

Chinese Muslim Converts Experience in the Relationship between Religion and Culture Using the "Dialogue of Life" Approach

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ABSTRACT

'Dialogue of life' is a form of religious dialogue, which is renowned among religious scholars. In general, the dialogue of life approach presented to solve misunderstanding, differences of life and thinking at the grassroots level of society with religious and cultural diversity. Terengganu is located in the East Coast of Peninsular Malaysia where 95% of the population is Malay Muslims ethnic group. Only 2.4% is Chinese, most of them are Buddhists. Conversion to Islam among the Chinese community in Malaysia has raised new polemics in everyday relationships. Thus, the problems of living culture, language and religious discrimination among Chinese Muslim community pose a new dilemma to them. Therefore, the dialogue of life approach combined with wisdom based on religious values may be able to solve problems in their daily lives. The findings obtained through interviews conducted with several individuals responsible in managing the affairs of the Chinese community in the state who had converted to Islam. In addition, the initial experience of a number of Chinese who converted to Islam also supports the findings.

KEYWORDS: Chinese Muslims, Experience, Religion, Culture, Dialogue, Life.

INTRODUCTION

Dialogue is a form of discourse in scholarly discussion to find a meeting point because of religious beliefs and differences. Through dialogue approach, problems are solved jointly and harmoniously according to the framework outlined by religion. Furthermore, intellectual tradition and the different process of understanding religions sometimes attract a lot of problems and conflicts. It is crucial to avoid this lasting conflict and to establish good relations with each other in a sustained and prolonged manner. With that in mind, every believer is responsible to cultivate openness, accept differences and respect diversity as well as strengthen their devotion and commitment to their religions. Azmil explained that the word dialogue came from two Greek words; *DIA* meaning through and *LOGOS* meaning word.^[1] The combination of the word means discussion, discourse or speech. According to *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, the use of the word dialogue was initiated by two famous Greek philosopher, namely Plato (429-348 B.C) and Socrates (470-399 BC). Plato used the word dialogue to refer to the philosophy of drama while Socrates used this word to refer to the question and answer in communication.^[2] According to *Kamus Dewan (Malay Dictionary)*, dialogue refers to words spoken by characters in drama and fiction, literary works in the form of conversations, discussions or negotiations between the two parties in dispute or an exchange of ideas in the open.^[3] *Times-Chambers Combined Dictionary Thesaurus* describes dialogue as a conversation, especially a formal one, words spoken by characters in a play or a book. Dialogue functions as a discussion or exchange of ideas and opinions especially between two groups with different views. It aims is to resolve a conflict or achieve an agreement.^[4] In Arabic, dialogue is described as *hiwar*, while Ibn Manzur explained dialogue as *back (al-raj' u)*, but in the sense that it gives meaning to the discussion and conversation between two or more parties.^[5] Based on the preliminary information above, it can be stated that the basic features inherent in a dialogue is that there are other forms of conversation, discussion, negotiation or speech that involves at least two parties. Also as described by Leonard Swidler: "Dialogue is a two way communication between persons who hold significantly differing views on a subject, with the purpose of learning more about the truth from the other subject".^[6] In the context of Malaysia's multi-ethnic society, religious issues related to everyday life can be a threat to the nation.^[7] Realizing the value of peace and harmony, every member of society should play a role in creating mutual understanding and cooperating with each other. This is in line with the writings of Chew Fong Peng which states that the interaction of the various ethnic communities in education, in particular through the involvement of joint activities would help promote understanding and tolerance of other races.^[8] Thus, without a good dialogue, a tense atmosphere would exist

especially in certain circumstances like religious conversion, problematic divorce, child custody, funeral rites, family conflict and others.^[9] Therefore, the efforts of dialogue among religions or between religions should be strengthened to clarify and avoid misunderstanding. Dialogue seems a very suitable way to organize lives among different religions and cultures in Malaysia through participating in everyday interactions and activities that should be made available as well as through established friendship and family connections. The phenomenon of religious conversion often displays various forms of new life experience to new converts. It also covers aspects of the current relationship between ethnic and intra-ethnic place in everyday life. In the context of the Terengganu state, the spread of Islam in this state has resulted in many of the Chinese people to embrace Islam. Based on the conversion to Islam in this state from 2005 to 2010 (until 21 of December), a total of 608 people have embraced Islam. This number consists of indigenous people, the Chinese, Indian and others. The data obtained also showed that the total number of Chinese who converted to Islam in Terengganu from 2000 to 2010 stood at 496 people.^[10]

METHODOLOGY

Data were collected through interviews of 20 Chinese people who have already converted to Islam in Terengganu state. Interview method done to get information about the history, the views and experiences of respondents during conversions. Semi-structured interviews methods done through focused interviewed to developed sharing experiences between researchers and respondents. Simple sampling was conducted by selecting respondents who participate in Islamic religious studies classes at Darul Hidayah Complex (under supervision of Religious Department of Terengganu State) and the Office of Darul Fitrah Association (Association of Muslim Converts). In addition, through snowball sampling technique, the researcher introduced by respondents to other Chinese friends who have done the conversion to Islam. Thus, the interviewed was also conducted by visiting other Chinese converts houses. Respondents were asked about their background, including age, occupation, education level, duration of embraced Islam, the place of origin and previous religion. Before the actual interview is done, the pilot study of 5 Chinese who had converted to Islam were made to ensure that questions designed have values of validity and reliability. In addition, to get a general overview of the conversion to Islam among the Chinese community in Terengganu, structured interviews was conducted among three personel who had important role in the lives of Chinese Muslim community in Terengganu state, firstly Ustad Abdul Halim Abdul Rahman Lim, principal Complex of Darul Hidayah. Secondly, Datin Norhana Ng Abdullah, who is also the president of MACMA and Mohd Jaafar Abdul Sufri who is executive officer at PERKIM Terengganu. Furthermore, the information was recorded electronically with the consent of the respondents themselves. Taking the possibility of electronic equipment has a problem, the researchers also manually record the information. The data have been obtained through written originally in the form of a transcript for purposes of analyzing. Among the specific measures in the data analysis process includes a comparisons, recognizing trends, classifying, looking for a relationship, make a statement and do the interpretation.

THE IMPORTANCE OF DIALOGUE

The former fifth Malaysian Prime Minister, Abdullah Badawi said that dialogue and understanding is a prerequisite for building a fair relationship between culture and civilization because it allows us to understand the differences and similarities. In fact, all religious leaders should find a way to combine the teachings that can lead to peace and tolerance in life. Moreover, Malaysia's pluralistic country and its integration is important to the process of achieving development.^[11] Therefore, in accordance with the situation in Malaysia, race relations through dialogue approach could promote unity and tolerance. Hence, some specific methods can be used to foster interfaith dialogue among multi-religious society and culture. Mohammed Razak explained that the organization of discourse and seminars, publication of brochures and books on the reading material that involves various community truly have distinctive impact. Practices such as shared culture, entertainment and arts can highlight the value of cooperation can aid in developing mutual respect among each other. Likewise friendship formed through sports competition could enhance the relationship and the feeling of belonging instead of just focusing on the prizes. Notwithstanding the various forms of dialogue can be promoted, it should be noted that the ethics and order in the dialogue should be prioritized so that the discussion does not lead to a situation that could worsen or bring disadvantages to other religions. In order to ensure the goal of the dialogue is achieved, the participation from every level of society such as the individual, leaders, NGOs and government bodies is needed.^[12] Mohd Farid stated that dialogue can establish the truth of their own religion and avoid misunderstandings among other faiths which in turn will create understanding and cooperation. In fact it is able to ensure the continuity of peaceful co-existence.^[13] Thus, dialogue is not forcing someone to absorb the beliefs of others, but through dialogue, suspicion between communities of different faiths and cultures can be eradicated, and mutual understanding can be established. At the same time it can help build harmony

through searching for common ground in different religions and cultures. Furthermore, the goal of every society is to live in prosperity and freedom of cultural and religious principle can be achieved. Ubaidullah explains that dialogue can contribute towards decreased fanatical, conservative, inward-looking, closed-minded, ethnocentric and militant communities and more mellow, open-minded, outward-looking and tolerant groups. As the result, a society that tolerate, respect, love and empathize each other will be born. Apart from that, there will be the realization that violence and conservative character will produce hostility and human disaster [14]. Thus, the dialogue between religion and culture has some importance, namely:

- i. It is capable of building peace in potential conflict
- ii. It can be a platform to explain religious truth and avoid misunderstanding among religions.
- iii. It can ensure the continuity of harmony, diminish prejudices and foster a sense of belonging
- iv. It can reduce increasing commercialization of extreme properties that exist in society.

Based on this, Hans Kung a Professor of Ecumenical Theology and founder of global ethics, says ‘*There will be no peace between the civilizations without a peace between religions and there will be no peace between the religions without a dialogue between the religions.*’^[15] It should be recognized that the views of Hans Kung explain that harmony, peace and unity among people of different religions, cultures and thoughts can only happen through inter-religious relations. This includes the conflicts arising from religious problems that have previously led to destruction of property and human life. Development of the dialogue movement with other religions should be done at every level, starting from the lowest level, that is the family, the village, up to the wider national and international stage. Based on this development, religious dialogue can be divided into four different forms;

- i. Dialogue of life
- ii. Dialogue of action
- iii. Dialogue Religious Experience
- iv. Theological dialogue^[16]

As religious dialogue encompasses a very broad subject, this study focused only on religious dialogues which are informal or spontaneous dialogue of life. According to Nathan Iddrisu, through dialogue of life, people of different religions and cultures live with tolerance and peace. They are also able to live together, and are open to cultural differences which exist in others’ lives.^[17] Through the dialogue of life, too, conflicts arising from cultural differences can be detected and prevented early before it spreads to a level that is difficult to contain. In the context of Malaysia^[18] that has communities with a variety of religious and cultural composites, the dialogue that takes place at this fundamental level is essential to avoid misunderstanding that could plunge the nation conflict. Thus, the non-Muslims through the experience of living together are able to understand the religious aspects of Islam such as the practice of prayer, fasting, wearing a veil especially by family members who embraced Islam.^[12]

ALTERNATIVE DIALOGUE FOR SOLVING DAILY LIFE ISSUES

Studies and development on religious dialogue are to create awareness among researchers and to highlight an approach to enhance relations between the different religious communities and cultures at the grass roots level through their daily activities. Nathan Idrissu suggests that using dialogue can bring people from different faiths together to share joy and sorrow in every aspect of life, whether in schools, higher education, business center, on the playground or in the office.^[17] Dialogue of life is the dialogue that takes place on a fundamental level that among non-elites. In this dialogue, there is common interaction that occurs among ordinary people through meeting each other in their daily activities.^[12] This is also explained by Anugrah Ramble & Rev Joshva Raja “*Dialogue at grassroots means communication between two persons, two communities, two caste groups, or people from two nations who are not intellectuals or leaders, but ordinary members of their group.*”^[18] In this case, Olivia also describes dialogue as “*Dialogue of life is what happens in our day-to-day life among people of different religions in their homes, workplaces & neighborhoods. It is a mother teaching her children to love all irrespective of their religions, a taxi driver, a teacher, a public servant, serving people irrespective of their religions.*”^[19] In addition, the dialogue of life is also known as ‘cultural dialogue’ which is the experience of religious life that displays the value of sharing. The existence of everyday interaction due to family ties, friendship and partnership activities exposes various religious communities to the dialogue of life.^[20] This method describes religious experience through sharing stories about the background, history and life experiences that can build a better relationship between the dialogue

¹Malaysia 2010 population census report stating the total indigenous population of 67.4%, Chinese 24.6%, Indians make up 7.3% other 0.7%. Each ethnic group also has its own religious and cultural.

participants. In fact, it can also enrich participants with information about the lives of others. For example, Patel et al. stated that his studies at Chicago's Interfaith Youth Cores consist of teenagers from Judaism, Christianity and Islam who share their religious experience through story telling.^[21] Besides providing information and understanding other people's religious practices and highlighting their religious identities, narrative methods of religious experience also bring awareness to the participants about the importance of religious obligations and defend practices inherited. In addition, the activities also involve exposure to culture and religion. Muhammad Nur said that through the program Spiritual Camp 2009 organized by the Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia and Malaysia Young (Chinese non-Muslim youth organization), Muslim youth to gain exposure about Tai Chi exercise that is often highlighted in the ritual worship of Buddhism. Meanwhile, the Chinese youth who are Buddhists discussed about the conduct of individual and congregational prayers by Muslim youths.^[22] Thus, dialogue of life occurs in the form of workshops or camp experience featuring dialogue that takes place in a formalized manner. Dialogue of life outside classroom also builds relationship between religions. According to Azizan Baharudin, in daily life, all races and religions deepen their understanding by practicing the values of civilization and traditions through work, working together and in schools, hospitals, public transport use and others.^[23] Thus, Michael explains that the dialogue of life occurs in every group of people and it is the most fundamental level of dialogue. In coexisting with other faiths, we would endeavor to greet, mingle, mutually support and help each other. This is done not only for the sake of courtesy and etiquette, but it is also advocated by our religious.^[24] In the context of Malaysia's multi-ethnic, multi-religious society, issues related to everyday life can form a threat to the nation's harmony. Realizing how precious the value of peace and harmony is, every member of society should play a role in creating mutual understanding and cooperating with each other. In fact in certain circumstances, there arises the tense atmosphere between races in Malaysia when religious conversion results in problematic divorce, child custody, funeral rites, family conflict and so on.^[7] Due to the racial problem in this country, it is indeed a complex problem to solve; having different ethnic groups together in one place such as at work, school or university is not a guarantee that it can solve the problem of unity.^[9]

DISCUSSION : DIALOGUE OF LIFE BASED ON CHINESE CONVERTS EXPERIENCE

According to Chuah and Abdul Salam, a person who goes through religious conversion has had their faith transformed and a new relationship with God is developed.^[25] Mohd Asin states that conversion means a process of changing spiritual beliefs and these changes can be seen through the implementation of practices endorsed by these beliefs.^[26] Anton^[27], Raymond^[28] and Mulyono et al.^[29] explain that religious conversion is a shift that causes a re-development of religious identity. In the context of conversion to Islam among the Chinese community, Ma Rosey explains that conversion to Islam among the Chinese community causes them to face problems such as family relationships, religious practice, cultural conflict, the issue of naming and the celebration of the Chinese New Year.^[30] Hence, the proposed approach of life dialogue with wisdom based on the experience of Chinese Muslim community is suggested for dealing with this challenge. In the state of Terengganu, the Chinese community is the second largest ethnic group, with most living in major cities in the state. Report of the state population in 2010 showed that the total Chinese population in the state of Terengganu is a total of 27, 900 people or 2.4% of the total population. A large part of the Chinese community embraces Chinese religions such as Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism and ancestor worship. Since the majority of the people of Terengganu are Muslims, the conversion to Islam among the Chinese community poses some problems for them.^[31]

1. Relationships with Family

In the Qur'an, Allah has guided mankind to continue creating good relationship with the non-Muslim family members even after the individual's conversion into Islam. In the Qur'an, Allah says:

And if they strive to make thee ascribe to me a healthy mind you do not know thy presence, then obey them and live with them in the world in a good way.^[32]

According to Ibn Kathir, in that verse of the Quran, Allah instructs all Muslims to communicate and mingle with their parents even if their parents stay in their previous religion. They will have to treat their parents politely and full of respect. This practice may help to avoid misconception towards Islam by the non-Muslims.^[33] Norhana explained as follows:

Although the Chinese who converted to Islam shunned by their families, they are required to visit the family of non-Muslims to adopt the ethics of pilgrimage in Islam with embroidered moral principles of Islam. Direct involvement in the lives of the Chinese Muslim community capable of articulating their original truth and scrape their misunderstanding of Islam.^[34]

There are cases where Muslim Chinese converts return to their parents' house and were rejected by their parents because they have embraced Islam. The following is an anecdote of that experience:

I returned to my parents' house to persuade them to accept me back into their lives. On my visit to my parents' house, they will always serve halal (legal) food that they buy for me. My parents finally accepted me back into their lives. I think it is because they see that I am a good person because I practice good Islamic principles.^[35]

To avoid misunderstandings among my parents, I often pay her a visit, especially during Chinese New Year celebration.^[36]

When I walked into my sister house's .. eat and drink, I saw how I could eat., after my mother died, my siblings received again, when EidFitr, I carry raw goods from my house for a BBQ at home dad, I do my rice and cooking.^[37]

After I married, after I get a child, my mother could've received, meaning only one year ..now my mom too good, too good siblings, sister's all good, if feast siblings come home I'll cook and sometimes he would help me.^[38]

Then I met with a saint in Islam, the people of my village as well, people call him TokLebai (religious teacher) . I asked him, if in a Muslim is, if I can go back to the original family home, because some said to me that when converted to Islam then it would break with the family .. he said, not that I recall last to my original home. ... after my return my father so angry is no .. but he said let you in Islam .. how to do.^[39]

Thus, Muslim Chinese are advised to remain calm at all times when dealing with their family members as the atmosphere can be tense. They will have to continue to do good deeds to their non-Muslim parents. They should not forget to ask for their parents' well-being. Based on the interview given by that Muslim Chinese in the interview, it is proven that anger among family members especially parents can be eradicated through a courtesy often visit, having meals together, and engaging in daily activities together. By doing all these activities, prejudice can also be eradicated. Non-Muslim family members may get the enlightenment on the beauty of Islam via the frequent visits from the Muslim Chinese converts. They will understand that Islam is a beautiful religion that promotes the faithful to constantly carry out good deeds and foster good relationship among family members. The practice of visiting one another and caring for each other definitely help to eliminate misunderstandings between people of different faiths.

Abdul Halim Lim Abdul Rahman explained that the non-Muslim family members will not stay mad at their family members who have converted into Islam. The main reason why the non-Muslim family members reacted negatively towards their converted family members is due to their misconceptions of Islam. During this delicate period of strained relationship, the Chinese converts are advised to regularly pay their non-Muslim family members a visit.^[40] The frequent visit may help to loosen the apprehension among their non-Muslim family members. By displaying good moral values on each visit, the converts may help to lessen the misunderstandings that their non-Muslim family members might have towards Islam. However, in certain circumstances, it is better for the converts to hide his new faith in order to avoid serious problems. In the Qur'an (40:28), Allah says:

And said a man from the family of Pharaoh believed that hide his faith. What would you kill a man who says' My Lord is Allah? But he has come to you with a variety of evidence from the Lord...."
^[32]

Based on this verse, Lim Jooi Soon said that this method proposed by Allah should be practiced in order to maintain a good relationship with the non-Muslim family members and the community. This approach should be applied if one's conversion into Islam poses danger towards him. Revelation of the conversion into Islam should be done with meticulous preparation so that it does not cause harm to the person who converted. Therefore a discussion or dialogue of life might be helpful to avoid conflicts.

2. Islamic religious practice

In the context of Islamic religious practice, the responsibility in the conduct of religion should be done gradually so as not to burden the new converts and thus cause them to become bored and depressed. If these converts are being pressured to perform their duties as Muslims, it is afraid that they might go back to embrace their old faith. In this case, Abdul Halim explained:

Religious education classes based on the ability provided by the Islamic Religious Council and Malay Customs (MAIDAM) to facilitate the understanding of Chinese society and the teachings of the Muslim religion. To encourage them to attend classes, the Chinese Muslims were also given an allowance and be involved in outdoor activities such as class visits, workshops on faith, celebration of the greatness of Islam and so on. Through this organized event, they revealed an

appreciation of Muslim life in mutual aid cooperation, communication and communal life with other people.^[40]

In this respect also, Mohd Sufri said that there is a need for a separate class for new converts. They should not be in the same class with those who have embraced Islam for more than 10 years such as the Malay community. This is because they might feel inferior. In addition, the delivery methods of disseminating knowledge should be varied in order to avoid the newly-converted Muslim Chinese from feeling bored while in class. In religious classes conducted at PERKIM Terengganu, the students are encouraged to share their experiences of living as a Muslim with their classmates while being supervised by an ustaz (a religious teacher). The dialogue tells the audience of their religious experiences. The dialogue is also meant to compare their experience of religious life before and after they have converted into Islam. Apart from that, the dialogue also aims to identify the extent of their knowledge of the relationship of Islam with their spiritual experience.^[41]

Therefore, the inclusion of the newly-converted Chinese society in informal joint activities outside of class exposes them to the many forms of social relations with other Islamic communities. This helps to motivate the newly-converted Muslim Chinese to embrace the teaching of Islam further. The experiences gained from both inside and outside the classroom help to promote good relations, cooperation and respect among the newly-converted Muslim Chinese.

On the other hand, Darul Fitra Association of Terengganu used a different approach. According to Norhana Ng, Darul Fitra Association conducts visits to the homes of Chinese converts and share knowledge on the fundamentals of the religion in the comfort of their own homes.^[34] Meeting the Muslim Chinese community in their own environment allows them to learn about Islam more comfortably. Moreover, the teachers will be able to give more attention to their students depending on the latter's ability and age. This method allows the students to get to know each other better, to better understand their own strengths and weaknesses, while simultaneously boosting their self-confidence.

3. Conflict of Cultural

According to Ridzuan Tee, customs and traditions practiced before one converts into Islam can be continued to practice as long as they do not clash with the Islamic teachings.^[42] In this regard, it is clear that followers of different religious traditions are exposed to the practical daily living of their religious counterparts within the same community. They experience one another as real people and learn more about their neighbors. According to Abdul Halim Lim, the assimilation between the newly-converted Muslim Chinese and the Malay Muslim community shows that Islam does not discriminate anyone. The Islamic Religious and Malay Customs Council of Terengganu (MAIDAM) in collaboration with several NGOs inform the public that it is okay to practice Chinese customs and traditions that do not clash with the Islamic teachings. Among the permitted cultural activities are: the Dragon Dance, the Lion Dance, Chinese Cooking Competition, Lantern Festival, the Chinese New Year Celebration and eating using chopsticks. The Malay community was also invited in order to give them the exposure to the Chinese culture and also because Islam is a religion of tolerance.^[42] By having this dialogue of life, people will understand that it is permissible for the Muslim Chinese to practice some of their racial cultures and traditions. Thus, people should understand that when one embraces Islam, that does not mean that one loses his cultural identity. According to NorhanaNg Abdullah, it is okay for Muslim Chinese to attend Ching Ming festival because they want to show their respect to their deceased family members. However, they should not get involved in the worshipping ritual as it is contradicting to the teachings of Islam.^[34] Her statement is supported by Ridzuan Tee as he stated that it is perfectly fine for a person who has converted into Islam to attend a wake or funeral or visit the graveyard of their beloved non-Muslim family members. However, one should not join in the prayer during the ceremony.^[43] It is also okay for the Muslim Chinese to clean the gravesite belonging to their non-Muslim family members. Based on what our beloved Prophet Muhammad had practiced in his lifetime, it is okay for a Muslim to attend a non-Muslim funeral. This is because Muslims will be able to demonstrate to the non-Muslim community that we respect and care for every human being.^[51] When a convert attends a religious ceremony held by their Chinese community does not mean that he wants to return to his original faith but it merely suggests the importance of their involvement of their role in the family. Islam is a religion that prioritizes kinship. That is why Islam encourages each and every individual to foster a good relationship even with family members of different faiths. In the dialogue of life, Islam encourages the Muslims to attend a funeral. This can help eliminate negative perceptions towards Islam.

4. Relationship between Chinese Muslims and the Malay Muslims Community

Integrative activities like celebrating Islamic festivities together, communal work and the Assimilation program are among the many approaches carried out to strengthen the ties between the Malaysian Chinese Muslims and the Malay Muslim community. According to Mohd Sufri Jaafar, in the Assimilation Program Muslim Converts

including Chinese Muslims will live with a Malay Muslim family to expose them to the various values relative to a Muslim in daily life. Among them the cultural greeting or 'Salam', eating with bare hands, eating together as a family, sitting cross-legged on the floor (Malay custom) and most importantly carrying out prayers and its accompanying rites.^[41] This program organized by the Terengganu branch PERKIM (Malaysian Muslim Welfare Organization) is to ensure that new converts from the Chinese community and the community as a whole are able to integrate and associate with other Islam communities in Terengganu. Since marriages between the Chinese and Malay community is becoming commonplace. This program is also a testament to the various communities that diverse culture is not a hurdle or obstacle to living together harmoniously. Feedbacks based on interviews carried out (transcription) are as follows:

I've been to many wedding ceremonies and I always help my friends in the proceedings. Usually, I am called to help out during the proposal proceedings, sending off the bride and to carry the dowry.^[45]

My children got married in the Malay style. I was bridesmaid for my brother-in-law. That's where I learned the various customs, merisik, meminang (customs to ask for and propose marriage) and bersanding (marriage custom where the bride and groom are seated on a dais) but its more or less the same with the Chinese, we also have the custom of proposing.. its somewhat similar.^[46]

When carrying out the communal activities, they'll ask me to peel onions and inquire on how to clean, soften and prepare the chicken meat. I give them the how-to..and they can accept what I cook, they eat my cooking. Usually at the market they'll give me the chicken saying "Sis. Nurul take this chicken and cook some Ginger Chicken for me", and I do it for them. They'll then take it back to their families..^[37]

I usually join the funeral processions... following the procession till they reach the grave for the final rites.^[47]

If it's the house of a friend or neighbor, we'll just go and help out with the cooking maybe cutting onions and preparing the chicken, we do what we can, whichever place where there is less manpower, we head there to help.^[38]

If there is a tahlil or reading Yasin (religious service) about to be done, we go around calling the kids from the Maahad Tahfiz (school where learning of Islam and the Quran is carried out) and ask them to join in, all together, to pray.^[47]

Involvement in activities like the sacrificial rites and offering for *Korban* (Muslim Celebration), communal food preparation, Family day celebrations, sports events and communal entertainment will increase unity and promote harmony, understanding and respect among those taking part. Furthermore, The Chinese converts community can learn and assimilate the customs and living culture of the Malay community through the experience garnered from taking part in these activities.

5. The Experience of Celebrating Chinese New Year with Family

According to Dr. Ridzuan Tee, the Chinese New Year celebration is a cultural festivity that has nothing to do with religion. The Chinese New Year is a point of significance to the Chinese community since it is a time of respite from work and pursuits. It is a holiday of sorts for resting and recounting the past year. Thus, as a Sino-Muslim, foreign religious elements need not be integrated into the celebration. In the context of intra-ethnic relations, the Chinese New Year is a way of bonding with the rest of the Chinese community who are non-Muslims. Members of the Chinese community who embrace Islam as a way of life are not forbidden or in any way stopped from celebrating the Chinese New Year with their families. On the contrary, sharing in this celebration with non-Muslim family members is urged, since in Islam family ties and relationships are very important. A deeper understanding can be gained from these interviews with a few Chinese people who have converted into the Islamic faith:

I celebrate and join in the family dinner at my mom's place. To please her I partake in the halal food that are served like fruits, nuts, tidbits and canned drinks.^[35]

When it's Chinese New Year we go visiting to many relatives houses. When I visit my aunt's place with my mom, they know my religion and about the customs in Islam. So they order Malay food as well -during Chinese New Year- packed in polystyrene containers.^[38]

For Chinese New Year we chip in as well in the food preparation, chickens and ducks all strung up, my father waits for us, and asks my husband to prepare it nicely. As for the pork, if we come home, papa doesn't eat it at all... we have two fridges one for that (pork) and one for the other stuff.. when they eat pork, if he knows I'm coming back, he cleans it all up, he doesn't want us to see it.^[45]

I celebrate it, as most of my friends are Chinese, during the first day its fairly simple I provide just drinking water and a few cakes since I'll be going visiting, I go visiting all my friend's houses. If here in Terengganu, they all order Malay food, cooking some Nasi Dagang and Satay (Malay traditional food) as most of their friends are Malays. They also use polystyrene containers and plastic spoons. So if we don't go, it's an insult to our Chinese friends, how can we be friends with them if we don't join. I also join in for the Deepavali celebrations, I buy a chicken and give it to him.^[45]

Of course I join in, I celebrate with them, but you gotta be smart, taking care as to what you eat and drink seeing if it is halal (legal) or otherwise. Usually, during Chinese New Year, the Chinese eat Chinese food... we'd think its mainly pork right.. but frankly I tell you, not all Chinese people eat pork. The Peranakan Chinese (local born), like me don't eat pork. ^[47]

If they call us we go, and they'll usually prepare steamboat.. that is the usual food they prepare, they buy the food stuffs and store them.. meaning.. they actually know what we can and cannot eat. ^[48]

Celebrating the Chinese New Year with non-Muslim family members helps build a closer bond with family members of the Islamic faith. This integrated celebration of the Chinese New Year while taking into account customs of Islam sheds the light of understanding to the non-Muslim family members that other festivities can be celebrated openly as long as it does not go against the Syariat (Rules of the Islamic faith). In accordance to that the Sino-Muslims take extra care when it comes to food, for fear the preparation of it by their non-Muslim family members is not in line with the Syariat guidelines of Islam.

In its efforts towards building an integrated Chinese New Year celebration, MAIDAM (Council of Islamic Religion and Malay Customs) and the Darul Fitrah Association of Terengganu organized a social event in conjunction with the Chinese New Year celebrations inviting members of the Chinese Muslim (converts), Chinese non-Muslims and Malay Muslim community along with Christian and Buddhist religious leaders. Those present were treated to a Chinese cultural delight among them eating using Chop sticks, Chinese cultural performances and Chinese cuisine. The main purpose of this annual program is to promote awareness to the various communities of different culture and religion that Islam is a religion of tolerance and harmony and it features a diverse living culture. Thus, religious dialogue has to feature a large and diverse group of participants so that the understanding that unity can be achieved, even though culture and belief varies, can be driven home. Since the conception of race is a creation of Allah s.w.t, thus the adapting or assimilation of culture or lifestyle of others is not considered wrong. As long as culture does not contradict Islam and its guidelines, we can by all means accept it openly. Therefore, proactive dialogues on living harmoniously in a diverse environment should continuously be carried out in such a way that all communities can reap its benefits.

CONCLUSION

Building a close relationship with new Chinese converts through dialogues can promote awareness in their respective original communities of converts while correcting misconceptions toward Islam. Even though they have converted into the Islamic faith, the religion provides space for the Chinese Muslim community to freely exercise their culture as long as it does not contradict the Islamic Syariat. Hence, the changes in lifestyle that the newly converted Chinese go through both in the religious and cultural aspects are considered an advancement of culture. Carrying out dialogues is an alternative to reduce the strain and misunderstanding in relationships that normally takes place in the life of a convert.

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