JOHORE	248	235	364	296	379	402	567	461	441	479	555	585	655	818	606	2715
PAHANG	99	107	151	209	158	206	235	277	184	238	155	115	177	252	243	1075
TERENGGANU	82	82	75	115	166	117	94	79	60	94	76	76	43	88	41	403
SARAWAK	1,085	921	875	853	849	794	992	1,016	465	884	780	752	1,114	1,127	1,057	5975
SABAH	**660**	**838**	**1,294**	**1,222**	**1,333**	**1,010**	**1,045**	**1,379**	**1,190**	**1035**	**1316**	**1254**	**1230**	**1712**	**1778**	**7592**
FEDERAL TERRITORY OF LABUAN	108	142	63	106	77	85	111	88	104	85	101	97	98	114	132	1015
KELANTAN	107	161	145	194	155	198	199	531	227	314	365	275	291	304	521	3466

Source: http://www. islam.gov.my/informasi/statistiksaudarabaru.html. And adapted from Osman Abdullah@Chuah Hock Leng and Abdul Salam Muhamad Shukri (2008:124)

Mixed marriage involving convert in a religion in Sabah is reported to happen since early pre-independence and has continued until now. Registered marriage reports by Jabatan Hal Ehwal Agama Islam Negeri Sabah (JHEAINS) or Department of Islamic Affairs of Sabah show that the first mixed-marriage reported in Keningau was first identified since 1944 and the number has increased each year in other districts in Sabah. The mixed-marriage among ethnic groups that was first practised by the Chinese community with other aboriginal groups of Sabah had occurred even before the arrival of Colonial resulting in mixed-ethnic group known as 'Sino'. Although mixed-marriage between ethnic groups does not always result in converting a religion, still, it influences the norms of the community in Sabah towards mixed-marriage involving couple of different religions in Sabah.

Sometimes mixed marriage involving converting a religion can cause disputes not only to the members of the family of different religion but also to the community they live in. However, according to Abdul Rahman Embong (2009), a harmonious mixed marriage will assist in the formation of a Malaysian nation. This can be seen in Sabah, where mixed marriage happens rampantly, and it can become an effective platform in promoting better understanding between groups of different religions. This culture acceptance can be used as a benchmark to understand the harmonious relation

between religions in Sabah. According to Gavin W. Jones et al. (2009), "interreligious marriage is an important indicator of good relations between communities in religiously diverse countries".

The phenomenon of mixed marriage indicates positive development because nothing has ever been reported that will jeopardize the harmonious relations between religions in Sabah. Mixed marriage involving converting in a religion will result in mix-faith family which also has become a social norm among the people of Sabah. The structure of this mix-faith family is accepted by the community in Sabah although family quarrels do occur at the beginning of the marriage---this situation is controlled later.

c) Acceptance of Mix-faith Family Structure

Unity in diversity has not only become the belief and philosophy of living together in this pluralistic community of Sabah, but it is also manifested in a family structure. The structure of a mix-faith family produces individuals of Muslim converts living together with non-Muslim families and Muslim communities. Their presences in families with mixed religions are no longer regarded as something abnormal because the structure of mix-faith family has become a norm and normal scenario among the community of Sabah. This is a heritage that has occurred for such a long time and the cultural process of this practice has continued up till today.

The structure of mix-faith family does not only represent family members of different cultures but also highlights different religions' practices. This normally causes misunderstandings and worries on family members who have converted to other religion especially to Islam. This exists because there are religious boundaries and obligations which may look abnormal to families' beliefs and traditions. However, the experience of daily interactions, which act as interface and the practice of living together since childhood resulting in a friendship, e.g. playmate, neighbour, school friend and couple, has given the opportunity for both groups of different religions to get to know each other better and improves their understandings on suspicious and confused matters in religions. In other words, the frequent interactions between groups of different religions and ability to adapt to different culture have become the main causes towards harmonious relations between religions. Also, the harmonious relations among family members will inculcate the cooperation between the diverse religions communities in Sabah.

d) Healthy Competition through Collaboration between Religions

The experiences of living together through assimilation and vast interactions, as well as sharing and accepting mix-faith families have triggered the sense of cooperation among the community of Sabah

regardless of religions. Although there are competitions and influences exist in the relations between Muslims-Christians in Sabah, especially in the propagation of religion, the competitions are healthy and compromised through cooperation. It is evident to see teamwork between Muslims and Christians in political accommodation---under the same political party. Even though the political history of Sabah recorded commotion in the relation between the head of the state and central government that results in territorial sentiment among the people of Sabah, it does not affect the relations between religions, which have occurred long ago starting within families and neighbourhoods. There are also collaborations in education, where Christian Missionary schools and Chinese schools become the focus of early education and main choice for many people in Sabah.

This healthy competition can also be seen when these two major religions, namely Islam and Christian, succeeded to change the lifestyle of the people of Sabah, who were animists before, to a new lifestyle based on rules and religious values. For instance, the influence of Islam has changed the mentality of believing in spirits into a mentality that is based on Tauhid (oneness) paradigm---believe in the existence of ultimate power—and this has free them from believing in superstitions that hinder their social mobility and rational thinking. The same applies to the indigenous groups, who have embraced Christianity; they project modern and dynamic lifestyle. Moreover, the western oriented education has produced influential geniuses who can determine the focus of the Sabah administration since the beginning of its alliance with Malaysia up till now.

The dissemination of Islam has continuously progressed during the post-independence era when the development of religious buildings and schools become the main focus of Sabah administration in order to neutralize the colonial's legacy, which only focused on the building of churches and missionary schools. Again, the competition between these two major religions brings positive impacts on the development of education and spiritual awareness of their followers. Based on this healthy competition, these two major religions feel the sense of brotherhood and peace that the right to develop is mutual and a part of social obligations. This is further supported by the great number of people in Sabah who are still animists. It is clearly that this competition will continue to win these peoples' beliefs---whether to accept Islam or Christianity.

Religions are not a major issue for the people of Sabah that cannot be compromised and discussed maturely and diplomatically. There are other important issues, mainly issues on economic developments, be it the basic infrastructures in rural areas and education development to increase the living standard of the people in Sabah, so that effects of major developments

can also be felt and experienced by the people in Sabah as the nation of 1Malaysia. In accordance to this, matured solutions in solving any religious issues are needed rather than emotional actions that will only cause unhappiness to the people of Sabah, impede our economic developments and threaten our political stability.

The desire to achieve development that can only be realized in peacefulness has inspired the cooperation between religions. It also results in positive attitude to collaborate with each other in mix-faith families---during festivals, wedding ceremony, events of birth and death. Family members of different religions will show respects to the religious boundaries such in preparing food according to religious law. In many cases especially during wedding ceremonies, halal food is served, so that everybody can eat and join in the activity. In addition, during festivals, halal and non-halal food are served to respect guests and to welcome the presence of family members of different religions. In short, the differences in religions are not only respected but also compromised according to the needs to create harmonious lifestyle among the people of different religions and ethnic groups.

V. Conclusion

All four harmonious elements built through the process of socialization, integration, acceptance and collaboration are the foundations in forming harmony in inter-faith relations in Sabah. This process does not happen instantly because the efforts are continuously built in accordance to the period of developing Sabah after gaining independence through Malaysia. In addition, the attitudes and viewpoints of the people of Sabah, who are more inclusive and plural in handling issues on the relations between religions, have further encouraged the harmonious relations among them.

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