

Counseling Services in Muslim Communal Life in Malaysia

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Abstract: Although counseling is a new concept for Muslim communal life in Malaysia, practically, it is actually an Islamic culture in regards to helping others. In addition, providing assistance to those in need has long been in existence in the early days of Islam. Counseling service has become part of support systems for married couples. Using a content analysis design, this article uses secondary materials as important sources of data. The data indicates that the counseling service has existed since the era of the Prophet Muhammad which was known as *nasihah*. During Saiyidina Umar al-Khattab's era, he had established the so called *Diwan al-Hisbah* as the first step towards upgrading *nasihah* as a profession in regards to the missionary program and has been part of the approaches for missionary activities within the Islamic Religious Department of the country. The service among which include helping couples experiencing domestic conflict and providing necessary assistance to reestablish mutual understanding and strengthen their family ties and relations.

Key words: Counseling • Family ties • Support systems • Religious • Hisbah

INTRODUCTION

Counseling service, a professional field, is aimed at helping people. It is directed at bringing about change, whether individually or collectively. Counseling service is important because most often every individuals will be facing problems in their lives. Living in an urban environment is relatively recent. Urban life has been associated with individualism and is characterized with a low level of cooperation, while rural life is characterized with a high level of cooperation. As urban life becomes a major pattern of life and as rural and village life declines, conflicts and problems began to develop. Because of low level of cooperation among the urban dwellers, any problems at individual level in urban life will become his or her own problem. In this situation, counseling is seen very crucial to help individuals resolve their problems. Counseling is basically a counselor-client relationship. Zainab *et al.* [1] who review findings on the importance of this counselor-client relationship states that there are five

reasons why this kind of relationship is significant, that are: (1) to help client resolve problems that he has not been able to resolve through other relationships, (2) counseling relationship is formal and structured, where such relationship is not continued on a causal social basis, (3) counseling relationship is limited to the therapeutic hour, (4) it is a closer and deeper relationship than ordinary social relationships and (5), the counseling relationship is powerful because the principles of good human relationships are applied purposefully without the banalities of ordinary social interaction.

Although counseling is a new concept for Muslim community in Malaysia, in practice this form of assisting other fellow men, as stated has long been in existence since the early days of Islam. At the first place, counseling was not yet known. But its philosophy has been practiced where Prophet Muhammad became the first counselor for those having personal or communal problems besides providing guidance in regards to their religious matters. Humans naturally are poor and helpless.

As a helpless creature, human cannot escape from facing any problems in his life. If any members of the community have a problem, all other members of society are sympathetic and will provide necessary assistance for help. Short informal support system is still functioning and it is very effective in addressing any problems in society at that time. Life now is much different from that of the life before. The spirit of solidarity gradually ignored as people start to develop their own way of life. People to some extent, prefer to live alone without paying attention to other fellow men. This makes the formal support systems become more effective in the context of addressing daily family problems in society today.

In parallel with the formal support system that become a choice for most society to solve the problem, counseling services are among the forms of formal support systems designed to handle problems arise in society. There are several reasons why these counseling services are needed now. Modernization that occurred has changed society from simple to a more complex one. Modernization process besides created what is called the conspiracy of nuclear family [2, 3], has also made family members scattered and often live far apart from each other. Children living separated from parents because they have a different job with their parents. Residential segregation between members of family can cause problems in family support. Family member can no longer be counted as a medium to solve problems. Modernization has also forced more and more people to live in cities. In big cities, life becomes individualistic. City dwellers normally meet each other at office or at night markets. So, how one can expect he or she will get support in case of emergency since most of them will only meet once in a market? Thus formal support in urban life is needed.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Realizing the urgent need to understand and provide necessary assistance to couples with marriage problems in society, many of the state religious departments have introduced counseling services as part of their main program. Although such counseling services in some Islamic Departments have long been established, the domestic conflict and divorce are still continuing. In Federal Territory, Kuala Lumpur, for example, the number and percentage of couples with problems is increasing. In 1993 for example, from 2 922 married couples, there were 627 cases ended with divorce. In 1994, from 2 947 married couples, 608 couples were divorced and in 1997, from 3 020 married couples, 912 couples were divorced [4].

The figures show counseling is important to solve problems of urban societies. The importance of counseling in urban societies associated with the life styles which clearly ignores the importance of neighbors. Neighbors are no longer function as an institution that helps families overcome problems, while family members are leaving far from each other.

This article attempts to describe the tradition of providing assistance to those in need in Malay community in Malaysia. Although counseling is a new concept for Muslim community but in practice, in parallel with the continuation of Islamic culture since the earliest days of Islam, the tradition of providing assistance to those in need has long been in existence. As married couples, particularly couples living in urban areas involve in divorce has been increasing in recent years, the importance of counseling services as parts of support system is urgently needed. Using a content analysis design, this article uses secondary materials as important sources of data. According to this design, what was firstly done is the identification of relevant archival sources, or a body of material to analyze.

There were many relevant sources and the most important sources appropriate for this purpose are taken from Abd al-Karim Zaidan [5], Isma'il al-Faruqi and Lois Lamya [6], Hassan Langgulung [7] and Ibn Khaldun [8], as well as Zainab and Wan Ibrahim [9]. Content analysis is defined as any techniques for making inferences by objectively identifying specific characteristics of messages [10]. In content analysis, most often researcher will be using materials have been analyzed before. All these relevant sources were selected purposively. Through an extensive reading on these materials, specific themes related to research problems are then identified. These specific themes are discussed in this article.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Era of Prophet Muhammad: The tradition of providing assistance to people with problems has become an Islamic spirit and culture since very long time in the Muslim community. Counseling services may be said to have existed since the era of the Prophet Muhammad since he was appointed as a prophet [11]. This is because the role of Prophet Muhammad himself at that time as the place where Muslims complain their problem, get guidance on problems and get help to solve problems. However, the way the Prophet Muhammad provides guidance, assist those in need and solve the problems were not yet known as counseling. It was known as

nasihah. Hisbah is an Islamic concept which means keeping everything in order within the laws of Allah. This doctrine is based on the Qur'anic expression "enjoin what is good and forbid what is wrong" [7]. According to Abd al-Karim Zaidan [7], hisbah is religious functions in the *al-amr bi al-ma'ruf wa al-nahy 'an al-munkar* (enjoin what is good and forbid what is wrong) which is an obligatory for those who ruled the Muslims affairs. Ibn Khaldun [8] also argued that the hisbah is a position in Islamic religious affairs to uphold the good and prevent evil. Ismail al-Faruqi and Lois Lamya [6] considered hisbah as an institution for the concept of *al-amr bi al-ma'ruf wa al-nahy 'an al-munkar*. Although this hisbah is not conducted in a professionally and formally in the era of Prophet Muhammad, al-Mawardi pointed out that it succeeded in shaping the character and behavior of the Muslim community to respect, love and compassion amongst them [7]. The successful implementation of hisbah will depend on those who willing to do goodness and is free from any other intention except to seek for Allah pleasure.

The Era of the Companions: In Saiyidina Umar al-Khattab's era, he took step towards upgrading *nasihah* as a profession in regards to the missionary program. The successful implementation of *nasihah* during the Prophet's era has then been continued by Umar al-Khattab when he established and upgraded the system known as *Diwan al-Hisbah*. This new institution aimed at making hisbah system professionally recognized and very influential in keeping everything related to Muslim affairs in order within the laws of Allah. It operated under the direction of *muhtasib* who was the overseer of the market and public morals in accordance with Islamic law. Those elected as *muhtasib* were amongst good men including teachers, mosque imam, traders, youth, farmers, young women, husbands, wives, friends, relatives and neighbors who are generally responsible for the welfare of the public and to guide people to the good. The system carried out in various places such as houses, mosques, markets, or street. To fulfill the duties as *muhtasib*, they have to go out to the public to investigate and ensure that everything is in order as required by Islamic law [6].

At the time of Caliph al-Mahdi, the third Abbasid caliph, *Diwan al-Hisbah* was introduced as a separate department. Since its inception, the *Diwan al-Hisbah* gradually developed as a semi-judicial institution to handle things that are not bound or controlled by religious law. *Diwan al-Hisbah* was also responsible for various tasks such as administering the flow and

exchange of money, weight and value of coins, keeping the morals of the community, preventing Muslims from committing *bid'ah* (innovation or fabrication in religion), protecting the cemetery from being a place to drink and pleasure-loving or as a trading place, preserving the behavior of sex on the road or public baths and investigating any attempt to conceal or prevent the truth. *Diwan al-Hisbah* also oversees the remarriage of divorcees, widows and women by providing a suitable husband candidate who are responsible and capable of protecting their marriage [12].

In Present Day Situation: In the context of present day situation in Malaysia, counseling is not a new phenomenon. Since early 1960s the Ministry of Education at that time started to accept the importance of school guidance in its schools and nowadays most of secondary school in Malaysia had a full-time counselor. At the university level, in the 1980s, most of public universities and teacher training institutions in Malaysia started to offer guidance and counseling courses as parts of their efforts to produce trained counselors.

Counseling services has been used as a method of intervention. Couples having marriage problems come to see counselors to get intervention to resolve conflicts and improve their relationships. Many religious departments have employed such methods as part of their efforts to reestablish mutual understanding and strengthen relationship amongst couples. There are eight Islamic Religious Departments in Malaysia that took the initiative to establish counseling units in their departments. They are the Federal Territory Islamic Religious Department, Kuala Lumpur, Department of Islamic Affairs Terengganu, Islamic Religious Department of Selangor, Johor Religious Department, Islamic Religious Department of Malacca, Negeri Sembilan Islamic Religious Department, Sabah Islamic Religious Department and the Department of Religion, Sarawak.

Other Islamic Religious Departments not yet provide such counseling unit in a true sense but they have employed special religious officers to handle and oversee issues within Islamic guideline. They include the Department of Islamic Affairs Kelantan, Pahang Islamic Religious Department, Islamic Religious Department of Perlis, Kedah Islamic Religious Department and the Penang Islamic Religious Department. This phenomenon shows that there is a new tendency amongst Muslims to seek advice from those in authority to solve their personal and marriage problems. However, the importance of counseling services at Islamic Religious Departments as

a method to resolve family and marriage problems tend to be recognized more by urban Malays than by their rural counterparts. In a survey conducted at the Federal Territory Islamic Religious Department, Kuala Lumpur, more and more couples visit the Consultant and Family Development Unit to seek counseling services in the departments; however the success of the counseling process very much depends upon the level of education of the couples [11]. The study shows that the success of the counseling process was determined by many factors and educational level of respondents emerged as the strongest factor that influences the success of the counseling process conducted at the Consultant and Family Development Unit, the Federal Territory Islamic Religious Department. This finding is in consistent with the importance of education in Islam, as the Prophet Muhammad once told his followers to seek knowledge wherever even to China.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, it is important to note that some changes in socio-economic growth and industrialization process to some extents lead to marriage conflict and divorce. This makes a formal support system become so vital. Although counseling is a new concept in Muslim community in Malaysia, in practice this form of assisting other fellow men has long been in existence since the early days of Islam. The tradition of providing assistance to people with problems has become an Islamic spirit and culture since very long time in the Muslim community. Counseling services may be said to have existed since the era of the Prophet Muhammad since he was appointed as a prophet. However, the way the Prophet Muhammad provides guidance, assist those in need and solve the problems were not yet known as counseling. It was known as *nasihah*. During Saiyidina Umar al-Khattab's era, he had established the so called *Diwan al-Hisbah* as the first step towards upgrading *nasihah* as a profession in regards to the missionary program. In Malaysia in recent years counseling has been part of the approaches for missionary activities within the Islamic Religious Department to help Muslim couples experiencing conflict and providing necessary assistance to reestablish mutual understanding and strengthen family ties and relations.

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