

## The Culture of Tolerance in Families of New Muslims Convert

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**Abstract:** In this paper, the authors seek to highlight the importance of tolerance in the pluralistic community of Malaysia as being stated in Article 11 of the constitution which stresses religious freedom in developing a harmonious co-existence. To recognize the tolerance practices in Malaysia, this paper focuses on the new converts in Sabah. As this is a qualitative research in nature, it includes in-depth interviews with the new Sabahan Muslim converts comprised of Kadazandusun, Murut, Rungus, Sino and Chinese. The questions that arise basically pertain to their relationship with their family of previous faith after they have converted to Islam. The results confirm that living in a multi-faith surrounding is not a forbidding factor in developing religious and cultural tolerance amongst the family members. The daily communication and accommodation even develop better mutual understanding, respect and tolerance towards the new Muslim that eventually leads to the supportive response from the family of origin in practising the new lifestyle as a Muslim. In sum, the cultural tolerance has superseded the diversity of religions and ethnics in Malaysia through extensive daily communications and encounters amongst the different faith societies.

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### Key words:

### INTRODUCTION

Tolerance is a popular issue often discussed in inter-religious relationships. Religious and ethnical variations demanded that tolerance becomes a culture in ensuring continual co-existence. Moon the secretary for the United Nations emphasizes: "When we build a culture of tolerance and understanding, we build a better world" [1]. The world will become a better place if the culture of tolerance is built together. The culture of tolerance is significant in shaping the minds of the society that prioritize humanistic principles – love for peace and understanding. The importance of tolerance is accentuated when there is religious disagreement. The culture of tolerance, when practiced, is able to motivate the spirit of mutual respect towards core religious beliefs that are the foundation of the respective religions. Therefore, this article will discuss how the practice of tolerance that has been accepted and applied as a culture of the society in Sabah provides supportive interaction from the non-Muslim families towards the new Muslims in practicing Islamic life.

**The Concept of Tolerance:** The literal and lexical meaning of tolerance means to bear, to endure, to put up with. Tolerance comes from Latin, *tolerantia* which means flexibility, softness of the heart, broadmindedness and volunteering [2]. Generally, tolerance is equivalent to being positive and appreciating others in the frame of providing basic rights as human. There are two main models of tolerance: firstly, passive tolerance which means accepting differences as factual. Secondly there is active tolerance, which means being involved with others in the midst of differences and variations [3]. The outcome of tolerance is living side by side peacefully and accepting variations that exist.

Tamring states that tolerance in general refers to the willingness of an individual to establish a relationship and co-exist with another individual of a different cultural and social background [4]. The concept of tolerance explained by social sciences scholars is different according to their respective fields. Tolerance can happen in relationships of political, economic and social nature. It is also regarded as a principle in a society carries the meaning of not being fanatic, but of selflessness, openness, being realistic and

agreeable and of compromise. Those who practice tolerance are able to accept difficulty and critics, being one true self and the same time sacrificing oneself for others as well as being open and accepting [5]. Tolerance is certainly a reciprocal process between two counterparts.

Two main models of tolerance; firstly, passive tolerance which means accepting differences as factual. Secondly, is the active tolerance, which means being involved with others in the midst of differences and variations. The fact of tolerance is living side by side peacefully and appreciating between variations that existed. It can be said that without tolerance, the people of different affiliation will not enjoy the harmony of living together either as a friend, relative, coupling partner or member in the mix-faith family [3].

Agius & Ambrosewicz explain that tolerance is a formula to develop co-existence in a civilized way between sides that are different in terms of faith, belief and view [6]. Tolerance means that every individual or community has the same right; to acknowledge the right of others to have a different opinion, desire and behaviour. Based on the Declaration of Principles on Tolerance announced during the General Conference of UNESCO on October 25 until November 1995, tolerance is defined as follows:

“...is not merely a matter of recognizing and respecting the beliefs and practices of others but recognizing and respecting themselves, as an individual and as a member of the social or ethnic group or class to which they belong. This is particularly the case with tolerance of racial and sexual differences in which the targets are often individuals as representatives of their particular ethnicity or sex”.

Tolerance is not only the recognition and respect towards beliefs, but also demands respect for the individuals who belong in the society. In contrary, tolerance as planned by the West is tolerance without borders that gives absolute freedom to human rights. For instance, an individual who wants to practice free sex, then his wish should be given based on tolerance. This culture was almost being followed in Malaysia when represents a coalition of Malaysian NGOs (incl. Malaysian Bar Council, SUARAM, Empower, PT Foundation, United Nations, Amnesty International) and individuals proposed the basis of the “Program Seksualiti Merdeka 2011” that has been planned to take place on November 2, until November 13, 2011 at The Annexe Gallery, Kuala Lumpur. However the gathering was banned by Polis

Diraja Malaysia (Malaysian Police Commissioner) based on the objection by a majority of the Muslims, as it was considered against the ethical values of the Malaysian society.

Agius & Ambrosewicz further elaborate that a person who practices tolerance is a person who does not exert any pressure in order to change the belief of another person, respects an opposing view and is free from prejudice. Tolerance is defined as the willingness of an individual to accept other’s rights to be different and respecting without being judgmental [6]. Tolerance contributes to the shaping of human rights, pluralism, democracy and law legislation. Tolerance acknowledges that humans are naturally different in terms of appearance, character, behaviour and they have the right to live peacefully without interruptions of their rights. Learning to be a tolerant individual means the readiness to learn something new in regard to ways of thinking and behaving.

Tolerance is instilled through knowledge, openness, communication and freedom of thought. Tolerance is not only a moral value that every individual should have, but it is also a political requirement. Tolerance is capable of changing the culture of antagonism or animosity to culture of peace and harmony. Tolerance is opposite of intolerance, which can be translated to a negative behaviour and rejects the views and actions of others. Intolerance originates from the belief that one’s own actions and way of life is superior or better than others. The negative effects of intolerance include oppression, ethnic cleansing, apartheid and genocide that deny the needs and rights of others.

In different point of view, Hikmatullah Babu Sahib describes that the above definition confines tolerance to the domain of religion in a limited sense [7]. The term, tolerance over the years and particularly in recent times, has taken on a wholly new set of meanings. Accordingly, this term, dictated by the demands of modernity, now refers to tolerating all manner of views, beliefs and practices of others that are varying and even diametrically opposite to one’s own. This new sense of tolerance seems to arouse weariness among religious adherent which it does not only demand for accommodation of difference but as well demand for acceptance of others’ beliefs and practices.

Sahib argues that there is a real problem in allowing the statement of “acceptance the beliefs and practices of others.” It is because the term “acceptance” means “to consent to take what is offered”; “to view with favor”; “to admit the truth of, i.e. acknowledge” [7] There is no harm in admitting partial truth as partial truth and

accommodating it accordingly. However, the difficulty arises when such truth is to be acknowledged as full truth. This may not be tolerated since acceptance of it as truth would mean to acknowledge it as equal to the truth one holds. This is one of the problems that arise from pluralism. Therefore, the concept of tolerance as viewed by the West is different from the Islamic point of view.

Islam has its own perspective in defining the concept of tolerance. Awang explains the term "tolerance" in Arabic, which refers to *al-Tasamuh* which defines giving and receiving, and not only hoping for some to give and others to receive. Tolerance is an attitude of openness; to listen to different views of others, and functions two-ways; offering one's view and accepting others, and does not affect the religious beliefs of each other in that shared space. However, this *tasamuh* does not mean to simply accept to the point that it emotionally pressures someone to accept something that is against the teachings of the religion. Rahman et al states that tolerance of Islam towards freedom of religion is based on "firm on principle, tolerance with attitude." Islam proposes its followers to hold on to the principle of truth, without disregarding respect towards non-Muslims [8].

Given this scenario, the concept of *al-tasamuh* has brought the meaning of giving and receiving, and not only hoping for the one side to give and the other to receive. Tolerance is an attitude of openness; to listen to different views of others, and functions two-ways; offering one's view and accepting others, and does not affect the religious beliefs of each other in that shared space. However, this *tasamuh* does not mean to simply accept to the point that it emotionally pressures someone to accept something that is against the teachings of the religion [2]. Mohamad Zaidi et. al state that tolerance of Islam towards freedom of religion is based on the rule "firm on principle, tolerance with attitude" [8]. Islam proposes its followers to hold on to the principle of truth, without disregarding respect towards non-Muslims.

Hambali stresses that Islam highly values *tasamuh* as one of the strengths of Islam. In surah *al-Muntahanah* 60:8, al-Quran explains that justice and goodwill towards others who are of different convictions is one of the main conditions that brought about tolerance. *Tasamuh* is closely related to the concept of *mahabbah* (love) that requires every individual to be broad hearted, rational and professional in a certain matter [9]. Nevertheless, *mahabbah* has the meaning and approach that is more ideal than tolerance, as tolerance often raises confusion among the society; the question arises who should 'give'

and who should 'take'. Due to that, lately there have been certain parties who are bold in challenging the credibility sublimity of *Perlembagaan Persekutuan* (National Constitution).

The preliminary discussion pointures that tolerance is a much-needed universal value in building unity in diversity. The practice of tolerance, when it becomes a culture in the daily interaction between people of different religions is able to produce a society with positive attitude, broad hearted and compassionate. However, Islam only allows for tolerance in matters that do not violate the guidelines and requirements of its teachings. Tolerance in Islam is within a space that clarifies the fact of individual's independence so that his life is civil and ethical. This matter will be clearer when the concept of tolerance is discussed in the framework of religious tolerance and ethnic tolerance, as well as the practices in Malaysia.

#### **The Practice of Religious and Ethnic Tolerance in Malaysia:**

When tolerance is being related to religious tolerance and ethnic tolerance, these two concepts brought their own definitions. Religious tolerance according to the Golden Rule stipulates that we 'do not do unto others what we do not want them to do to us.' This principle requires that we put ourselves in the place of others and try to understand the situation once we are in another position. It is only through this experience that we are able to understand the complexity and injustice faced by the other side. Liew elaborates more on the Golden Rule that the rule appeals to more than mere consistency of behavior [10]. A member of a dominant religion can consistently discriminate against the members of a minority religion without fairly acknowledging that they are equally justified in discriminating against him when the roles are reversed. The rule requires that we imaginatively put ourselves in the place of our intended victims and exchange positions or roles with them. We are then led to understand the suffering and injustice of religious persecution and intolerance.

Religious tolerance is the opposite of religious fanaticism, which means not to budge from the original stand. An individual who is a religious fanatic is described as a person who always uses excuses or justification for their intolerance based on the conviction that the truth only exists within his own religion. Any oppositions or differences between the religions are considered wrong or false and therefore cannot be applied to others.

Tolerance in Islam according to Hambali does not mean that it has to sacrifice the sacredness of Islam, and at the same time does not disregard the existence of other religions in this world [9]. In other words, Islam recognizes the existence of other religions, although it does not mean that Islam also recognizes the legitimacy of other teachings besides Islam. Hambali further elaborates that religious tolerance demanded in Islam is not passive in its nature. It needs to be proactive and positive by looking at the similarities behind the differences in order to value the conviction of others and is eventually demonstrated through interactions that are honest and rational.

Nasr, the contemporary Malaysian Muslim thinker elucidates, as noted by Muzaffar, that tolerance in Islam is built based on the experiences of the Muslims' encounters with believers of other faiths [11]. The birth of Islam led to the meeting of this religion with Christianity and Judaism, and with others, including Zoroastrianism in Persia, Shamanism in Middle Asia and Mongolia, as well as Hinduism and Buddhism in India. The experiences of these encounters shape the understanding of Muslims towards other religions and produce the concept of Islamic tolerance. The experience of history shows the great examples of tolerance by the Muslims. For example in 638A.D, Khalifah Umar al-Khattab allowed Jews to return to Jerusalem, after they were banished by the Roman ruler since 132 A.D [12]. Under the administration of Salahuddin al-Ayyubi in 1187A.D, the Christians were given the assurance to use their worship houses and the Jews' holy places were protected. The same situation occurred in Spain during the time of the Muslim rule starting from 711A.D until the fall of Granada in 1492A.D, a period that displayed the harmonious co-existence of the three Abrahamic communities – Jews, Christians and Muslims. Hence, religious tolerance on the Muslims' side is still continuing in the aim of achieving tolerance with other religious adherents.

Indeed it cannot be denied that there are a number of examples of tolerance from believers of other religions towards Muslims. Emmet (2009) brings examples where Christians displayed tolerance towards Muslims, among them when Orthodox Christians donated land for the construction of a mosque around Bethelhem (Baitul Maqdis), the agreement among the community of Orthodox Greek Chicago to sell the church space to be turned into a mosque, and also collaboration between Methodist Christians in Fermon, California in the establishment of mosque beside a church. These examples provide the evidence that Muslims and Christians can co-exist based on the spirit of tolerance. Without

tolerance, the common relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims will complicate the effort in building a harmonious life [13]. This can be proven in the Malaysian context of Muslim majority country. As Hambali explains that religious tolerance that has been practiced in Malaysia all this while is based on Article 11(1) of the Malaysian Constitution which states [9]:

Every person has the right to profess and practice his own religion be subjected to Clause (4) spread his religion. Article 12 (2) states that, every religious group has the right to establish and maintain institutions for children's education in its respective religion; but it is legal for the Federation or the State to establish or administer Islamic institutions or organize or aid in the teachings of Islam or spending of funds as required by that purpose. However it is stressed that, as stated in article 12(3) that no one is allowed to demand or force any individual to follow any teachings of certain religion or celebrate any festivals or activities organized by certain religions apart from his own.

Hambali further elaborates that the right to religious freedom as stated by Article 11 of the Constitution has for so long functioned as the pulse of racial unity and harmony in Malaysia. The continuance of the harmony can only be realized if the culture of tolerance is also appreciated by the new generation [9]. This endeavor is not easy due to the challenges that must be overcome for the endurance of religious tolerance in this country. Among the main challenges is the generation gap. Today's generation is the second generation after Malaysia has achieved its independence, and it is in this generation which the spirit of fighting is fading. Therefore it is not surprising that the tie of agreement as being proposed in the 'Social Contract' by the first Prime Minister of Malaysia, Tunku Abdul Rahman that was once agreed among Malay, Chinese and Indian leaders is being questioned as the mutual trust and respect has started to weaken.

The confusion of Muslims and non-Muslims alike in regard to the definition of tolerance has led to debates in religious issues. For example, greetings and well-wishes to believers of other religions in certain celebrations have demanded clarifications on religious tolerance [9]. On this basis, Othman explains how religious tolerance in Malaysia does not happen in all honesty and reality, but can be considered more of cosmetic in nature. This patch-on harmony may encourage the risk of friction, as it is

mostly utilitarian and is not based on pure idealism [14]. In other words, the harmony is only surface thin. Even if there is effort for that purpose, it only happens in small groups especially the urban intellect and does not involve all ethnicities, particularly from the rural parts.

The effort towards increasing religious tolerance in Malaysia according to Muzaffar should be handled by solving the problem of inter-ethnic communication [11]. This problem comes from ignorance of values, attitudes and customs of others, deteriorates with deep-rooted prejudice between two sides; Muslims and non-Muslims. The problematic situation needs to be resolved by increasing the interaction space for the purpose of building trust, respect and compassion between two sides. According to Tamring, relationship be it a close or distant one depends on opportunities of interaction, not only the characteristics of similarities or differences between them [4]. Hence, the more often interaction takes place in the community, the higher the potential for tolerance among them. The role of parents in cultivating universal values and non-communal attitude in the new generation is also important for the purpose of producing a future generation who mingle easily, and is not socially awkward with people of different cultures and able to accommodate oneself easily in a different environment.

Hambali suggests that religious tolerance can be increased through a softer approach, by appreciating the similarities and respecting differences that exist within each religion. The old defensive approach, which regards religious issues as sensitive to be discussed must be discarded [15]. The best method is to raise and multiply the forms of religious interaction and without limiting them in dialogue programs between religious figures. It should be expanded to schools and institutions of higher learning so that prejudice may be curbed and managed at an earlier stage. Here it demonstrates the importance of learning religious theology which enables a person to determine their conduct and position towards the others and this will determine between the absence and the present of tolerance.

It is undeniable that religious tolerance in Malaysia should be expanded so that all levels of society either in the urban or rural areas may be able to nurture the spirit of tolerance through ties of acquaintance and friendship across religions. The culture of tolerance that has been cultivated from encountering, mixing, associating and co-existing generate amicable relationship not just in form of friendship, but this amicability encourages familiarity which leads to the relationship of brotherhood across religions and ethnicities. Starting from this amicable

relationship, a society with the culture of tolerance in all aspects of life can be built together. This kind of relationship can be realized through inter-ethnic relationship without limiting acquaintances and choosing friends or spouses from the same ethnic or selecting based on certain ethnicities only.

The research carried by Tamring in “*Toleransi Etnik Bajau dan Kadazandusun di Sabah*” (Ethnic Tolerance of Bajau and Kadazandusun in Sabah), shows that ethnic tolerance in Sabah is high due the factor of extensive interactions in daily lives which lead to openness in having relationship across religion and ethnicity [16]. High ethnic tolerance is described through the readiness or willingness to have an inter-ethnic relationship and their willingness to relate in other kinds or relations either socially, economically and politically. This demonstrates that tolerance has to go through processes depending on the historical and cultural differences of each society in determining the presence of tolerance.

The practice of ethnic tolerance is the way of co-existence of the Sabah society. Osman in *Laporan Kajian Toleransi Etnik dan Perpaduan Sosial* (Report for Research of Ethnic Tolerance and Social Unity) states that the general opinion believes Sabah has a high level of tolerance [17]. The same opinion was also brought forward by Nor [18], even with the complexity of the Sabahan composition, but we can see clearly the amicable relationship and harmonious environment, the tolerance and mutual respect between the people, which they maintain as their way of life. Kib also affirms that the building of a church at the shop-house building and also churches built in Muslims’ area, which demonstrates that the culture of tolerance is high among the Sabahan, especially the Muslim natives who can accept the existence of worship houses in their area [19]. Therefore, ethnic tolerance colours the social relationship in Sabah and this practice becomes the starting point of the building of religious tolerance in Sabah.

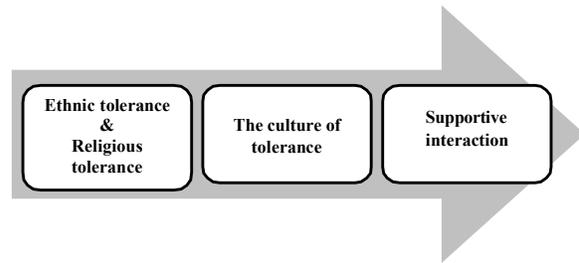
The construction of religious tolerance in Sabah is cultivated through the practice of ethnic tolerance, which is not only highlighted through inter-religious mixing and the establishment of various worship houses. This phenomenon can be seen from the aspect of co-existence in a multi-faith family. This phenomenon is obvious in the life a new Muslim convert, who practiced mixed marriage, either between ethnicities or religions. Mixed marriage that includes religious conversion in Sabah has been reported since the early pre-independence and persists until today. The report on marriage registry of *Jabatan Hal Ehwal Agama Islam*

*Negeri Sabah* (Department of Sabah Islamic Affairs) or JHEAINS states that the first case of mixed marriage reported in Keningau was detected as early as 1944. Moreover, inter-ethnicity mixed marriages practiced earlier on by the Chinese with partners of Sabah natives have been there even before the coming of the colonists, and produced the mixed ethnicity known as 'Sino'. The experience of mixed marriage across religion and ethnicity cultivates the spirit of acceptance towards others and shapes the social convention of being tolerant to the differences element that exists between them.

The phenomenon of mixed marriages that is still taking place until now displays a positive development, where unwanted incidents have not yet occurred that negatively affected religious harmony in Sabah. As a result of mixed marriages that involve conversions, the structure of mixed faith family has also become a norm in Sabah. In fact, this practice has also produced individuals from the new Muslim converts who live with non-Muslim families. The presences of new Muslim, who are of different faith, are not considered strange in the space of multi-faith family. This is because this practice is accepted as ancestral heritage that has been going on for a very long time, and the process civilizing this practice is still very much alive.

The mix-faith family does not only involve members of different faith, but also displays different religious practices. This matter has often resulted in misconception and anxiety in a family where its member has converted, particularly in the case of conversion to Islam. This is because there are religious boundaries and religious obligations that seem strange from the beliefs and practices of the family. However, the experience of daily interaction in form of interface and the practice co-existing that has been going on since childhood and lead to friendships such as village chums, neighbours, playmates, and schoolmates provides the space between people of different faith to be better acquainted, and nurtures the understanding on matters that usually produce suspicion and confusion between them.

The frequency of establishing daily relations between people of different faiths and the ability to adapt oneself with different culture has encouraged the spirit of tolerance in the new multi-faith Muslim convert family. Therefore, the culture of tolerance between Muslims-non-Muslims in Sabah can be seen in the relationship within the family of the new Muslim convert, which is highlighted through the support from the non-Muslim family members for the new converts to live the Islamic life. The process is shown in the chart below.



#### **The Practice of Tolerance in Families of New Muslim:**

The practice of tolerance is pressing in the life of new Muslim who live with a non-Muslim family. Tolerance is needed in aspects that involve eating together, living under one roof and celebrating of festivals. These three aspects demand high tolerance on matters that cannot be agreed on due to the limit of regulations and obligatory demands that differentiate Islam from other religions. The approach of cultural adjustment cultivated through the spirit of tolerance encourages support from families of non-Muslim towards the new Muslim converts who are living the Islamic way of life.

Apart from that, the practice of tolerance is needed in order to guarantee the perseverance of harmony that has been affected due to misunderstandings and anxieties from the conversion to Islam. This practice is becoming crucial in solving predicaments that cannot be agreed together based on the changes that happened to the new converts of Islam. For instance, the changes of daily routines that feature Islamic way of life is now limited by religious regulations and obligatory religious demands are seen as strange and worrisome by the non-Muslim family members. Even if changes happen to new converts to other religions, the changes are not as immense as those experienced by the new Muslim convert. Osman et al. explain that [20]:

*This is because, in Christianity, there are no limitations on food and drink and clothing. Further, the mass on Sundays in the church can be held in the language of Christian convert. However, for a Muslim, it is rather strict. A convert could not worship idol, could not take pork and alcohol, and must learn to pray in the Arabic language.*

In reality, the life of new Muslim converts at the stage of post-conversion faces the problem of double marginality, which means being isolated by two situations [21]. New Muslim faces the dilemma of being between commitments as a Muslim and conserving a harmonious relationship with non-Muslim families. Zebiri in his book '*British Muslim Converts: Choosing Alternative Lives*'

notes that new Muslim converts at the stage of post-conversion is a bitter experience and full of difficulty, particularly when informing the family about the decision to convert to Islam [21]. This inter-religious dimension shapes the four pattern of association between the new Muslim convert and the non-Muslim family: starting with strained relationship to accommodative, neutral and supportive relationship. This model of familial relationships introduced by Sebastian & Parameswaran becomes the main back up in explaining the form of new Muslim convert familial relationship [22].

Firstly, contentious interaction explains 'high conflict, low consensus', such as the mutually challenging element in a conflict between the new Muslim convert with the non-Muslim family. Secondly, supportive interaction which is a form of interaction opposite of contentious interaction, explained through 'low conflict, high consensus. Thirdly, accommodative interaction which is 'high conflict, high consensus' where it partially accepts and oppose the rest. For example, the non-Muslim family is ready to ensure that the new Muslim convert is served *halal* food but is uncomfortable seeing the new Muslim convert practicing Islam in home such as *solat* (prayers), recitation of Quran or covering the *aurat*. Fourthly, the neutral interaction, which shows the situation of, 'low conflict, low consensus'. This is where the family does not mind the new faith of the new Muslim convert, but they neither encourage nor discourage the changes in the new Muslim convert. From these four types of relationship, the supportive interaction is the best description for the act of tolerance of the non-Muslim family for the new Muslim.

In order to understand how the culture of tolerance is practiced in new Muslim-family relation, this study applies the method of in-depth interview with selected new Muslim converts around Kota Kinabalu. Data accumulation involves new Muslim from various ethnics and districts/states. Hence, the new Muslim can be classified into two categories. The first category is the new Muslim from the Sabahan native people which comprise of the ethnic of Kadazandusun, Murut, Rungus, and Sino. Secondly, the new Muslim from the Peninsular Malaysia and Sarawak, that comprise of the ethnic of Chinese, Indian and Iban. The result of the interview is shown through descriptive narratives which display the practice of tolerance in the form of supportive interaction from the non-Muslim families towards the new Muslim in practicing the Islamic lifestyle. The supportive interaction in new Muslim-family relation is shown through verbatim transcription below:

- When I go home I did not eat pork, then my parent realized. Mother asked, "Have you become a Muslim?" I said "Yes". And after that mother said, "*Why didn't you say so earlier.*" I said. "I thought honestly you might not be able to accept that because I had that conversation with my dad, I think you understand what Islam is but you disagree with the way Muslims meet their life here and you love me you don't want me to suffer.

...So they accepted it very well. No oppositions. In fact mother asked me, "*Why didn't you say so earlier, if you had told me sooner I would have bought chicken from a halal shop.*" Every time I go back my mum would say, "*you tell me one week in advance, I go shopping one week, on Sunday I go to Ayamas and buy for your chicken.*" To that that extend.

But again I am not Malay Muslim. I do not *samak*(tan) the plate because only Malay do it. Arabs do not. Just make sure that it is clean, no trace of pork, the cooking pan is also the same since glass do not absorb. As long as it is clean and mother does not cook them together. It is okay.

(Source: Interview conducted on September 20, 2008 at the home of the respondent in Taman Kingfisher, Chinese/P-Sjung-Resp5)

- *My family in Japan supports me.* They know Islam one of the traditional religion. They only ask me not to follow the new religion such as cult. If she doesn't pray at home, my family will remind me to do that. My family will *help to search for the Halal court.* They are very particular on that matter.

(Source: Interview on August 14, 2008 at the office of the respondent at UMS, Jpn/P-Jpn-Resp10)

- My family never stops me to convert to Islam. Very supportive – *Mother takes particular care of my food to make sure that it is halal.* Mother does not encourage eating outside and she herself will cook the food. Mother changes to special kitchen utensils for me.

(Source: Interview on August 14, 2008 at the office of the respondent at UMS, Jpn/P-Jpn-Resp11)

- They (family) once said to me, "When you have converted, *be a true Muslim and hold on steadfastly to its teachings.*"

(Source: Interview conducted on October 25, 2008 at guidance class of Teratak Fitrah, Sembulan Kadsn/L-Ppr-Resp13)

- My older brother did not ask many questions. He mostly observed. So now my brother is watching over me. *When I gave birth, he asked his wife (my non-Muslim sister-in-law) to visit and take care of me.*  
There is not much difference between before and after converting to Islam. Like nothing changes. Familial tie is as usual. Supportive relationship from both sides.  
(Source: Interview on February 13, 2009 at the respondent's office at UMS, Kadsn/P/KMrd-Resp18)
- Finally I converted to Islam and told my father, who *did not oppose instead he gave me encouragement to be a devoted Muslim.* When I go back home, I will kiss my father's hand and my family does not feel the difference with the time before I converted.  
(Source: Interview conducted on August 23, at the respondent's workplace in Masjid Negeri, Kadsn/P-Trn-Resp27)
- Then I told my elder Muslim sister that I converted to Islam. My sister asked me, "Is this for real, I thought you wanted to become a sister?" My sister told me my father said, "*if that's what she wants, fine.* But think it over. If just following friend, boyfriend, then better not." After telling me to think it over, *five month later, my mother and father accompanied me to JHEAINS for the process of converting to Islam.*  
(Source: Interview carried on Nov 6, 2007 at the sanctuary of Teratak Fitraj, Likas, Mrt/P-Kng-Resp29)
- My family gives support because they do not doubt me. *In a week, I often go call and go back home. Maybe from that my mother thought that even if my religion is different, I still respect mother and father.*  
(Source: Interview on February 8, 2009 at Maahad Tahfiz, Rgs/P-Kdt-Resp34)
- Family still comes and visits us (in our home). At my parents' house, before I converted, my father kept pigs. *After I become a Muslim, my dad sold all those forbidden stuff.* They bought new pans and plates. After that they never eat the thing at home anymore. In a year, I go back three or four times. If they want to eat it, they will go the restaurant, and does not bring it home. My dad says it will be sinful of him when I go back. I never have any problem with my family. Supportive relationship. Family supports and gives encouragement. For example, buying scarves and new utensils.

Relationship is still close-knitted. In one month my mother will come three or four times. They do not feel awkward. They come on weekend (Friday). My father often calls.

I have a cousin who is a Muslim. They are no Muslims in my mother and father's family. *I am the first in my family to convert. Our family relationship is still harmonious.*

(Source: Interview on July 24, 2009 at the guidance class of Teratak Fitrah, Rgs/P-Kdt-Resp36)

- Other siblings are okay with it. Younger sibling and older sister gives support. For example, they say, "enter Islam but do not throw away your family".  
(Source: Interview conducted on January 17, 2009 at guidance class of Maahad Tahfiz, Kepayan, Sino/P-Kng-Resp42)

The result of the study shows that different faiths between new Muslim converts and their families do not prevent positive relationships. This positive relationship can be seen from the tolerance displayed by the non-Muslim families such as supporting and encouraging them to perform Islamic obligations; advising the new Muslim converts to be obedient Muslims; accompanying the new Muslim converts for the registration of Islamization at the Islamic department; cooperating in getting *halal* food, as well as preparing special cooking utensils in order to avoid anxiety to stay with their family; and maintaining relationship with visits back and forth. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that converts may have encountered conflicts and dilemmas during the early post-conversion period. However, as tolerance is a long-term achievable process, Muslim converts need to have patience in instilling understanding and further maintain a culture of tolerance in order to cultivate a harmonious environment among the family members.

The acceptance of non-Muslim family towards new Muslim convert to live together as well as support in implementing the Islamic lifestyle display the culture of tolerance in the relationship of Muslims-non-Muslims in Sabah. Although the tolerance that has been displayed takes place in a small family unit, this practice becomes the starting point in relationships with friends and neighbours of different faiths. It can be said that the practice of tolerance has been accepted as the culture of the Sabah society inherited from previous generations. The manifestation of this practice can be seen from the collaboration in celebrations, festivals, co-existence, eating together, business venture at the *tamu*,

as well as having family members from other races. This acculturation process does not only take place among the families of new Muslim converts in the urban areas, but also involves clusters of families living in the rural areas. The spirit of tolerance in the rural areas is very apparent when one looks at the mosques and churches built side by side in one village, such as at Kampung Wonod, Telupid.

In reality, the culture of tolerance in the families of new Muslim converts in Sabah is wrought from the experience of ethnicity tolerance and religious tolerance, cultivated from mixed marriages. The practice of mixed marriages that happens naturally is capable of shaping familial ties and understanding across ethnicities and religions. The willingness of a family to include members of different faiths and living together as one big family is an example of the inclusive attitude of the Sabahan and simultaneously displays a most encouraging culture of tolerance.

Nevertheless, let be understood that ethnical tolerance is different from religious tolerance. Shahran explains that religion is closely related to principle and conviction which are absolute in nature and it is a sacred territory that has difficulty in accepting change [23]. Religion naturally mirrors a framework of worldview that is comprehensive and shaped from a number of main elements based on the absolute source of the religion. Another difference is from the boundary of religious regulations and the religious obligations between Islam and other faiths. The limit of regulation and obligations dictates that there are *halal-haram* and obligations of prayers as the boundary that set the limit for a relationship, either in a family of friends of different faiths. Based on the existence of these limitations and obligations, religious tolerance forwarded by Islam must be within the permissible scope, which is "firm on the principle, tolerant with the attitude". On the other hand, it means being firm in performing Islamic principles, both in the regulations and obligations of Islam, nevertheless, at the same time displays forbearance and being accommodative in social relationship with people of different faith. This is what is being demonstrated by the families of new Muslim converts who are accepting towards the fact that there are differences between their religious principles.

This situation is different from ethnical tolerance that only requires openness and willingness in accepting the presence of others, without being tied to certain regulations and obligations. The term ethnic refers to a cluster of human, where its members connect themselves with shared heritage and share origin in regard to history,

original country, language, customs and value system. Ethnical difference does not involve disparities in principle, conviction and execution of certain obligations that led to the widening of chasm between practice and lifestyle of the respective religions. Religion is a solid identity, religion is something sensitive and attentive, the feeling of religiosity easily stimulates a person to act compared to other elements that shaped a person's identity, moral and spiritual values supported by religion encourage a person to change attitude, and religion left a deeper impact compared to other elements. On that basis, it can be said that ethnical tolerance is easier to perform compared to religious tolerance since it is not hard for religion to accept change, but at the same time it also has to be accompanied with certain regulations and obligations.

The vast experience of interaction between ethnics and religions in Sabah is a catalyst in the acculturation of the tolerance culture in Sabah. This process starts with broad interaction; a result of encounter, acquaintance, and friendship across ethnicities, which later encourage a deeper association with teachings of other religions. Through this correlation, cordiality is cultivated and eventually leads to understanding in differentiating between current faith and the newfound faith. Comprehension of the new faith based on the correct understanding sparks the spirit of religious tolerance, motivated by respect towards other religions, which are different in beliefs, regulations and obligations. This is the situation displayed in the relationship of the families of new Muslim converts, where the culture of tolerance can be seen from support given by people of different faiths.

## CONCLUSION

Tolerance is culture that founded the co-existence of pluralistic society in Malaysia. The culture of tolerance can only be built if ethnical tolerance and religious tolerance is accepted as a common practice – Muslims and non-Muslims alike. The description of tolerance in families of new Muslim converts is the platform towards the acculturation of tolerance in the societal life with neighbours and friends from different faith and ethnicity. It can be said that the higher the tolerance of ethnicity, the higher is religious tolerance, which is manifested through supportive relationship between people from different religions. This situation is highlighted in the relationship of Muslim-non-Muslim in Sabah where the culture of tolerance is apparent in living together. Extensive interaction through encounters, acquaintance, and co-existence that shape the friendship brotherhood

and kinship is the best formula in nurturing the culture of tolerance in the pluralistic society of Malaysia.

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